



Universidade de Santiago de Compostela

Facultade de Filoloxía

Grao en Lingua e Literatura Inglesas

Traballo de fin de grao

**The influence of social media in
language change:
Changes in vocabulary.**

Andrea Vilariño Ferreiro

Titora: Belén Méndez Naya

Curso Académico: 2018/2019



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FACULTADE DE FILOLOXÍA

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Nowadays, social media such as Twitter, Instagram or YouTube, and computer-mediated communication have become quite relevant not only in people's lives, but also in the way language is used. Language change, and in particular changes in vocabulary, seems to be accelerated in the last decades and this seems to be intimately connected with the Internet and social media. They have a great impact on the terms and expressions we use, on which ones become popular, sometimes even bringing back terms that have not been used for a long time, or changing their meaning to fit the needs of the new reality. The aim of this dissertation is to explore how these social platforms may influence language in particular, both lexical and semantic change.

This dissertation will consist of two different parts: in the first part, which will be more theoretical, I will give an account of the appearance of the Internet and the social platforms I am going to study. I will also deal with the different types of lexical and semantic change. For the second part of the study I will compile a list of terms typically found in the social media and computer-mediated communication, such as *spill the tea*, *to roast somebody* and *shipping*. These terms will be studied paying attention to (i) the kind of word formation strategy they illustrate; (ii) their lexical history (e.g. when were they first used; are they neologisms just found in computer-mediated communication, or are they also part of the general vocabulary?); (iii) their meaning; (iv) whether they have been borrowed from English to other languages. For this purpose I will make use of various dictionaries, ranging from the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), dictionaries of usage of Present-Day English (such as Cambridge Dictionary, WordReference, Collins English Dictionary), and the Urban Dictionary (www.urbandictionary.com).

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1. INTRODUCTION

The arrival of the Internet has drastically changed our day-to-day life and the way in which we communicate. It has triggered a linguistic revolution, particularly in the written language, because people can publish anything online without the need of an intermediary to check the proper use of language, unlike in traditional media. Different formulas have been created to bring more expressiveness to the traditionally formal written mode, and a word or expression can acquire global popularity online in a matter of hours. All these new modifications have created a new variety of online language: the Netspeak. The Netspeak could be described as a hybrid between the written and the spoken modes, since it shares characteristics from both, as well as having its own new features.

As we know, language is changing continuously in order to adapt itself to the new realities of the speech community in which it emerges. The aim of this dissertation is to study the role the Internet, particularly social media, has on language change, more specifically in changes in vocabulary. I have chosen vocabulary because it is the area of language which is most affected by external factors, such as technological advancements like the Internet. For this study, I have focused mainly on social media, as I personally think social platforms are the best representation of the way people use language on the Internet. This type of language or *Netspeak* is usually unfiltered, making it an accurate representation of the linguistic changes that might be occurring at the present time.

From its appearance in the 1960s, the Internet has attracted the attention of many scholars. There is still, however, a lack in information concerning the topic of how language has been affected by its presence, especially offline. This dissertation is mainly based on information from online research papers and articles found on the Web itself, as well as some books that deal with the topic, such as David Crystal's works *The Language Revolution* (2005) and *Language and the Internet* (2006). Moreover, one of the main

difficulties that I have faced during the elaboration of the dissertation has been the fact that the Internet develops at a fast pace, and language is changing almost at the same rate. As a result, information on linguistic trends on the Web becomes out-dated very rapidly. Books published a couple of years ago do not represent online speech anymore, and some of the terms and expressions mentioned in them have become almost obsolete.

In addition to publications and Internet sources, dictionaries have been central for this dissertation. Several standard dictionaries, such as the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) or the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, have been used to research the internet terms dealt with in this dissertation. The OED, the major dictionary of English, is a historical dictionary. As such, it has been of great help to search for the origin, older meanings and uses of particular words. Other dictionaries like the *Cambridge Dictionary* or the *Oxford's Lexico Dictionary* are dictionaries devoted to current usage and, therefore, they were employed to know the current meaning of the selected words. Some of the articles found on their websites, especially in Merriam-Webster's page, were of great help, since they also included some of the history behind each word.

The dictionaries mentioned have been my main sources of information in terms of meaning for words that have already been included in the language. However, since some of the terms studied have not been included in the regular dictionaries yet, I have made use of the *Urban Dictionary*. The *Urban Dictionary* is a very rich tool to study Internet language and modern slang, as it is frequently updated with the newest terms and expressions. It is also helpful because it is made by contributions of users, who give their view on how a certain word, abbreviation or expression is used and the connotations it may carry. The possibility of rating each definition gives us a more accurate view on such phrases or words, as usually the most voted definition is the most widely accepted one.

The dissertation is structured in six different chapters, the first and the last being an introduction and the conclusions. Chapters 2 and 3 provide an overview of the history of English and the Internet, respectively, while chapter 4 deals with the Netspeak, the variety of language used on the Internet. Chapter 5 focuses on social media and provides a list of some of the words that are being used on social platforms nowadays, giving information about their origin, word-formation strategy and meaning.

I chose to study the language in relation to three different social platforms: Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. My reasoning for this is that the three of them serve the same purpose, that is, to keep up with updates of friends and family while posting the speaker's own material, but also the fact that they have a lot of differences between them. Facebook is the most widely used social platform at the moment, and it is usually used for people you have some kind of relationship with, while Twitter is a place where you communicate with people you do not know. Brevity of language is a condition for its use, since it has a 280-character limit per post. Concerning Instagram, I wanted to see if it had any impact on language at all, since it is a platform designed for photography and language is less important there than in the other two.

2. AN INTRODUCTION TO LANGUAGE CHANGE IN ENGLISH.

Language change has been a topic of discussion of linguistics for a long time. Recently, with the advent of the Internet, language change seems to be accelerated. The influence that the Internet has on the manner people speak or write has been heavily criticised and even accused of having an impact on literacy, especially in the younger generations. Many famous figures have stated their opinion towards the linguistic consequences of this technological revolution, as in the case of the BBC broadcaster John Humphrys, who affirmed in one of his *Daily Mail* articles (2007) that texters “are destroying [language]: pillaging our punctuation; savaging our sentences; raping our vocabulary. And they must be stopped,” or Jacques Chirac, former French Prime Minister and President of the Republic, who argued that the Internet’s influence in language is “a major risk for humanity” (quoted in Wu 2004).

Such a belief, that language is deteriorating due to technology, is not exclusive to the arrival of the Internet. In fact, many other innovations which we now perceive as essential and accept without any questioning were the object of many accusations when they first appeared. This happened with inventions such as the printing press or broadcasting, as Crystal (2006:2) points out:

In the fifteenth century, the arrival of printing was widely perceived by the Church as an invention of Satan, the hierarchy fearing that the dissemination of uncensored ideas would lead to a breakdown of social order and put innumerable souls at risk of damnation. [...] The telegraph would destroy the family and promote crime. The telephone would undermine society. Broadcasting would be the voice of propaganda. In each case, the anxiety generated specifically linguistic controversy. Printing enabled vernacular translations of the Bible [...] adding fuel to an argument about the use of local languages in religious settings [...]. And when broadcasting enabled selected voices to be heard by

millions, there was an immediate debate over [...] whether to permit local accents and dialects, which remains a lively debate [...]

Furthermore, this prejudice towards new technological developments also gives rise to arguments such as the fact that the speech of younger generations is somehow corrupting language and even ruining it with its new features, claims that usually come from those who believe language should be “pure” and “fixed”. As previously mentioned, others also associate such innovations to a gradual loss in literacy, especially in younger kids (see Humphry’s quote above), when, in reality, various studies have shown that this may well be the contrary: the constant use of the written format on the Internet may be even improving their writing skills.

The truth is language change is inevitable and has been happening since the very beginning of English as such, be it triggered by external or internal causes, as language reflects society, its interests and values, and even its history. It is a fact that linguistic change is further accelerated by the arrival and expansion of the Internet and social media, since they connect people from all over the globe. These individuals speak different languages or varieties of the same language, with diverse backgrounds and who are in contact with other kinds of popular culture, an element that will have also a massive impact on language, as will be seen in chapter 3. Moreover, the Internet is also creating a new kind of language in English, the *Netspeak* or *digitalese*.

In what follows I will introduce the topic of language change, establishing a distinction between the categories of external and internal history of the language and the extra- and intra-linguistic factors that can cause change.

2.1. External history

External history refers to the social, historical and non-linguistic events that have had an impact on society and, consequently, on language. These changes cannot be predicted, and they are interconnected with the history of a community, as any changes for us as a species will have an impact on the language we use. As Algeo (2011:1) puts it:

Language is so basic to human activity that there is nothing human beings do that does not influence and, in turn, is not influenced by the language they speak. Indeed, if Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956) was right, our very thought patterns and view of the world are inescapably connected with our language.

Economic and social changes are quite relevant in the history of English, especially those concerning the status of certain social groups, as they are closely linked to the prestige of the variety or the linguistic variants they use. The Industrial Revolution was one of the events that triggered a shift in the social structure during the eighteenth century, giving more importance to the working classes, also fostering migration and migratory movements towards the industrial cities. This favoured the contact between different languages and dialects and, as a result, the influence between each other. Moreover, it should be noted that the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were quite favourable for the appearance of new technical words to keep up with the innovations and new machinery that came along with the industrialization, something that can also be applied to scientific changes. The terminology related to these fields of language constitutes up to the 60% of new words in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, according to its editor-in-chief Frederick Mish (Wu, 2004).

Alongside economic changes, language and culture have also been affected by changes in technology, which have been of great importance. One of these is the printing press, first invented in the 1450s by Johann Gutenberg and introduced in England by

William Caxton in 1476. The first printing shop in England was set up in Westminster and, according to Caxton, published over a hundred books between its opening and 1492, the year of his death. Most of these books were written in English and a few others in Latin.

The printing press allowed the production a great number of copies of the same work faster and at a cheaper price, whereas before the introduction of printing, books were copied by hand, their production thus being much more expensive. This technological innovation not only increased the reading public, but also fostered the development of literacy, facilitated the process of standardization and had great impact on the lexicon of the English language. To sum up, the printing press has been one of the most important inventions in relation to linguistic change and the creation of new words. Nowadays, this role has moved on to the Internet, which has as much influence on language as the printing press did at the time.

Hughes (2000) includes the political context as another external circumstance that triggers language change. Thus, invasions such as the Germanic invasions or the Norman Conquest have played a determinant role in the history of English:

These form the main stages of the remarkable growth of a vocabulary initially brought to England some 1500 years ago by some belligerent Germanic tribes in what probably seemed an accidental and minor turbulence of the times. Subsequently it will trace the phases of how English survived being displaced as the official language of the land for 300 years of Norman hegemony, how it was enriched by Norman-French and classical elements, and how in the last four centuries it has expanded through colonialism, trade and prestige to become the most spoken language in the world (Hughes 2000:xi)

Finally, the ideology of a certain period of time is also responsible for the word choices speakers make and the language they use, and, consequently, changes in ideology

will resolve in linguistic modifications and alterations so that language fits in with the new mindset. The arrival of Christianity in 597 AD, for instance, meant an important ideological change with the introduction of a new religion and, moreover, with the introduction of a new language of religion, Latin. The main impact of Latin was lexical, since many borrowings were introduced to the language, both religious and domestic.

Lately, changes in ideology have revolved around minorities, such as the LGBT community and drag culture, which are going to play an important part in the impact of social media in language, especially drag, as will be seen in chapter 4.

The LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) community have had a history of oppression until very recently and many individuals of the community have endangered their lives to fight for their rights. This has triggered a change in society and in the way of thinking of most people. It has spread awareness to the fact that language was also a weapon that perpetuated homophobia and transphobia, and people started to be more cautious with their wording. This gave give rise to one of the most generally discussed matters at the present time concerning language, that is, *inclusive language*, which *Oxford's Lexico Dictionary* (s.v. *inclusive* adj. 1.4) defines as: “deliberately avoiding usages that could be seen as excluding a particular social group, for example avoiding the use of masculine pronouns to cover both men and women.” The lack of representation in media is also another issue concerning this social group, as they have been ignored, mocked or made invisible by what was considered “normal”, which can also be applied to the drag community, one of the main sources of vocabulary in social media nowadays.

2.2. Internal history.

While, as we have seen, external history is the reflex of extralinguistic features, internal history takes place within language itself and can be defined as the linguistic developments that occur at the morphological, syntactic, semantic, pragmatic and phonetic level. It should be noted, however, that changes at one level may lead to other ones in another level of the language.

Some examples of the factors that trigger internal change are the presence of ambiguity or synonymy, and chain reactions concerning meaning. Ambiguity tends to be avoided in a language, as having a number of words with similar or exact meanings goes against the Economy Principle of language. This principle, also referred to as the ‘Principle of least effort’, consists in “tending towards the minimum amount of effort that is necessary to achieve the maximum result, so that nothing is wasted. That is, the maximum benefit and utility are achieved with the least possible input” (Zhou 2012:100). This means that having several words to refer to one entity is counter-productive, and one of them will eventually prevail over the other or will change meaning, as in the case of *smell* and *odour*. According to the OED, these two words had a neutral connotation at first, but, eventually, *odour* (s.v. *odour* / *odor* n. I.1) underwent a process of pejoration, that is, it developed a negative meaning. On the other hand, *smell* (s.v. *smell* n. 2) remained as a term that refers to both, a fragrance and a stench.

A chain reaction affecting the meaning of words refers to a change in meaning that influences other semantically related terms. This is quite clearly illustrated by Burridge & Bergs (2017:56):

meat ‘all solid food’ > *meat* ‘flesh of animals’

flesh ‘animal tissue’ > *flesh* ‘tissue of humans’

foda ‘animal fodder’ > *food* ‘all forms of solid nourishment’ (and so replaces *meat*).

We can see here that a change makes the meaning of *meat* overlap with that of *flesh*, triggering a modification on its meaning as well. This goes on until the original sense of *meat* is picked up by the word *food*. This type of internal change is also closely related to the previous one mentioned, the tendency to avoid synonymy.

Internal changes are more predictable than the external ones due to the fact that they affect the weakest parts of language as a system, but both types can take part at the same time in linguistic change, as one may trigger the other, similarly to how it happened between the different linguistic levels. As mentioned above, the Norman Conquest was one of the external factors that led to internal changes in the language, especially at the level of vocabulary. It introduced several Norman-French loanwords during the Middle English period and, as a consequence, triggered the loss of many native words, especially in circumstances of synonymy because of what I have just mentioned, the tendency of language to avoid words with identical meanings. This is the case of the example briefly mentioned above: *odour* and *smell*. *Smell* was the native form to refer to “that property of things which affects the olfactory organ, whether agreeably or otherwise” (OED s.v. *smell* n. 2a), which shared meaning with the borrowing from Anglo-French *odour*. As mentioned, languages tend to avoid synonymy, therefore, *odour* underwent a change in meaning called pejoration or deterioration, that is, “the development of a sense of disapproval in a lexical item” (Crystal 2008:140). After this, *odour* began to be used with the meaning of “the property of a substance that is perceptible by the sense of smell; [...] (now, frequently) an unpleasant smell” (OED s.v. *odour* / *odor* n. I.1).

It may be relevant to mention that changes in vocabulary not only include borrowings from other languages, even though they play an important role in the

language, but also word formation strategies, such as compounding, blending (for instance, *vlog* as a result of mixing *video* and *blog*) or commonization (*Kleenex* for *tissue paper*); the reintroduction of archaic words with a new meaning, analogical terms, the gradual loss of words that resemble taboo terms or the normalization of slang, among others.

2.3. Temporary and permanent change.

Change does not occur at the same time and at once, that is, it is a slow process that sometimes happens under the radar, and there are periods in which linguistic change is accelerated by factors that tend to coincide with the external ones mentioned previously, while other periods do not experience as many alterations in language. This difference is very clear when we compare excerpts from Old English, Middle English and Present-Day English:

(1) Hwæt. We Gardena in geardagum,

þeodcyninga, þrym gefrunon,

hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon (quoted from Poetry Foundation, n.d.)

(2) When that April with his showers soote

The drought of March hath piercèd to the root

And bathèd every vein in such liquor

Of which virtúe engendered is the flower (quoted from Murphy, n.d.)

The first example corresponds to the initial lines of the Old English epic poem *Beowulf*, dated between the eighth and the early eleventh century. Here, we can see that Old English would be practically unintelligible to a Present-Day English speaker, whereas

the Middle English (2) excerpt from the Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer, written in the late fourteenth century, is much more similar to the current version of English even though the chronological distance is larger between these two than between Old English and Middle English.

With all of that said, it is important to consider that not all changes are permanent in a language, as some features or expressions may become ‘trendy’ and be used regularly for a certain time, but then they may die out and become obsolete. For a change in language to be considered permanent, this feature has to be used relatively frequently for an extended period of time, usually more than 30 years, which is unlikely to happen with every novelty despite their possible popularity at the time. This is especially so in the age of technology, where words or expressions go in and out of fashion at great speed.

Furthermore, there are several factors that contribute to the manner in which people speak, such as their age, their education level or where they come from, and play a role in linguistic change, as has been shown by research in sociolinguistics. Change does not affect the whole speech community at once. Nowadays, it can be imagined that the changes that come with the arrival of the Internet are also going to become a factor that distinguish those who are in contact with this tool or that belong to a particular group within said environment, and those who are not, with their speech becoming a marker of identity that may contribute to changes in the long run. It is known that the leaders of language change tend to be the younger generations, especially the females (Thompson, 2015). This coincides with the fragment of the population the Internet has the most influence on, as they are the ones making the most use out of social media, for instance. This can be seen, as I have previously mentioned, with the words from the drag community that have become frequent expressions used in social media which are

gradually seeping into everyday conversation as well, since a good percentage of the audience of the show that made drag mainstream is young girls, according to the webpage *Medium*.

3. THE INTERNET.

3.1. The arrival of the Internet.

The arrival of the Internet has drastically transformed people's lives, thus also affecting the language they use. This is especially so over the last few decades due to the great speed of developments concerning this kind of technology. Language is becoming more adapted to a type of environment where the written format is used, but unlike expected, a more informal style is used for communication. Language may also vary depending on the online situation speakers are in or on the technological device used, as speakers do not use language in the same way when using a computer or a smartphone as they used to when mobile phones had keyboards where they had to press a button several times to write a specific letter.

According to the Online Library Learning Centre, the official birth of the Internet is usually dated in January 1983, however, its origins can be traced back to the 1960s or even further back to the early 1900s, when Nikola Tesla proposed the concept of a "world wireless system" much before the technology appropriate for its creation was developed.

The creation of the Internet cannot be attributed to a particular person, as there were many programmers and engineers who worked for its development. As mentioned, the Internet began in the 1960s as a means of sharing information among government researchers, which was then stored in large computers that made use of magnetic tapes to share this information. As computers were not portable, these tapes had to be sent through the conventional postal system or the researcher had to go to the place where the computer was set up to get it.

Further improvement in this system took place with the outbreak of the Cold War and the need of the U.S. Defence Department to find a way to be able to pass and recover information in the case of a nuclear attack. This was the reason why the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPANET) was created. ARPANET was only accessible for a rather narrow group of people in a single network. Other networks were created following this model due to these limitations and they developed into what it is now the Internet after the establishment of the Transfer Control Protocol/Internetwork Protocol (TCP/IP), created by Robert Kahn and Vinton Cerf and adopted in 1983. In the article *Who Invented the Internet?* of the website *History*, Evan Andrews describes the TCP/IP as the development that made possible the communication and connection amongst computer networks.

Thirty years ago, on March 1989, Tim Berners-Lee submitted the first proposal for the World Wide Web (WWW) called *Information Management: A Proposal*, which he first explained as:

This proposal concerns the management of general information about accelerators and experiments at CERN. It discusses the problems of loss of information about complex evolving systems and derives a solution based on a distributed hypertext system. (Berners-Lee 1989:2)

Berners-Lee originally called this idea the *Mesh*, but, even though it was found appealing by those at the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) laboratory, it was not until 1990 when the idea was actually developed into the Web, a

hypermedia database of documents and other resources interconnected by hyperlinks,¹ which made the Internet a step closer to the present version of it.

Crystal (2006:14) describes the functions of the World Wide Web as:

a means of enabling high-energy physicists in different institutions to share information within their field, but it rapidly spread to other fields, and is now all-inclusive in subject-matter, and designed for multimedia interaction between computer users anywhere in the world. Its many functions include encyclopedic reference, archiving, cataloguing, ‘Yellow Pages’ listing, advertising, self-publishing, games, news reporting, creative writing, and commercial transactions of all kinds, with movies and other types of entertainment becoming increasingly available.

These two terms, the *Internet* and the *Web*, are used interchangeably most of the time, but they are not actual synonyms, as the Internet refers to the hardware and software infrastructure that allows computer interconnectivity by using the TCP/IP.

3.2. Internet situations.

The Internet is a rather heterogeneous space and we can find ourselves in many different scenarios within it, therefore, the language we use has to be adapted to them in order to follow some of the already established conventions for these situations. This is comparable to how our use of language outside this medium is modified in terms of its degree of formality or choice of words depending on the interlocutor and the context to make an appropriate use of language and to avoid being judged for our choices. I am now going to devote part of this section to this matter, which will also be useful in the next

¹ Dr Paul Mullins, “6a.3.World Wide Web”, *Slippery Rock University*. Accessed 05/06, 16:27, http://cs.sru.edu/~mullins/cpsc100book/module06_internet/module06-03_internet.html

chapter of my dissertation. I primarily focus on the most basic ones, that is, instant messaging, the e-mail, blogs and social media.

3.2.1. *The electronic mail.*

Just over a decade ago, electronic mail or *e-mail*, defined by TechTarget as “the exchange of computer-stored messages by telecommunication”, was one of the most common manners to communicate through a computer and it was not restricted to a certain type of interaction. It was not rare that somebody spoke to their friends as well as their business colleagues through e-mails. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, however, the e-mail has specialised its usage to a more business oriented, academic or to a more formal one, while family members and close friendships are now usually addressed by an instant message through our mobile phones, which avoids the asynchronous aspect of the e-mail. By describing the e-mail as asynchronous, we refer to the fact that the replies in a conversation do not have to occur right after one message is sent and the time span for the response is much wider than that of a real-time conversation.

3.2.2. *Instant messaging.*

Currently, the preferred method of communication is instant messaging, in which a communicative exchange between people occurs in real time, that is, it is synchronous, unlike what happens with e-mails. The participants in instant messaging chats are usually already acquainted with each other, an aspect which differs from the so-called *chat groups*, where individuals are allowed to enter an online conversation with several others who they may not know previously to the encounter.

Instant messaging has now moved on to mobile phones with the appearance of applications such as WhatsApp or Telegram, but this type of communication has been around even before phones had the possibility of having a service like the ones just

mentioned. In this case, MSN Messenger was the most popular computer programme for instant messaging, followed by AOL Instant Messenger and Yahoo! Messenger. Nonetheless, regardless of the already mentioned synchronicity being a significant advantage, it might also carry some problems with it. The portability that comes with mobile phones has affected our dependence on having a constant conversation with somebody to the point of leading to an argument if one of the participants takes a long time to reply. Most often than not, this simply happens because one is not constantly paying attention to their phone, but there are also other implicit meanings this silence may carry, such as conveying annoyance with the interlocutor or wanting the conversation to die out.² This is so common that the last implicature of silence has been given a name, *ghosting*, that is, “the practice of ending a personal relationship with somebody by suddenly stopping all communication without explanation” (OALD s.v. *ghost* v. 3)

3.2.3. *Blogs.*

Weblogs or *blogs*, as they are most commonly known, are quite a significant case in the virtual world of the Internet. As stated in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (s.v. *blog* n. 1), a blog is “a website that contains online personal reflections, comments, and often hyperlinks, videos, and photographs provided by the writer.” The people in charge of their entries have a wide range of options for their posts regarding length, theme and, most importantly, in terms of language, register and style. They are allowed to post any type of content without further supervision, unlike traditional writing in books, newspapers or magazines, where there is a figure who acts as a mediator to verify that the language used follows a particular variety, usually the standard one. This is very interesting for the study of language and language change, since it shows a raw example

² “8 Interpretations of silence when using instant messaging”, *The Couch Manager*, January 16, 2011, <https://www.thecouchmanager.com/8-interpretations-of-silence-when-using-instant-messaging/>

of the manner in which people use English even though these posts tend to be planned out, as they are more spontaneous and informal than traditional writing, similarly to how personal letters were used to examine language some centuries back. In addition, this also allows the owner of the blog to put out content that might have not been published so easily otherwise.

As in most situations, characteristics usually depend on the type of blog these *bloggers* lead. Many of these websites are used by companies or experts in a certain field for diverse reasons (advertising, offering information, discussion, etc.) (3), but others may just be used as a kind of personal journal (4) where its owners tell their stories to an audience with whom they can interact in the comment section that appears below every post.

(3) The call to make art isn't so much a choice as a force compelling creation, no matter the price. Few can resist the possibility that something lays beyond the sheer will it takes to render something out of nothing at all. For all that is given, the possibility of return is a draw: fame, wealth, and legacy. (Feature Shoot's photography blog: www.featureshoot.com)

(4) She was demonstrating how the pigments could be used & totally sold me on them...i wasn't planning on getting anything! She even posed for a photo, which she said she will try and find..so Gillian...if you manage to find this, let me know! :) (YouTuber Zoe Sugg's blog: www.zoella.co.uk)

Even though there are several approaches to these websites, these two examples allow us to get an idea of how language is used in each circumstance.

3.2.4. *Social Media.*

Nowadays, social media play a salient role in the everyday usage of the Web, as most users have at least one account in a social platform, if not in several of them. They are used as a meeting point not only for those who already know each other, but they also provide an environment where people of different cultures get to interact, influence one another, share opinions, create content, etc.

Social platforms such as Twitter, Facebook or Instagram allow their users to post updates about their personal life, pictures, videos, their status, etc. Each of the ones mentioned fulfil a specific purpose, for instance, Twitter is a microblogging social platform which only allows posts of up to 280 characters,³ including as much as four pictures or a video of a maximum of 2 minutes and 20 seconds. Facebook and Instagram realise a similar function in the sense that they work as a journal for their users, but do not have such big limitations when writing a post. It is important to keep in mind, however, that, in the case of Instagram, language is subjected to photographs and is mainly used as a description for them.

Businesses have also found in social media a good marketing place and the opportunity to connect with their customers in a more approachable manner as opposed to the comment section on websites or the traditional e-mail and phone call. However, the consequences of this are not as simple as they may seem at first due to the deceitful actions of some companies, which have led to the creation of policies concerning the management of businesses' social platforms and the disclosure of paid advertisements of new job positions, such as influencers, who have a clear impact on their audience's

³ Aliza Rosen, "Giving you more characters to express yourself", *Twitter Blog*, September 26, 2017, https://blog.twitter.com/official/en_us/topics/product/2017/Giving-you-more-characters-to-express-yourself.html

consumption and purchases. According to the *Independent Daily*, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) and the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) have collaborated to create an *Influencer's Guide* which is concerned with this issue and it includes information about

what the relevant rules are around social media advertising, what the ASA considers to be an ad, how to disclose a post is an advert, what the CMA's requirements are and what happens if someone complains to the ASA about a post on social media. (Hosie 2018)

Similarly to instant messaging, social media platforms have developed mobile phone applications for their users; thus, they are easier to access and less dependent on the website itself. The topic of social media will be further explored in the forthcoming chapter.

3.3. Languages of the Internet.

The creation of the Internet triggered a linguistic revolution where English played a key role. The term *revolution* is defined by Oxford's Lexico Dictionary (s.v. *revolution* n. 1.2) as "a dramatic and wide-reaching change in conditions, attitudes, or operation." It has been applied to many dramatic changes throughout the history of the English language, which may have been triggered by political or social factors, such as wars or political alliances. We can identify the changes from Old English to Middle English, and from this last one to Early Modern English as two important linguistic revolutions that transformed the language in the past in many aspects. Still, according to some experts like Crystal (2005:16), the introduction of the Internet exemplifies at best the meaning of the word. Even though its invention is quite recent, it accelerated the constant change of English and made information more readily available for the public while, at the same time,

breaking ties with the previous modes of communication and creating a new set of features characteristic to the Internet and the Web.

As previously mentioned, English plays an important role as a common means of communication for people who speak different languages. We can say that English is frequently used as a *lingua franca* in environments like business, politics or when travelling, and this also extends to the context of the Internet, where it is one of the predominant languages. However, a particular language does not become the mother tongue of as many speakers as English has nowadays or as widespread if the question of power associated to it is not involved.

Currently, English is considered a global language: it is taught as a second and as a foreign language in most countries and plays a role in the high functions of many of them. Those who are learning English as a second language are also exposed to it in everyday life and have the possibility of using it in conversation, whereas foreign language students are not in an environment that favours its frequent use in communicative exchanges. According to *The English Effect*, a report published by the British Council (www.britishcouncil.org) in 2013, approximately over 1.75 billion people speak English, that is, a quarter of the world's population. *ThoughtCo's* writer Kenneth Beare also took information from some reports by the British Council for his article *How many people learn English?* and stated that there are 1,5 billion learners of English in the world, 750 million learning it as a foreign language and 375 million having it as a second language. The remaining number represents native speakers (c. 335 million) and people learning the language as part of other programmes, such as corporate-sponsored English classes. It is estimated that this number will increase until reaching two billion people by 2020.

All these numbers would lead us to consider English as one of the most relevant languages concerning the Internet, if not the most important one, especially provided that the Web was in its beginnings an English-only environment due to the fact that ARPANET used English to link North American institutions in order to share information. In consequence, foreign countries had to use it as well so that they could take part in the project. Moreover, all of this was reinforced since the protocols used to transfer information were only available in this language and, also, when commerce and private organisations started to make use of the Web in the 1980s. Even the *New York Times* published an article titled *Computer Speak; World, Wide, Web: 3 English Words* (Specter 1996) that stated that the only way to best use the Internet to your advantage was learning and using English, given that it was the only language able to connect people from different parts of the world. Nevertheless, the article also mentions some of the problems that this may bring about, among them, the elitism that may develop from those who can speak English against those who cannot, or the issues which having such an important network being mostly Anglophone brings about since the Internet is supposed to be accessible to everybody, but not everybody is fluent in English.

Despite the expansion of the use of English on the Internet over the years and what many critics might debate, other languages are starting to gain ground, almost overtaking the place English had in this medium, as the Internet is becoming a multicultural space where non-English speakers are increasing considerably.

4. THE NETSPEAK.

It is obvious that the languages used on the Internet will be altered through the years to fit its characteristics, creating a new manner of using language. Many terms to refer to this kind of speech can be found, but the most popular terms are *Computer-Mediated Communication* (CMC) and *Netspeak*, which etymologically comes from *Internet-speak*. These two are the ones I am going to use in this dissertation. Other, perhaps, less popular terms are *cyber-slang*, *chatspeak*, *Weblish* or *digitalese*.

Netspeak presents a series of features that extend to most of its speakers, however, they do not have to occur in all contexts. Internet users generally make up this kind of language as the conversation takes place or have to adapt it depending on the interlocutor and the situation, as they would have to with spoken or traditional written language. I will provide further explanation on how the Netspeak varies depending on the situation after presenting its most general characteristics, starting with the fact that it may possibly represent a new approach to communication, as it not only shares some characteristics with speech and writing, but also creates others of its own. Its main influence is on vocabulary, a topic which I will discuss in detail in the next chapter.

The emergence of a new set of conventions is not unique to the Internet, since broadcasting and printing also created new ones, however, their reach and the speed at which they were conceived, changed and stopped being used was much lower. As a consequence of this, Internet users have to be aware of when and how to use these conventions. This is especially the case if an expression is quite old, for it might have undergone some changes, similarly to what happened to *LOL* ('Laughing Out Loud'), which went from representing genuine laughter to implying sarcasm or passive-

aggressiveness most of the time. BuzzFeed's article *The 12 Meanings of LOL* exemplifies up to twelve different uses for it, ranging from meaning nothing to 'being uncomfortable'.

The principal differences with the written and spoken modes of communication is, firstly, that the language of the Net is on many occasions more expressive and less formal than written language and, secondly, that the Web makes use of hyperlinks, which do not exist in traditional written language.

4.1. The expressiveness of Netspeak.

When speaking, factors like intonation, speed, volume or tone help us infer how the conversation is going or if the interlocutor is using sarcasm, for instance. By contrast, Computer-Mediated Communication has to find a manner to express all of this differently, but it must be noted that the following features may be restricted to a conversation between people with a close relationship, as its usage is not as frequent in a more formal context.

The most common tactics to imitate these aspects of speech apart from the ordinary *uhm* or *oh*, are orthographic features such as the repetition of letters, the use of capitals, or the presence or absence of punctuation in our message, giving special emphasis to what we want to highlight and making the reader understand it in the same way. For instance, capitals are sometimes overlooked on the Internet for the reason that the majority of users only use lowercase when typing, but they also have a special meaning, as a word or phrase written in capitals would be read as if the writer was almost shouting. We can see the difference in the following example:

(5) what have you done?

(6) WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?

The other exception for their use is a more obvious one, that is, fulfilling an emphatic function as it can be seen in (7), where the capitalized element would not represent a shouting function, but the action of highlighting even more the focus of the phrase. There are other forms of achieving the same result, for instance, placing punctuation before and after the word that is in focus, for which asterisks (8) or the symbol “~” may be used, or by putting spaces in-between the letters of a word or full stops, making it sound as if it was pronounced slower than usual and, therefore, making its presence stand out from the rest of the sentence, as in (9) and (10).

(7) i LOVE that dress.

(8) i *love* that dress.

(9) i l o v e that dress.

(10) i. love. that. dress.

Typos are bound to happen in this kind of language, especially if a person is typing fast. These mistakes, however, have developed into a feature characteristic of the Netspeak, as they are now frequently used on purpose to convey an implicit meaning. This phenomenon has also started to develop into a phonetic writing where, for example, *that* would become *dat* and *though* would be spelled <doe> or <tho>. The traditional exclamation mark clearly plays an emphatic role when used, however, it is sometimes combined with other symbols, usually at random, not only to express surprise or disbelief in an exaggerated manner, as in (11), but also to signify sarcasm or excitement when combined with the number one due to its position on the keyboard (12). The Urban Dictionary affirms that this gives the impression that a typo was made as a consequence of not holding down the *alt* key properly even though it has been written like that on purpose. Moreover, this usage has become so popular that Internet users do it even when typing on their phones despite the fact that it is not possible to make this typo on there, as

the numeral value one and the exclamation point are in completely different parts of the keyboard.

(11) what!!!!!!!!!!/\$%&/(?

(12) i can't believe it!!!!1!!!!1!!!

A peculiar aspect that we might encounter on the Internet is a random assortment of letters that do not have an actual meaning, as they are just a result of hitting arbitrary letters on the keyboard, usually the row of <a> to <l> (*asdfghjkl*). According to the Urban Dictionary, such strings are used to convey a feeling of excitement or something that cannot be put into words easily, and their use was particularly popular on the microblogging website Tumblr, but then it spread out to other websites and, although we can still find it especially among younger people, it is now on its path to disuse. This technique is also common to represent an exaggerated laughter (13).

(13) HAHASHDSG

Finally, we also have to consider that body language is very relevant in face-to-face conversation and it is replaced in online conversation by emoticons or *smileys*, which have evolved into the *emojis* we can find in our mobile phone's keyboards currently. Apart from these, the feature of the *gif* search bar in most social platforms helped make online conversation more expressive.

Despite all of this, the Internet situations mentioned in 2.2. have to be considered and the differences are rather obvious when comparing the e-mail and the instant message, for instance. There is a dramatic change in the language used in e-mails. It eliminates some of the features previously mentioned in order to become less colloquial, since it has become a more business-oriented messaging platform. An instance of it is the fact that the *emojis* or the overly exaggerated signs of punctuation tend to be avoided,

unless the interlocutors have a close relationship, or the communicative exchange is less of a professional interaction.

The complete opposite happens in instant messaging. Due to the already existing familiarity between the participants, the conversations in instant messages are most often informal and the messages may be accompanied by images, such as memes. Memes are defined by Oxford's Lexico Dictionary (s.v. *meme* n. 2) as "an image, video, piece of text, etc., typically humorous in nature, that is copied and spread rapidly by Internet users, often with slight variations" and they tend to go out of fashion very quickly, gifs or one of the most popular innovations as of recent: the possibility of sending stickers. These have the tendency to be a reproduction of memes used in a more practical manner, given that the whole image does not have to be sent, or one of the participants could have made them out of an inside joke with their interlocutor. The possibility of sending voice memos is one of the main features of instant messaging nowadays, making it easier for the speaker to express long ideas as if they were speaking face-to-face or in an asynchronous phone call.

4.2. The hyperlink.

The other main difference of Netspeak with traditional modes of communication, such as written and spoken language, is the use of hyperlinks or *links*, which refer to "an element in an HTML document that links to either another portion of the document or to another document altogether" (www.techopedia.com). In other words, a hyperlink allows the user to move through different pages by just clicking a highlighted word. This is a major difference in relation to traditional written texts, and, even though they are sometimes compared to annotations by the side of a text on paper, they are not quite the same as these notes considering that regular texts can exist without them, but the Web would not be able to exist without these links connecting one page to another.

To conclude this chapter, we have to stress the fact that the Netspeak is not a homogeneous type of language, as we would imagine if we take into consideration that most of the population has access to the Internet and not every single person is going to follow the same conventions, putting situational differences aside. This is usually compared to a country where one language is spoken, but numerous varieties derive from it in different parts of the territory. As seen above, some features of Computer-Mediated Communication present alterations in orthography, grammar and vocabulary depending on the situation, making it a heterogeneous type of language with different varieties used depending on the needs of the speaker, the purpose of the conversation and the attitudes or degree of familiarity with the other person taking part on the exchange. Even the device used plays a key role, as our speech is also conditioned by it.

5. THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social networks have become elements of everyday life for many people. Even though these platforms came into existence relatively recently, their growth has been very rapid and their influence on people and people's behaviour is much greater than ever imagined. People have started to make time in their daily routines to check their social platforms and, nowadays, one can count over 2.62 billion users in these sites. It is estimated that these numbers will increase until reaching 3 billion before 2021, according to the Terrell (n.d.), however, what is uncertain is the future of the leading social networking sites at the present moment. This is due to the fact that the environment of the Internet changes at great speed, making what is 'trendy' at one point in time, old-fashioned the next, which also applies to the vocabulary used on the Web.

It is obvious that anything we use on a daily basis is going to affect our manner of living and acting. As mentioned above, social platforms have experienced a swift expansion in a short time span, carrying with it certain advantages and disadvantages.

The blog *NDOT* (www.ndot.in) published a list comparing the different advantages and disadvantages of social media, from which some of the following are taken. First of all, they mention that social platforms are one of the most useful inventions to keep up with the life of friends and family, as well as sharing your own information, such as photographs, videos, and status. They are also used by companies to give updates of their campaigns and to develop a closer relationship with their audiences, in addition to them being a great marketing place for their products. These platforms are even used in the context of politics, giving politicians a means of updating their voters during campaigns, as well as giving people an environment to express their political ideas that perhaps otherwise would have not been heard.

Despite the advantages outnumbering the disadvantages, social sites have been an object of criticism almost since the beginning. A study conducted by *Social Magnets* (www.socialmagnets.net) has reported that 32% of people check social media during meals, 40% do not care if they are interrupted in conversation by a message and 56% check Facebook daily, out of which 12% do it several times a day. The first two actions would usually be considered rude or disrespectful towards those who are with the person in question, while the third one can be seen by some as a case of addiction. Because of this, social platforms have been compared by, for instance, the BBC, to alcohol and cigarettes in terms of creating an addiction (Brown 2018). Further criticism concerns the well-being and self-esteem of users, especially those who are exposed to Instagram ‘models’ on a daily basis because of the subtle use of programmes like Photoshop or FaceTune to alter their physical aspect.

5.1. Social platforms

One may think that there are no rules on the Internet, and, while that is partly true, it is not entirely the case. As has been mentioned throughout this dissertation, trendy becomes old fashioned in a matter of days, especially if the element in question has been heavily and constantly used for a period of time, and meanings or connotations tend to shift overtime, as was the case with LOL. Other times, it is just a matter of breaking rules and knowing when or where it can be done. One would not use a very informal language in a business e-mail, but language could shift to a very formal and correct style during a chat conversation with a friend in order to convey annoyance, especially with the use of the end period.

All of these are rules that apply to the language of the web, but there are also similar others related to the websites themselves. Language is everchanging, and so are

social platforms, how they are used, and which ones are popular. This is a consequence of them being created for different purposes or, presumably, having a different demographic.

Based on the Terrell (n.d.) for *History Cooperative*, the first two social media platforms, called *Six Degrees* and *Friendster*, ended up shutting down despite their popularity at the time because of the arrival of newer social sites.

Six Degrees is considered the first social media site, active between 1997 and 2001, when it closed. It had over 3.5 million users and it allowed to add other people to the personal network of the user. It was given said name because of the ‘Six Degrees of Separation’ Theory that asserts that the whole of the world’s population is connected by less than six degrees of separation.

Friendster launched in 2002 with the same purpose as Six Degrees, to share information, pictures and videos with other profiles accepted in the user’s personal network. This platform reached a hundred million users before being rebranded as a gaming site in 2011, when its decline started, and in 2015 its services shut down officially.

It was not until 2006 when two of the most relevant social media sites were launched: Facebook and Twitter. These are the ones I am mainly going to focus in this dissertation, along with Instagram, since they are seemingly three of the most commonly used at the present time. How they came into existence, their evolution through the years and their impact on language will be discussed in the subsequent corresponding sections.

5.1.1. *Facebook*

Facebook is potentially the most popular and well-known social platform, not only because of what it has to offer, but also in relation to the story of its creation, especially

It was not until February 4, 2004 when *thefacebook.com* was launched, which would drop the *the* in 2005. This new website resembled the already existing face books with the difference that *thefacebook* connected all the students at Harvard, while face books did not have such reach. Soon after, it became available to other universities in the US and Canada, such as Stanford and Yale, and, by the end of 2006, it became open to anyone. The only condition was to have an e-mail address and being over the age of 13.

The website grew extremely quickly, as reported by *Brandwatch* (www.brandwatch.com), starting with 12 million people registered in December 2006 and reaching 100 million in 2008, when they introduced the feature of the chat. By July 2010, it was already at 500 million, but this increase faced some complications when, in 2014, it was revealed that Facebook conducted an experiment on their users regarding advertisements. This issue concerning the leakage of personal information would be repeated throughout the years, consequently, losing people's trust. The story told by the *Independent Daily* also includes that the google searches for *delete Facebook* also increased around this time. Adding to this, the changes made on the platform in order to improve the engagement between users were not well received, resulting in people spending less time on the platform.

Regardless of all the controversies, Reed (2014) agrees that it cannot be denied that Facebook was the main leader in vocabulary change in relation to technological advancements, creating an alternative meaning to already existing words, as can be seen with *friend* or *wall*, which will be discussed in section 5.2.1.

5.1.2. *Twitter*

As seen above, Twitter is a microblogging social platform which only allows posts of up to 280 characters, including as much as four pictures or a video of a maximum of 2

minutes and 20 seconds. Until 2017, it only allowed 140 characters per *tweet*, that is, for each post, but this has changed recently since the amount of space languages need to convey the same message can differ drastically.

MacArthur (2019) tells us in her article for *Lifewire* that Twitter was originally conceived by Jack Dorsey in 2006 as a platform that tried to recreate SMS conversation. This way, friends or relatives could keep updated on each other's lives based on their status. This is the reason for the limitation of characters, since phone companies usually placed SMS character limit at around 140, but they decided to keep it as it had become a characteristic feature of the website.



Figure 2. Twitter's current timeline. From: freshvanroot.

Before changing the name of the social platform, the vowels were removed from it, owing to a popular trend at the time and hoping it would bring attention to the site. Indeed, *Twtrr*⁴ was a success from the



Figure 3. Twitter's first tweet. Screenshot of @jack.

beginning, with over 60,000 tweets sent each day of the South by Southwest Interactive

⁴ That is, before the website was rebranded to *Twitter*.

Conference of 2007. At the moment, Twitter has 200 million users who tweet over 140 million times per day and other 460,000 register each day (Picard 2011).

Picard (2011) affirms that, with the arrival of Twitter, also came a new trend concerning the brevity of the language. This not only includes writing, but also reading information, as Twitter has become a relevant source for people who want to keep up to date with what is happening in the world, but in short. According to the website of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (<https://www.britannica.com>), this phenomenon started when Janis Krums told the story of a water landing of US Airways Flight 1549 in New York, to which was a photograph attached.

Moreover, most of the innovations related to language that are now typical of Twitter were created by users for their convenience when using the platform. Examples of this are the @ they used to signal the fact that they were addressing a particular user, which later would develop into an actual feature, and the hashtag. The hashtag is probably one of the most characteristic features of this social network, and it is defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (s.v. *hashtag* n. 1) as “a word or phrase preceded by the symbol # that classifies or categorizes the accompanying text (such as a tweet).” It also adds further down on the page: “the hashtag can now be a tool for a supplementary coy or witty comment (e.g., #awkward).” Furthermore, *Lifewire* explains that the retweet was also done manually by adding *RT*, since people wanted to find a way to repost tweets without plagiarizing. The feature was added in 2010.

5.1.3. Instagram

Of the three social networks taken into consideration, Instagram is probably the fastest one in terms of growth, considering it only started towards the end of 2010. It has become one of the most popular social platforms to share photographs in less than 10 years and it is also a source of income for the so-called *influencers*.

The history of Instagram is shared in the website *Medium* (www.medium.com). It begins in San Francisco, where Kevin Systrom built a prototype for a website similar to Facebook. It allowed users to share

information, pictures and to keep up with what others were doing. This website was originally named *Burbn*, after the alcoholic drink bourbon, before being changed to *Instagram*, a blending of *instant (camera)* and *telegram*. The rebranding of the name occurred after Systrom and his new partner Mike Krieger modified the purpose of the website. They believed there were already many other platforms with the same purpose on the Web and, when they realized people were mainly attracted to Burbn by the photo-sharing feature, they took advantage of it and turned it into the whole site.

In the beginning, this photo-sharing platform allowed users to publish photographs with the condition of them being square-shaped, and these were accompanied by a caption under the post. When it was bought by Facebook in 2012, several improvements were made, such as giving users the possibility of tagging friends, the option of the direct message or the stories, a feature that allows content to be on show



Figure 4. Instagram's current timeline. From: screenshot of my own timeline.

for 24 hours before it disappears. The restriction of the square-shaped photograph was also removed in 2015.

Unlike Facebook and Twitter, Instagram was originally an application for mobile phones. Despite being only accessible to those with an iOS device, that is, the operating system of Apple Inc.'s devices, it gained popularity very rapidly. According to *Candybit Social* (www.candybitsocial.com), it reached a million users in two months and 10 million in only a year, a number which greatly increased with the launch of a version for Android devices.

However, the main difference between these platforms lies in the fact that Instagram sets aside language in favour of photographs, as mentioned above, making them the most important part of the website. This does not mean that language does not play an important role in it, in fact, many writers use Instagram to give a more creative spin to their works. This is the case of username *jazducca*, who combines the visual aspect of letters with messages of strangers written on them in her *Left Unsaid* project, or the English version of it in the profile of *theunsentproject*. The author of the best-seller *Milk and Honey*, Rupi Kaur (*rupikaur_*), also uses her platform to share excerpts of her poetry, sometimes accompanied by illustrations that relate to what is being said, while others like National Geographic (*natgeo*) use captions to share stories. I have screenshotted two of these examples from their profiles in order to further illustrate language use on Instagram:

at home that night
 i filled the bathtub with scorching water
 tossed in spearmint from the garden
 two tablespoons almond oil
 some milk
 and honey
 a pinch of salt
 rose petals from the neighbor's lawn
 i soaked myself in the mixture
 desperate to wash the dirty off
 the first hour
 i picked pine needles from my hair
 counted them one two three
 lined them up on their backs
 the second hour
 i wept
 a howling escaped me
 who knew girl could become beast
 during the third hour
 i found bits of him on bits of me
 the sweat was not mine
 the white between my legs
 not mine
 the bite marks
 not mine
 the smell
 not mine
 the blood
 mine
 the fourth hour i prayed

 - rupi kaur

Figure 5. Post from @rupikaur_

natgeo Photo by Nina Robinson @ninarobinsonnyc //
 Sponsored by @ProcterGamble // Jericho Brown is a poet
 and writer in Atlanta, Georgia. In the past, I worked with
 Jericho on a project combining my photography and his
 poetry. "There's already pressure in the United States
 around being black and queer. I think the hardest thing for
 me is when that pressure comes from inside our
 communities, when I'm pressured in a certain way about
 how to be black ... when people want me to be the 'right
 kind' of black," Jericho said. "They want me to be that
 good, respectable black, that dignified black that I think
 people have almost made a stereotype out of, and it has
 become hugely problematic. I got a lot of that from my
 family when I was growing up, and I'm getting rid of a lot of
 it—to this day." Much of my personal work focuses on
 vulnerability, reflection, and ways of challenging bias and
 limited belief systems. To navigate and persevere through
 the constant occurrences of racial bias is a daily exercise
 for me and for every black person I know. I recognize that
 black men carry a particular burden. The ongoing battle to
 merely do well and be respected is often drowned out by
 the many injustices they suffer. // @ProcterGamble
 understands that images in TV, film, and advertising can
 shape how people see each other, leading to bias and
 consequences that impact us all, especially people of
 color. Dialogue and understanding can unlock powerful
 revelations. #TalkAboutBias

Figure 6. Caption from @natgeo

5.1.4. Demographics.

Demographics are important to determine the language use of a platform and how it develops through time. In a 2015 article in *Mail Online*, Professor John Sutherland from University College London showed that, currently, there is a “seismic generational gap” in relation to how language is used on the Internet and, in particular, in social media.⁵ According to the Cambridge Dictionary (s.v. *the generation gap* n. 1), it is “a situation in which older and younger people do not understand each other because of their different experiences, opinions, habits, and behaviour”, which, in this case, is applied to language use.

Sutherland interviewed 2,000 adults during his study. It revealed that 86% of them thought younger adults spoke completely different on the Internet, and 90% failed to

⁵ Press Association. 2015. “Generational language gap ‘seismic.’” *Mail Online*, May 1, 2015. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/pa/article-3063505/Generational-language-gap-seismic.html>

guess the meaning of words such as *bae*, a term of endearment. Moreover, 43% had not heard of *fleek*, used to describe something being flawless, and acronyms like *TBT* ('Throwback Thursday') or *NSFW* ('Not Safe For Work') were also unknown for parents.

In addition to this, it is important to comment on one of the most common assumptions when speaking about social media and language: the fact that teenagers are responsible for these changes. Relating it to the data just mentioned, we can see that it is mostly accurate. The percentage of young adults in social media is considerably higher than the percentage of adults, with a 90% against a 78% of 30-49 year-old adults, according to Abrahão (2014:110). Furthermore, some scholars even refer to these users as *digital natives*, term coined by Mark Prensky in 2001, since they were born in the Internet Age.

Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are three of the most used social platforms at the current time, but it is relevant for this study to know their demographics in order to infer which ones may have more impact on language based on the data just mentioned. The following numbers are based on West (2019) for *Sproutsocial*.

As I have previously said, Facebook is the leader of all platforms in terms of users, with 2.27 billion in total, and over half of them check their account on a daily basis. Its main audience corresponds to those between the ages of 18-29, representing 81% of the young adult population. This is closely followed by those between 30-49 and 50-64 years old, that is, 78% and 65% of those demographics, respectively. Teenagers who use Facebook only represent the 51% of the 13-17 demographic, making it one of the least appealing platforms for such users.

On Twitter, we find something similar in the sense that 18-29 year olds lead the chart, in this case, distancing considerably from those between 30-49 years old (27%). These last ones are overtaken by the younger population of 13-17 year olds (32%).

Instagram counts on 500 million daily users and a billion monthly ones. In this case, there is a gradual descent concerning the popularity of the social site in terms of age. The demographic for teenagers between the ages of 13-17 is of 72%. The number drops to a 64% for those between 18-29 years old and drops again for 30-49 year olds, with only a 40% of that group using it. The numbers continue to drop among adults older than 50.

	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram
13-17 year olds	51%	32%	72%
18-29 year olds	81%	40%	64%
30-49 year olds	68%	27%	40%
50-64 year olds	65%	19%	21%
65 + year olds	41%	8%	10%
Female	72%	24%	39%
Male	62%	23%	30%

Table 1. Percentage of users based on age and gender. From: West (2019)

*% out of the online population.

To conclude, these numbers give an approximation of which social websites are more appealing to whom, making Facebook the preferred platform by adults, Twitter the favourite of young adults and teenagers leading Instagram. The split between male and female use is quite balanced.

5.2. Innovations in vocabulary.

Vocabulary is one of the aspects of language that is more vulnerable to change. Taking into account that the impact of the Internet has been massive in general, it is only clear that it affected and still affects vocabulary as well. Despite social media only representing a fraction of the Web, it is where people come into contact and most influence each other and, consequently, language.

Over the last decades, dictionaries have been adding terms and updating the meaning of already existing ones to keep up with these technological advancements or slang terms that come from the Net, since a word can become globally ‘trendy’ in a matter of days.

There are two sources of new lexicon: technology and slang. As developed by Crystal (58-61:2011), the actual technology involved on the use of the internet creates the need of new words to describe it, varying from basic terminology, such as *computer* and *software*, to neologisms and substitutions of clusters, such as *twictionary* (a dictionary of Twitter functions) and *blargon* (blog jargon). The other source of change in vocabulary comes from the users themselves and linguistic innovations of slang, colloquialisms, abbreviations and word games. [...] In addition, already existent words can receive a new meaning depending on the use online, giving new definitions and even syntactic features. (Abrahão 2014:108)

Considering the studies mentioned in 5.1.4. which revealed that the population was experiencing a generational gap and that teenagers are the ones responsible for the linguistic changes in social media, it is only fair to study their online lingo in order to get an idea of where online language is heading. Therefore, we would be taking a look at language change in an apparent-time perspective versus a real-time perspective. By saying this, I am referring to the assumption that “the kids of today will be the adult speakers of tomorrow” (Burridge & Bergs 2016:18) and, consequently, the way they

speak and write will reflect language in the future. However, we have to be somewhat sceptical about what we find because of how fast change on the Internet occurs, especially concerning slang terms.

In the following sections, I will discuss some of the most frequently used words and expressions I have found on social media at the moment, since I am also a user in the three social platforms I discussed in this dissertation. The criteria for the organization of the list I have compiled is based on their relation to the social site. The first section (5.2.1. *Words of technology*) is formed by words related to the structure and features of the platform, whereas the second section (5.2.2. *Slang*) contains terms used by people in those platforms. The latter is further divided into acronyms and abbreviations, where I highlight the importance of these elements in social media language and give examples of them, and trends. The section concerning trends is probably the one that changes the most through time, since it also represents the other influences users have been exposed to. In this case, I have taken drag culture as an important factor for these changes, even though it is not the only source for language changes in social media.

For the following examples, I have also provided, if relevant, the original meaning and the new meaning, the date they were first used and their history.

5.2.1. *Words of technology.*

Words related to technological inventions tend to be re-appropriations of already existing words. With the arrival of new inventions or online features, there is also a need to find a word that describes them, which is usually taken from the existing vocabulary of a language whose meaning could be somewhat related to the new feature, such as the word *block*. The verb *to block* went from meaning “to prevent movement through something” to “to stop emails, text messages, phone calls, etc. from a particular person”, according to

the Cambridge Dictionary s.v. *block* v. Here we can see a clear relation of preventing something from happening between both meanings.

In the context of social media, Facebook has been crucial for this type of words (Reed 2014), considering that it was one of the first platforms to reach as much popularity as it has since the beginning. It has introduced new meanings to *wall*, *friend* and *like*, among others.

Wall in its traditional sense is used to refer to “a vertical structure, often made of stone or brick, that divides or surrounds something” (Cambridge Dictionary, s.v. *wall* n. A1). However, in the context of the Internet, it is “part of a Facebook user's profile where the user can post status updates and receive messages from friends” (www.techopedia.com). Santamaría (2013) states that Palaeolithic walls have been a way of telling stories through visual representations of real elements since Prehistoric times. This could be compared to the virtual wall that can be found on Facebook. Therefore, taking this into account, one could say that the meaning of the word has undergone a semantic shift by means of a metaphor, that is,

a process of understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another. A typical metaphor is a mapping between a better-known, more concrete conceptual domain (the ‘source domain’) and the conceptual domain which it helps to organize (the ‘target domain’). (Crystal 2008:98)

Friend (14) is another important word on the environment of social media. The original meaning refers to “a person with whom one has developed a close and informal relationship of mutual trust and intimacy” (OED s.v. *friend* n. 1), while the online meaning is that of “a contact on a social networking website” (OED s.v. *friend* n. 11). Contrary to popular belief, this new meaning was not created by Facebook, but made popular by it. The OED registers the first use of the online meaning in 2003, with a

publication of the *Los Angeles Times* reproduced here as (15). Moreover, Facebook also popularized the use of *friend* as a verb, which already existed in 1200 with the meaning of ‘to become friends with someone,’ but became obsolete due to the fact that *befriend* was the most widespread option (OED s.v. *friend* v. 1).

(14) I thought you two were *friends* on Facebook.

(15) With 977 first-degree friends and counting, she is the friendliest member in my personal network.

Its counterpart, *unfriend* (16), means “to remove (a person) from a list of friends or contacts on a social networking website” (OED s.v. *unfriend* v. draft additions March 2013). It was created by means of derivation by adding the negative prefix *un-* to represent the opposite of *friend* as a verb. Again, this verb was popularized by Facebook around 2007, according to *Etymonline* (www.etymonline.com), but already existed in English as a noun. Its use can be traced back to around 1275 with the meaning of ‘enemy’, and it was mainly used in Scottish (OED s.v. *unfriend* n. and adj. 1a).

(16) No, she *unfriended* me last week.

Twitter and Instagram do not use the term *friend*. Instead, they use *follower* to refer to the person who *follows* another on those social platforms, that is, a person who subscribes to the updates and posts on their social account (OED s.v. *follower* n. draft additions June 2013). The meaning of the word has become more specialised, as it was much more general before (OED s.v. *follower* n. 1: “one who follows”):

(17) He thinks he is famous, but he has only 120 *followers* on Instagram.

Like is one of those words whose online meaning is related to the general meaning of the verb, as clicking the ‘like’ button to show approval of a post is a reflection of the original meaning of “to take pleasure in or be pleased by something” (OED s.v. *like* v.

II). This is the use of *like* as a verb, as in example (18), but it can also work as a noun to refer to “the act or an instance of liking an online comment, post, etc.” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary s.v. *like* n. 2.3), as in (19). We can say that its meaning has become more specialized in the online world, as the action of *liking* only applies to comments or posts.

Again, its antonym *unlike* (20) is created by means of derivation, and we find that this verb already existed in the language as “to give up liking” (OED s.v. *unlike* v. 1). However, it was considered obsolete, with its last use being registered on 1761. The new sense is similar, but it only applies to the context of social media: “to withdraw one’s liking or approval of (a web page or posting on a social media website that one has previously liked)” (OED s.v. *unlike* v. 2). It is a case of specialisation of meaning, that is, it has become less general.

(18) I *liked* Lady Gaga’s picture before it had any comments on it.

(19) She has tons of *likes* on her posts, she must be famous.

(20) Getting so many notifications from his post annoyed me so I *unliked* it.

Other times, new words come from brand or website names that have undergone a process of commonization, that is, a case of semantic broadening “where proper names extend from a specific case and end up referring generally to the whole class of items” (Burridge & Bergs 2016:38). The most obvious example of this is the verb *to google* (21) as “to use the Google search engine to find information on the internet” (OED s.v. *Google* v. 1), which comes from the webpage Google. At the same time, the name *Google* originates from the misspelling of *googol*, that is, a name for ten raised to the hundredth power (10^{100}) (OED s.v. *googol* n.) to convey the meaning of it having a lot of data available. In these examples, we typically find both, conversion and commonization, since conversion refers to “[a change in a] part of speech without anything being added”

(Burridge & Bergs 2016:35). Other examples of commonization and conversion include *to Instagram* or *to Facebook* to refer to posting on those websites. A more special example is that of the word *Tumblr*.

Apart from the verb *to tumblr*, which refers to posting on Tumblr, we have the adjective *tumblr*, which was created taking the name of the website. This is a more special case as, even though it comes which the technological aspect of being the name of a website, it also falls in the category of slang. The name of the website comes from the idea of the tumblelogs, that is, blogs that focus on spontaneous writing, similarly to a stream-of-consciousness. According to its creator, Tumblr was a modification of the word *tumble*, as users metaphorically tumble through the information found on the webpage⁶. As the website gained popularity, a particular aesthetic was formed around it and *Tumblr* began to be used as a synonym for ‘hipster’ and ‘trendy’ (Khan 2013). This adjective is currently losing popularity (22).

(21) If you don’t know what it means just *google* it.

(22) that girl’s aesthetic is so *tumblr*!

Boomerang is another case of commonization and conversion which comes from the platform Instagram. *Boomerang* is an application launched by Instagram on 2015 that allowed its users to create an image similar to a GIF, that is, an animated image that plays on loop. Henceforth, it has become a verb with the meaning of ‘to make a boomerang.’

(23) However, the difference between them is that the boomerang does not cut before starting to play again, it reverses the footage making it seem as if it was a continuous video. This is similar to how an actual boomerang works, since it returns to its starting

⁶ Cosgrove, Lauren. 2015. “Why Is Tumblr Called Tumblr?” *Rewind & Capture*, June 29, 2015. <https://www.rewindandcapture.com/why-is-tumblr-called-tumblr/>

point when it is thrown. The word *boomerang* itself is a borrowing from an Australian aboriginal language of New South Wales, according to the OED (s.v. *boomerang* n.), and it refers to an Australian weapon.

(23) Guys, pay attention, I want to *boomerang* this!

From the few examples mentioned, we know that most of these words have been used for several years and we can infer that they will probably not disappear in the near future. They are well-established words in the language.

To sum up, in this section we have seen that words that designate parts of a social platform tend to be already existing words whose meaning has shifted, such as *wall*, or words that have been created by different word-formation strategies. I have mentioned instances of derivation with words like *unfriend* or *unfollow*, as well as commonization and conversion (*Google*, n. > *to google*, v.; *Tumblr*, n. > *tumblr*, adj.)

5.2.2. *Slang*.

Slang is a term that represents “very informal language that is usually spoken rather than written, used especially by particular groups of people”, as defined by the Cambridge Dictionary (s.v. *slang* n. c1). Given the nature of the Internet, the slang words that I will discuss are typically found in the written mode.

The use of slang also serves to connect people with others who have similar ideas or interests, as these words tend to represent a particular group of people and, sometimes, only those who belong to it understand them.⁷ Slang terms tend to exist for a relatively short period of time, however, there are some cases in which they become part of the

⁷ “30 Examples of Slang Words,” YourDictionary, accessed June 19, 2019, <https://examples.yourdictionary.com/20-examples-of-slang-language.html>

common vocabulary of a language, therefore, they are understood by most of the population.

5.2.2.1. Acronyms and abbreviations.

Acronyms and abbreviations are core elements of the Netspeak, especially in instant messaging and social media. In social media, users try to condense as much information in as little space as possible, especially in websites like Twitter, where the limit of characters is very strict. Therefore, these strategies have become a useful strategy to make the most out of a post or a tweet without sacrificing information.

Acronyms are words created from the initial constituent of a number of words and are pronounced as a single word (Crystal 2008:1). Even though the word *acronym* can be used as a cover term for both, there is also the term *initialism*. Within the same definition, Crystal says that initialisms “reflect the separate pronunciation of the initial letters of the constituent words”, that is, they are read letter by letter. On the other hand, abbreviations refer to the shortening of a word.

The most obvious example of abbreviations related to social media is that created to shorten the name of the social platform itself. Their use is one of the most common across social sites and they even appeared in some scholars’ publications, for instance, in the quote by Blattner & Lomicka that was mentioned in section 5.1.1 (p. 32) In this case, the initialism used was *FB* to refer to Facebook, but others including *IG* or *Insta* for Instagram, *TW* for Twitter or *YT* for YouTube are rather common.

Moving on to the acronyms that could be considered slang, the most well-known would perhaps be *LOL*. This 30-year-old acronym stands for ‘Laugh(ing) Out Loud’ and the OED (s.v. *LOL* int. and n.) defines it as an interjection “used to draw attention to a joke or humorous statement, or to express amusement.” There is also another entry on the

OED (s.v. *LOL* n.) which gives it a different meaning, in this case, the initialism stands for ‘Little Old Lady’ and it has been used since the 1960s.

According to Morgan (2011), the first recorded instance of the use of *LOL* can be traced back to the decade of the 1980s, when Wayne Pearson allegedly wrote it for the first time. Throughout the years, this interjection has suffered changes in its meaning to the extent that it does not actually refer to somebody laughing anymore in most cases. People started saying it ironically to respond to a joke that was not funny, to express passive-aggressiveness or just for the sake of adding something else to a message so it did not sound too serious. Moreover, some speakers used to get confused by its meaning and interpreted it as ‘Lots of Love’, which led to many misunderstandings. Other expressions similar to *LOL* have also appeared through the years, including *LMAO* (‘Laughing My Ass Off’) and *ROFL* (‘Rolling On the Floor Laughing’).

Morgan also mentions that *OMG*, alongside *LOL*, are usually the two first online terms older generations learn when introduced to social media or instant messaging, since they are very commonly used. *OMG* is an initialism which means ‘Oh My God’ and “express[es] astonishment, excitement, embarrassment, etc.” (OED s.v. *OMG* int. and n. A). First of all, it is relevant to say that the expression *oh my God* has experienced a pragmatic change during the history of English, as religious terms have suffered a dramatic shift on their use, going from having a high impact on the interlocutor during the Middle Ages to being normalized and, consequently, losing their power in conversation in Present-Day English. In the past and when used in vain, these terms were considered profanity and their use could be heavily fined (Allan 2016), but after the secularization of society they no longer perform the same speech act (Nübling 2006:147, quoted from Jing-Schmidt 2019).

One of the most interesting things about *OMG* is that it dates back to 1917. According to the *Huffpost*, Lord Fisher had already used the acronym *O.M.G.* with this same meaning on a letter to Winston Churchill over a 100 years ago:

(24) I hear that a new order of Knighthood is on the tapis—O.M.G. (Oh! My God!)—
Shower it on the Admiralty!! (OED)

YOLO is one of those slang terms that became so overused that it lost popularity. It stands for ‘You Only Live Once’ and it is pretty much the modern day *Carpe Diem*. It is a manner of saying that you should live your life to the fullest, as you just have one. Zimmer (2012) mentions that the wording *you only live once* was already popular during the late 19th century and it was also used as a title for a Fritz Lang film from 1937, but it attributes its popularity to the song *The Motto* by Drake. It also states that the determining factor for its rapid expansion is social media, to which it also adds:

Consider the lists of slang compiled every semester by students of Connie Eble, a professor of English at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. *YOLO* was entirely absent from the submissions by Eble’s fall 2011 classes. By the spring semester, *YOLO* had become the most frequently mentioned slang term among the students. (Zimmer, 2012)

This expression is now used as a representation of the essence of youth and, at some point, teenagers felt so identified with it that they were getting it tattooed on themselves. However, the decline of its popularity apparently came with the overuse of the acronym and the fact that adults started to use it, ceasing to represent a particular group of people, in this case, teenagers and young adults. Moreover, in some cases, it acquired a sarcastic meaning:

(25) I am going to take a nap because *YOLO* lol.

Although Instagram is mainly a photography platform, it has brought with it some initialisms to the English language, such as *TBT* or *OOTD*. *TBT* stands for ‘Throwback Thursday’ and it is most often used in the form of a hashtag. According to Moreau (2019), the term is used when people post pictures taken any time in the past, be it a week or several years, on Thursdays, and, even though *TBT* had been used in various social platforms since 2003, it became the most popular with Instagram towards the end of 2011. The hashtag #*TBT* has now over 490 million posts.

OOTD stands for ‘Outfit Of The Day’ and, again, usually appears in the form of a hashtag. Anwar (2016) reports that this acronym is typically used when one wants to showcase the clothes they are wearing on a particular day, as they may have dressed up for a special occasion or they simply like their outfit. Its use is frequent in fashion influencers’ posts, since it is their job to show how they style certain pieces of clothing, and the hashtag #*OOTD* has now over 261 million posts.

Some of these acronyms are seeping into spoken language, which has contributed to the already negative attitudes of some people concerning their use. As mentioned earlier in the dissertation, some individuals strongly think that Internet slang is ruining language and people’s literacy, however, acronyms have been used for decades outside the environment of the Internet. In fact, Abrahão (2014) reports that, during the Second World War, a Dictionary of Abbreviations was used by the army in order to facilitate and increase the speed of the conversation. Provided that both have the same functions, it is quite contradictory to have such different opinions towards them, since the Dictionary of Abbreviations was seen as a great advancement in terms of language and communication.

5.2.2.2. Trends

Trends are the most ephemeral part of Netspeak, that is, they are the terms and expressions that come the quickest but are discarded at the same speed. They tend to be used constantly for a certain period of time and then die out. However, as in any other aspect, there are some exceptions to this rule.

A trend can be described as “what's hip or popular at a certain point in time. [...] A *trend* simply reflects what seems to be going around at any given time”, according to *vocabulary.com*. Thanks to social media, a trend can be created in a matter of days, since a person can reach a wide audience just by other users sharing it with their friends or followers. Moreover, something might start as a trend, but end up becoming part of the vocabulary of a language.

This is the case of the word *selfie*, which was selected Word of the Year by the Oxford Dictionaries in 2013. In the world of photography, self-portraits have always been around, and, by taking a look at the word-formation strategy of *selfie*, we can infer that its meaning is similar to that of a *self-portrait*. The word itself was created by means of derivation by taking *self* and adding the *-ie* suffix, and this is essentially what a *selfie* is: “a photograph that you take of yourself, usually with a mobile phone. Selfies are often published using social media” (Cambridge Dictionary s.v. *selfie* n.). According to *Visual Thesaurus*, its origin comes from a post from a public forum in 2002, when an Australian man where he said:

From: Hopey @ 13/09/2002 15:19:29

Subject: re: Dissolvable stitches post id: 169902

Um, drunk at a mates 21st, I tripped ofer and landed lip first (with front teeth coming a very close second) on a set of steps. I had a hole about 1cm long right through my bottom lip.

And sorry about the focus, it was a selfie. (Visual Thesaurus, 2013)

As mentioned in 2.1, popular culture also affects language. With the TV show *RuPaul's Drag Race* becoming mainstream, the lingo of drag queens has become popular as well, being adopted by people outside this community who may not know its origin or what it stands for. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (s.v. *drag queen* n.) defines *drag queen* as “a usually gay man who dresses as a woman and performs as an entertainer especially to caricature stereotypically vampish women” and its first use in this sense dates back to 1941, probably due to the vogue balls organized in Harlem in the 1940s. This minority used language in a similar way to how gay men used Polari to define their identity and to recognise others from their community. With it being adopted by popular culture, it ceases to covertly represent drag and it starts to be used by people who do not know its history, which has been quite controversial concerning the topic of misappropriation. Guo (2016) explains it as:

From Instagram makeup to “throwing shade,” popular culture has adopted, or rather, capitalized on the distinctiveness of the drag community. Distorting the lifestyle of a traditionally rejected minority, the homogeneity in our generation’s vocabulary on social media [...] has undermined the struggles of gender fluid and transvestite individuals and even more so, it has objectified drag culture to little more than a few pithy phrases.

As previously mentioned, words and expressions from drag queen culture are some of the most frequent in social media nowadays, with young cisgender females using them most (Crawshaw, 2017), who at the same time are generally the ones in charge of linguistic change. Some of these terms include *throw shade*, *tea*, *slay* and *wig!*

Shade and *to throw shade* first appeared during the 1980s within black and Latino gay communities. In its traditional sense, *shade* just refers to “comparative darkness or obscurity owing to interception of the rays of light” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary s.v.

shade n. 1.1a). However, in this context, there is a shift in meaning and *shade* is explained by the drag queen Dorian Corey in an article from *Business Insider* as:

If I were to say in a terribly condescending voice, “Oh honey, I’m so glad you saved up to buy those glasses,” that’s blatant shade. I didn’t insult the glasses, or you, directly. It’s implied by my voice and the context of what I said. You know they’re ugly.

Therefore, *throwing shade* is a manner of indirectly insulting somebody. This comes from the fact that African-Americans are more indirect when speaking, since this type of disrespect within the gay and black community could get you in serious trouble, even resulting in death, says E. Patrick Johnson for the Merriam-Webster Dictionary post *What Does ‘Throw Shade’ Mean?*

Tea is a word used to refer to gossip, but, originally, it did not mean that and was not even related to the beverage. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary⁸, one of the first instances of *tea* in this sense comes from the book *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* by John Berendt where he interviews Lady Chablis, a drag queen. In it, she claims that she does not want people to “know her T”, that is, her truth – that she was transgender. *Tea* also appears in the sense of ‘other people’s secrets.’ In consequence, when you *spill the tea*, it suggests that you are gossiping about other people’s secrets, which reminds us of another already existing phrase in English with the same meaning: *spill the beans*.

Tea can be accompanied by adjectives to qualify the information that was ‘spilled’. When *hot tea* appears, it refers to very recent gossip, whereas *cold tea* is used

⁸ Merriam-Webster Dictionary. n. d. “Let’s Talk ‘Tea’.” Accessed June 18, 2019 <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/tea-slang-meaning-origin>

when a topic has been previously discussed or long known, and not interesting anymore.

Slay has been part of the language since Old English. It originally meant “to strike to death” (OED s.v. *slay* v. II.), but it acquired another meaning during the Roaring Twenties, that is, “to overwhelm with delight, to convulse (someone) with laughter” (OED s.v. “slay” v. II.5.a.(b)). According to *Dictionary.com*, during the 1970s and 1980s, another meaning was given to *slay* by drag queens, in which it referred to a flawless aesthetic in terms of outfit, makeup, dance and attitude. It is now basically used a synonym for the expression *killing it*:

(26) “She was slaying that outfit!”

Wig is a term that has recently become popular among social media users. Its standard meaning is “an artificial covering of hair for the head, worn to conceal baldness or to cover the inadequacy of the natural hair [...]” (OED s.v. *wig* n. 1a), but the Internet has popularized it as an expression of awe or surprise for other people’s actions. The website *Knowyourmeme.com* says that the word is “shorthand for doing something so incredibly it causes another's wig to fly off” and it was popularised by fans commenting it on their idols’ posts:

(27) omg my *wig* is in outer space right now.

The word itself is a shortening of *periwig*, that is, “any highly stylized wig of a kind formerly worn by men and women [...] and retained by judges and barristers as part of their professional dress” (OED s.v. *periwig* n. 1a), but *wig* in the online sense is related to those used by African-American drag queens. As explained by McDowelle (2018), African-American women used this type of accessories in order to protect their natural hair from damage and promote its growth, and so did drag queens.

Consequently, members of the drag community started using it to signify praise and flattery.

All these examples come from changes in the ideology of a particular community, since drag queens are now praised when, initially, they were marginalized. However, not all social media slang has a history behind each expression that becomes popular. In fact, it is so easy to make a word or expression go viral that it only takes a funny video for it to happen. This is the case of *shooketh*.

Shooketh evidently comes from *shook*, the past tense of the verb *shake*. *Shook* figuratively means to be “emotionally or physically disturbed, discomposed, upset” (OED s.v. *shook* adj. 2b) and it has been used in this sense since the late 1800s. On the other hand, based on its page on dictionary.com, *Shooketh* became popular when the comedian Christine Sydelko said it in a video that she posted on YouTube in 2017 and people turned it into a meme. It is mainly used on Twitter and Instagram in response to other’s pictures, especially famous people, to express a reaction of amazement:

(28) That outfit has me *shooketh*.

The reason for the addition of the suffix *-th* is unclear, since it was used during the Middle English period to mark the third person singular inflection in the present tense, but it would have been added to the form *shake* rather than *shook*.⁹

This ability to make a word popular so quickly can also lead to misconceptions concerning its origin. For instance, *to roast somebody* is considered by many as a millennial expression, when it is, in effect, the complete opposite. A teenager told *ABC News* in an article that “adults don’t really say it... it’s like a kid thing” and it is also

⁹ Martin Brilliant, May 30, 2018, comment on Quora, “Where did the words “shook” and “shooketh” come from?”

included in a post by *dictionary.com* titled *Cracking The Code of Millennial Slang*. However, it has actually been in the language for over three centuries, according to the OED. *Roast somebody* in the context of the Internet is “to be tactfully mean (snarky) without being mean-spirited in poking fun at someone, teasing, ruthlessly ridiculing, trash talking, and even mocking them” over the Internet (Urban Dictionary s.v. *roasting* v. 4). This could be identified as a revival of an old expression which dates back to 1710 with the meaning of “to severely ridicule, reprimand, or interrogate (a person)” (OED s.v. *roast* v. 5b):

(29) As for Dr. Sacheverell, nothing will serve some of 'em but Roasting him; using the Expression of a Furious Zealot against him, who is since Dead.

Dictionary.com also compares it to the traditional roasts, where people mocked and joked about a special honouree in gatherings.

To end this section, I am going to mention the case of *bae*, which is a bit different from the rest of the terms mentioned so far in that it has two meanings. In both cases, it is an affectionate term to refer to one’s significant other. In the first interpretation, the Urban Dictionary (s.v. *bae* n. 1) explains *bae* as a clipping or shortening of the word *babe* which comes from the pronunciation of African-American Vernacular English speakers of this word. (30) The OED registers its first use in this sense in 2006 and explains that it can also have another meaning, that is, ‘Before Anyone Else’ (31). In this sense, it would become an acronym and a rationalization of the word. Considering that the dictionary indicates that this interpretation came later on in the word’s life, it perhaps originated from the need of people to give a justification for its structure and the manner in which it is used.

(30) Do you want to hang out today, *bae*?

(31) I love her so much, she comes *bae*.

To sum up, popular culture has a great impact in the linguistic trends that can be found online. In this case, I have taken as an example drag culture which, since the popularization of RuPaul's Drag Race, has been a great source of words and expressions. In this section, I have mentioned words that have shifted in meaning when used online, such as *slay* or *wig*, and others which have been created by means of derivation, as in *shooketh*, or clipping them (*bae*).

6. CONCLUSIONS.

In my dissertation I have discussed how the Internet and social media are changing language, and I have found several examples which lead us to think that a new linguistic revolution is happening at the moment. First of all, written language in the context of the Internet is becoming more expressive, since people have created a set of rules in order to convey information such as the intonation and pronunciation of words and phrases. This has turned Internet language in a hybrid between the spoken and written modes, as it shares features from both, as well as having its own innovations. I have focused on vocabulary change for my dissertation. The most obvious examples of changes in vocabulary come with the need to name certain elements that did not exist prior to the Internet or social media, such as a *wall* or a *follower*. Some of the terms used to refer to these new realities are new, but many were already present in language and have suffered a semantic shift, in which the new meaning is somewhat related to their original one.

External history has been very relevant for the topic of language change in relation to the Internet, since this relatively new technological invention has altered our lives in almost every way possible, especially in terms of communication. It allows us to have any kind of information at hand and lets us communicate with any person around the world. Within the Web, social media is the clear example of how people use the language online, which is the reason why I have focused on them. Changes in society and ideology have also affected vocabulary through social media, as explained in 5.2.2.2. with all the expressions and words from drag culture which are infiltrating our online language, for instance. Old words that had become obsolete, such as *to roast (somebody)*, have become popular again in these sites to the point where people think they are an innovation in language. However, despite having many examples of vocabulary with a history behind

them, not all of them fall into this category, since other terms like *shooketh* have become a trend only because they are funny.

Changes in vocabulary are very rapid and are constantly happening, especially when it comes to trends, hence the difficulty of keeping up with all the new meanings and connotations these terms acquire overtime. One word may mean something at a certain point in time, but change meaning in a month or a year, as in the case of the acronyms *LOL* or *YOLO*.

I hope I have clearly illustrated how social media affects vocabulary and how a word can acquire global popularity online just by being shared with your *friends* or *followers*, as well as how easily language can be modified, since even a funny video can trigger the use of a word all over the Internet.

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APPENDIX

GLOSSARY:

Bae, n.: ‘Before Anyone Else.’

Bae, n.: “a boyfriend or girlfriend; a romantic or sexual partner. Originally and chiefly as a term of endearment or affectionate form of address: sweetheart, darling, baby.” (OED s.v. *bae* n.)

Block, v.: “to stop emails, text messages, phone calls, etc. from a particular person”
(Cambridge Dictionary s.v. *block* v.).

Boomerang, v.: ‘to create a video using the application Boomerang.’

Cold tea, adj. and n.: ‘old gossip; uninteresting gossip.’

Facebook, v.: “to contact (a person) using the social networking service Facebook. Also: to search for (a person) on Facebook, typically in order to obtain information about or make contact with that person.” (OED s.v. *Facebook* v. 1)

FB, n.: ‘Facebook.’

Follow, v.: “to track the activities or postings of (a person, group, etc.) by subscribing to their account on a social media website or application.” (OED s.v. *follow* v. draft additions June 2013)

Follower, n.: “a person who follows a particular person, group, etc., on a social media website or application.” (OED s.v. *follower* n. draft additions June 2013)

Friend, n.: “a contact on a social networking website” (OED s.v. *friend* n. 11).

Google, v.: “to use the Google search engine to find information on the internet” (OED s.v. *Google* v. 1)

Hot tea, adj. and n.: ‘recent gossip.’

IG, n.: ‘Instagram.’

Insta, n.: ‘Instagram.’

Instagram, v.: “to post (a picture) to the Instagram photo-sharing service” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary s.v. *Instagram* v.)

Like, v.: “to express approval of or support for by clicking on a particular icon.” (OED s.v. *like* v. 16)

Like, n.: “the act or an instance of liking an online comment, post, etc.” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary s.v. *like* n. 2.3),

LMAO, v.: ‘Laughing My Ass Off.’

LOL, int., ‘Laugh(ing) Out Loud’.

OMG int, n., adj.: ‘Oh My God!’

OOTD, n.: ‘Outfit of the day.’

Roast somebody, v.: “to be tactfully mean (snarky) without being mean-spirited in poking fun at someone, teasing, ruthlessly ridiculing, trash talking, and even mocking them” (Urban Dictionary).

ROFL, v.: ‘Rolling On the Floor Laughing.’

Selfie, n.: “a photograph that you take of yourself, usually with a mobile phone. Selfies are often published using social media” (Cambridge Dictionary s.v. *selfie* n.).

Shade / to throw shade, v.: ‘to indirectly criticise (somebody).’

Shooketh, adj.: ‘struck with amazement.’

Slay, v.: ‘to have a flawless aesthetic.’

Spill the tea, v.: ‘gossiping about other people’s secrets.’

TBT, n.: ‘Throwback Thursday.’

Tea, n.: ‘other people’s secrets.’

Tumblr, adj.: ‘trendy.’

TW, n.: ‘Twitter.’

Unfriend, v.: “to remove (a person) from a list of friends or contacts on a social networking website” (OED s.v. *unfriend* v. draft additions March 2013).

Unlike, v.: “to withdraw one’s liking or approval of (a web page or posting on a social media website that one has previously liked)” (OED s.v. *unlike* v. 2).

Wall, n.: “part of a Facebook user's profile where the user can post status updates and receive messages from friends” (www.techopedia.com).

Wig, n.: “shorthand for doing something so incredibly it causes another's wig to fly off” (Knowyourmeme.com)

YOLO, int.: ‘You Only Live Once.’

YT, n.: ‘YouTube’.