

Linguistic Features of Malaysian Students' Online Communicative Language in an Academic Setting: The Case of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

Ciri-Ciri Linguistik Bahasa Komunikasi atas Talian Pelajar Malaysia dalam Suasana Akademik: Kes Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Social media have gained astounding worldwide growth and popularity and have become prominent in the life of many young people today. According to various research studies in the field of online social networks, social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Whatsapp are greatly impacting the lives of youths. These sites have provided a platform whereby the young can create groups based on their common interests and build connections by updating various topics to discuss. However, with social media taking up such a large space in our lives, there is a concern as to whether it is impacting our communicative language; more importantly, our youth's communicative language. In view of this phenomenon, this article is an attempt to add to the understanding of online communicative language used by youths in social media. Specifically, it reports on the linguistic features of online communicative language used by youths in an academic setting in Facebook. This study employed two research tools, namely Virtual Ethnography and Content Analysis. Data collected was in the form of screen captures and snippets of conversations. Content Analysis was employed to look into the occurrences of languages in contact in phenomena such as code-mixing, code-switching and borrowings of certain words from the first language-second language and vice versa. The findings of the study indicate that the language used by the participants on Facebook consists of a mixture of code-switching, code-mixing, fillers, emoticons, spelling modifications, foreign language words and colloquial Malaysian English.

Keywords: Online communicative language; social networking space; Facebook; academic setting; linguistic features

ABSTRAK

Media sosial telah tumbuh dengan pesatnya di seluruh dunia dan popularitinya telah menyebabkan ia telah menjadi sebahagian daripada kehidupan anak muda masa kini. Menurut pelbagai kajian penyelidikan di dalam bidang rangkaian sosial atas talian, laman media sosial seperti Facebook, Twitter dan Whatsapp begitu memberi impak kepada kehidupan golongan muda. Laman-laman ini telah menyediakan satu platform di mana golongan belia boleh melibatkan diri dalam kumpulan yang mempunyai minat yang sama dari segi disiplin atau bidang dengan mengemaskini pelbagai topik untuk perbincangan atas talian. Namun, disebabkan media sosial telah mengambil ruang yang besar dalam kehidupan kita, timbul kebimbangan mengenai impaknya terhadap bahasa komunikasi kita; terutamanya bahasa komunikasi belia kita. Berdasarkan kepada fenomena ini, makalah ini merupakan satu usaha untuk menambahkan pemahaman bahasa komunikasi atas talian yang digunakan oleh belia di media sosial. Secara khusus, makalah ini akan melaporkan tentang ciri-ciri linguistik bahasa komunikasi atas talian yang digunakan oleh belia dalam suasana akademik di Facebook. Kajian ini menggunakan dua kaedah penyelidikan, iaitu Etnografi Maya dan Analisis Kandungan. Data yang dikumpul adalah dalam bentuk tangkapan skrin dan coretan dalam perbualan. Analisis Kandungan digunakan untuk meneliti penggunaan bahasa dalam fenomena percampuran kod, penukaran kod dan pinjaman kata-kata tertentu daripada bahasa pertama-

bahasa kedua dan sebaliknya. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa bahasa yang digunakan oleh para peserta di Facebook terdiri daripada campuran daripada penukaran kod, campuran kod, kata-kata pengisi, emotikon, pengubahsuaian ejaan, perkataan bahasa asing dan bahasa pasar Bahasa Inggeris.

Kata kunci: Bahasa komunikasi atas talian; ruangan rangkaian sosial; Facebook; persekitaran akademik; ciri-ciri linguistik

Introduction

Malaysian university students are no strangers to social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp, just to name a few. As the Internet becomes ubiquitous and a necessity, social media sites too, have become indispensable to everyone especially for university students as they not only provide spaces for creating, maintaining and preserving connections such as friendship, bonding with family members and significant others, and communication with peers in the 21st century, social media sites have also cut across the social domain into the academia and in different academic settings to provide spaces for teaching and learning. Electronic communications through the Internet include online forums, discussions boards, instant messages and interactive blogs. Language use in social media has become increasingly prevalent and has been the subject of much research and debates. Researchers are in agreement that the language used in social media, or what is known as online communicative language (OCL) is a special variety of language that is carried out via computer-mediated communication (CMC), i.e., communications aided by the use of computers. OCL has characteristics of nativization depending on the users who actively contribute to the language. Many researchers now refer to the hybridity of emerging language online. OCL is also characterized by linguistic features that are prevalent simply to adhere to space restrictions and for time saving on the part of the user that more often than not, can be highly innovative for achieving meaningful communication. Amongst others, these include reduced lexical and syntactic structures, use of abbreviations, emoticons, shortenings, clippings, contractions, non-conventional spellings, non-alphabetic symbols and the use of letter or number homophones (Zaemah, Marlyna & Bahiyah 2012). OCL is mutually intelligible amongst its users, its dynamicity and heavy reliance on those linguistic features may lead to

the formation of a new linguistic community that is dominated by the younger generation. This is identified through the criteria of language variety given by early researchers, such as the influence of first language, code-switching and the usage of certain words. Kirkpatrick (2007) concludes that the localization of terms and words is common hallmarks of varieties of Englishes used by Malaysians, Singaporeans, Indians and Africans. This signifies the innovation of the language and marks a birth of a new variety. Likewise, OCL also follows the same route of becoming a new variety much like the other varieties of English, only that to study the development of OCL, we must track it on virtual reality and study it online.

Thus, the main aim of this article is to report on the findings of an exploratory study that was carried out in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. This study investigated the linguistic features of OCL used by youths in an academic setting, namely a group of university students in a social media website, specifically Facebook. As not many research studies have been conducted to study the patterns of language used in Facebook and amongst a group of university students, this study is an attempt to explore the communication dynamics of youths specifically Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia students' patterns of language use in Facebook via wall posts and comments. This article recognizes that the OCL in Facebook has features that straddle both synchronous and asynchronous communication such that both features of spoken and written discourse meld into OCL in Facebook.

The Multifarious Purpose of Facebook

Facebook started as a space for university students to gather on the web. In his IPO letter, describing Facebook's purpose, values and social mission, its creator, Zuckerber (2012:1) outlines some notable core business of Facebook, which includes "giving people the power to share" and "to strengthen how people relate to each other".

He states that, "At Facebook we build tools to help people connect with the people they want and share what they want, and by doing this we are extending people's capacity to build and maintain relationships" (Zuckerberg 2012: 1). He also iterates that "relationships are how we discover new ideas, understand our world and ultimately derive long-term happiness" (Zuckerberg 2012:1). Besides building and maintaining relationships, Zuckerberg alludes to information, specifically to the spread and consumption of information via Facebook. Facebook according to him rewires the way people spread and consume information. Zuckerberg (2012:1) continues to say that "the world's information infrastructure should resemble the social graph- a network built from the bottom up or peer-to-peer".

In Malaysia, Facebook not only has sparked a unique phenomenon but also triggered a nationwide phenomenon and is able to form its own territory and has followers of various ideologies, color, ethnicity and religion. According to statistics released by Socialbakers, an online marketing research company from the United States, until November 2012, the number of Malaysians who joined Facebook has reached 13,461,860 people and Malaysia ranks 18 in the number of Facebook users worldwide (Nur Nasliza Arina & Jamilah 2015). The use of Facebook has now moved outside the periphery of its original intended users and has reached schools, businesses, government organizations, social institutions and various agencies.

Research on Online Communicative Language (OCL)

The nature of OCL has been discussed by many researchers. Maynor (1994) classifies online communicative language; email for instance, as a written speech, a hybrid form of language that stays in the middle of written and spoken. While Ferrara, Bruner and Whittemore (1991) consider OCL as "a hybrid language variety" or a "hybrid register" in terms of characteristics of the existing spoken and written languages. Baron (1998) who compiled data from email, bulletin boards, and computer conferencing, says that in the late 1990s, online language was fundamentally a mixed modality which resembled speech as it was largely unedited; it contained heavy use of first and second person pronouns, present tense, and contractions and

its level of formality was generally low. Crystal (2001) uses the term "Netspeak" to the collective forms of language used online. He concludes that "Netspeak has far more properties linking it to writing than to speech". This is further supported by Werry (1996) who argues that online language reproduces and simulates the discursive style of face-to-face spoken language and it displays informal and speech-like features.

In the Malaysian context, Siti Hamin and Azianura (2013) studied the existence of some prominent features in Online Communicative English Language that is identified through the criteria of language variety given by early researchers, such as the influence of first language, code-switching, code-mixing and the use of certain borrowed words. Their findings significantly suggest that "Malaysian Online Communicative English has been transformed into another sub-variety of Malaysian English that signifies the identity of young Malaysian Facebook users" (Siti Hamin & Azianura 2013:131). In another study conducted in the Malaysian context, Tan and Richardson (2006) discovered that students' informal writing involved new hybrid forms of English and included the use of a mixture of short forms, "Penang English" and Net English. This study has implications for the English literacy education of Malaysian high school students learning ESL while immersed in a contemporary digital and Internet culture. Wong (1983) in her research '*Simplification Features in the Structures of Colloquial Malaysian English*' studied the features and processes of how Standard English developed into Colloquial Malaysian English. As Wong and other researchers have basically focused on the pronunciation of words in spoken Malaysian English, and not in online communication settings, it can be concluded that online communicative English employed by young Malaysian Facebook users nowadays significantly portrays Facebook posts and comments as written forms of spoken colloquial Malaysian English.

Code-switching and Code-mixing

Code-switching, code-mixing and borrowing, contrary to popular belief do not only flourish in speech but may also occur in written form and one place it can be seen flourishing is in Facebook. Auer (1988, cited in Bahiyah, 2003) explains code-switching as (part of a) verbal action where

two or more codes, i.e., languages or dialects are used alternatively in which this alternation between codes is employed as a resource for the construction of interactional meanings (Bahiyah 2003). Researchers in code alternation such as Auer (1998), Bahiyah and Azhar (1995) and Bahiyah (2003) are adamant that code-switching is not a random phenomenon but one that can be used variously; for instance, to mitigate and to aggravate messages (Koziol 2000), to effect precise and efficacious messages (Azhar & Bahiyah 1994), to signal language preference (Bahiyah 2003) and so on. To sum up, Adendorff (1996:389) concludes that code-switching is a “functionally motivated” behavior. Code-mixing online has been associated with creativity in interpersonal communications, i.e., according to Fung and Carter (2007) using a code to enhance the effectiveness of another. Ferreira da Cruz (2008) states that code-mixes can increase comprehension, can be used as identity markers and can support affective expressions.

The Study

This is an exploratory study of written responses of English Language Studies (ELS) students in Facebook. Forty-one respondents participated in this study, all of whom made up the final year class of English Language Studies at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). The respondents were male and female students of different ethnicity between 21 and 25 years of age and came from different states in Malaysia. These students have maintained their Facebook communications in this online group since 2012, i.e., when they first started their program in UKM, with the purpose of communicating and sharing information among themselves regarding their studies, as well as to deliver notifications and announcements from their lecturers to their friends.

This study employed two research tools, namely Virtual Ethnography and Content Analysis. Virtual Ethnography is an ethnographic approach to research that takes place in an online setting through the World Wide Web. Virtual ethnographers study online communities and their cultures. Kozinets (2006:135) succinctly defines Virtual Ethnography or what he calls netnography

as “ethnography conducted on the Internet; a qualitative, interpretive research methodology that adapts the traditional, in-person ethnographic research techniques of anthropology to the study of online cultures and communities formed through computer-mediated communications.” Data collected was in the form of screen captures and snippets of the conversation. Content Analysis was employed to look into the occurrences of languages in contact in phenomena such as code-mixing, code-switching and borrowings of certain words from the first language-second language and vice versa in the Facebook conversations following Auer (1998) and Bahiyah (2003). Besides this, other linguistic features of OCL such as spelling transformations and modifications, the use of jargons, acronyms and abbreviations, as well as the use of symbols and emoticons were examined as well following the model set by Zaemah, Marlyna and Bahiyah (2012).

Findings of the Study

The findings of the study focus on the posts and comments made by the students as participants of the research. The posts chosen and discussed in this article are those which have received a substantial amount of responses from members of the group. These responses are considered significant as they provide the largest number of feedback to the posts.

It is important to note that some postings contain hybrid English which is characterized by code-mixing or code-switching. Some postings do not contain hybrid English but stick to wholly English or wholly Malay while some postings use fillers and emoticons. This demonstrates that the students in this study are not only savvy about using languages, albeit mutually understandable languages among themselves although they are English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, but are also savvy about the use of new word forms, structures and styles of expressions that are prevalent in Netspeak. Fillers are used as portrayers of feelings and expressions, to help lessen strong remarks, to indicate stress and to change a statement into a question. Emoticons are used to express the “visual” aspect of online communication that gives us emotional and mood cues; and it could carry positive or negative emotional messages (Zaemah, Marlyna & Bahiyah, 2012).

In the sample excerpts below, all posts and replies are in italics. Those in italics and in bold denote English, the parts that are italics, but not in bold denote Malay and those underlined denote other languages other than Malay or English, e.g., Japanese and Arabic that were used in the posts and replies. Those in brackets are English translations of the posts and replies.

Sample Excerpts

Example 1

kwn2 mintk tlg edit doc SWOT analysis utk program Comm. Make over aritu.. dr T. nk as a survey sbb kita pilot program.. spe x isi s dpt sijil.. tulis name korg at the end of your opinion.. tulis je la pape.. asal ade.. (Friends, need your help to edit the SWOT analysis for our Communication program that day. Dr T wants it as a survey because we piloted the program. Those who do not fill up the details will not get a certificate. Write your name at the end of your opinion, write anything, as long as there is something).

The above message is a request from a participant of the Facebook group, specifically, the student leader of the course. It starts with a polite request at the opening of the message which is ushered in by a Malay-code mixed phrase - *kwn2 mintk tlg edit doc SWOT analysis* which in English means *Friends, need your help to edit the SWOT analysis document*. The opening with the colloquial Malay code-mix immediately cues the readers that this message is targeted at all in the group. In colloquial Malay, the phrase *mintk tlg* is a polite means for an otherwise direct request, in this case, which is to edit the SWOT analysis. This direct request is actually from the lecturer involved, Dr. T, who has directed this student leader to convey the message to others; this is shown by the code mix in Malay done in contraction and short form - *dr T. nk* (*Dr. T. wants it...*) that legitimizes the request that what is asked of the students is actually from the lecturer and not from the student leader. The Malay code-switching of *spe x isi s dpt sijil.. , tulis je la pape.. asal ade..* is an attempt by the student leader to continue to be polite as well as at the same to coax his classmates to follow the instructions to edit the SWOT analysis as directed by the lecturer involved. The Malay code-mixes in this request message act in tandem with the English code-mixes but play different functions. The Malay code-mixes relate to the student as messenger giving his own instructions to coax his fellow classmates as opposed to the English code mixes that act directly as instructions straight from

lecturer herself in point form (read only the bold parts of the message). Other features that can be seen here that are salient is the usage of short forms of Malay words like *mintk* (for *mintak*), *spe* (for *siapa*), *pape* (for *apa-apa*), *korg* (for *kau orang* – colloquial Malay usage for addressing a group/crowd of people) and *ade* (for *ada*). These words are written exactly as how they are pronounced in the spoken form, denoting informality. Here the motive for this kind of usage is simply to show to the others in the social media discourse; in this case, Facebook, a lessening in social distance and a reduction of social power difference.

Example 2

Yg lb cemana kawan2? What does 'How you can decolonized of your readings BlaBlabla' any one know how to put it in laymen's term? (Friends, how is lb?)

This example clearly shows code-switching in play between L1 and L2. The participant firstly used Malay to enquire about the group members' responses to an assignment question for their Literature course but soon after, he alternated to English to reiterate his question and to make it more specific by quoting verbatim the question in the original language which is the topic of discussion here that was given by his instructor – note the opening and closing inverted commas denoting a quotation in writing. In addition, the participant also used '*BlaBlabla*' as a filler in the post to substitute the whole sentence he is quoting from which is reminiscent of speech. The next sentence, which is a question in English with missing auxiliary verb "does" is an indirect call for assistance from others as to how to answer the question given by the instructor. The online communicative English linguistic features show the apparent usage of short form of the Malay language and the usage of Americanized form of spelling of the word '*decolonised*' and '*any one*' instead of '*anyone*'. This sample garnered a number of responses from five other members of the group. Some notable linguistic features are the usage of the filler '*uuuuuuu*' and code-mixing such as '*kene rename ke doc quiz nie?*' (*do we have to rename the quiz document*) and '*Ada takdiabagi specific methods of citing?*' (*Didn't she give any specific methods of citing?*) These two responses from the post and the comments showcase examples of code-mixing between Malay and English. Specifically, it can be seen that Malay forms the basic sentence structure, in both of these cases, question structures with

verb forms intact in Malay (*kene rename ke doc quiz nie*) and (*Ada takdiabagi specific methods of citing*).

Example 3

Hey u'olls.. Just a friendly reminder. Esok pasti kan dah berkumpul di PPBL sebelum 8.00am. Pastikan dress appropriately, formal or smart casual. (Hey everybody (you all). Just a friendly reminder. Make sure you gather at PPBL before 8 am tomorrow. Make sure you dress appropriately, formal or smart casual).

For this excerpt, this participant's post shows the process of code-switching from English to Malay. The message has an opener in informal English, it acts as an attention getter of friendliness. This is then extended to the announcement of the real intention of the message- *Just a friendly reminder*. Then, the participant code-mixed her Malay sentence with English: *dress appropriately, formal or smart casual*. Other linguistic features of OCL can be observed in the spelling modification of the word 'u'olls' which is the non-formal way of spelling the word 'you all'. Although this post did not garner any response from the rest of the members of the group, it is a clear indication of a note or reminder sent out by a lecturer to be passed on to the rest of the class where the focus of the reminder is with regards to appropriate dressing, i.e., where the salient and specific information in this reminder is akin to the lecturer herself reminding the students in face-to-face communications: '*dress appropriately, formal or smart casual*'. The lecturer's speech is reported in English to denote formality and in this message it signals a change of speaker or who does the addressing.

Example 4

Konichiwa~below is the new tutorial time and tempat for Friday (Discourse and Pragmatics). NEW: BS13 Wednesday 12-2pm but will finish around 1.30pm cuz Dr KM ada meeting. (Good day~below is the new tutorial time and venue for Friday (Discourse and Pragmatics). BS13 Wednesday 12-2 pm but will end around 1.30 pm because Dr Km has a meeting)

In example 4, it can be seen that the participant code-mixed in Japanese at the opening of the message, from the usage of the greeting 'konichiwa' or "Good Day" in English. Code-mixing at the opening is a resource to be different and to affect attention getting (Bahiyah & Kesumawati, 2012). The other code-mixed item is the Malay word – *tempat*. This one word insertion may have been

code-mixed because the participant may have had a problem to spontaneously come up with the equivalent lexical item – "place" or "venue" in English at the time of posting the message.

This post garnered a few responses from the others. Three replies are discussed:

Ini memang permanent kan? From this week on, tuto is Wednesday, right? (This is permanent right? From this week onwards our tutorial is on Wednesday, right?)

The reply above is from a participant who exhibited the process of code-mixing in the opening of the sentence. He mixed English and Malay with the insertion of 'permanent'; an English word in a Malay sentence, specifically a question showing uncertainty. The insertion here may be caused by not being able to get the equivalent word in Malay for "permanent" and so it was more convenient to just insert the English word to make his point. He then code-switched to show uncertainty in English and the sentence structure used cued for someone to provide an answer to prove his understanding of the matter is right or wrong.

I rasa permanent la~ tapinanti masa lecture boleh confirm lagi muackmuack. (I think this is permanent, but we can confirm during the lecture muackmuack)

The above response starts with a code-mix where the English word "permanent" is inserted in the Malay sentence. Although this reply appears to give an answer to the previous message, it is done in a manner that is not definitive specifically with the Malay lexical item "rasa" (I rasa) and filler "la" to show uncertainty. The next clause in a "but" clause in Malay signed by "tapi" which directly cues to the factor of uncertainty. Here, the participant directly states that the information previously given about the class meeting schedule must be further confirmed – indicated by the use of the insertion – "confirm" in English. The jargon 'muackmuack' was also used as a closing. It is used similar to 'hugs and kisses' or 'muah' to signify friendliness.

"Nais job gais" (Nice job guys)

The last response gathered is the example above where spelling modifications are apparent as 'nice' is spelled as 'nais' and 'guys' as 'gais'. This is a note of praise given by the participant to the

participant who had posted the message and to those who had replied. This is perhaps agreeing to the suggestion that the information about the change in class meeting time must be verified in the next lecture hour.

Example 5

Message from Dr. S.:

Our thesis presentation will be held on December 12. Place and time will be announced later. BE PREPARED. Jumpa supervisor korang cepat kepada orang-orang yang belum jumpa lagi.p/s:muah ciked (quickly go and meet your supervisor for those of you who have not met them yet)

This participant's post serves as another message sent in as a note to the rest of the group. Specifically, the participant cues the others to the intent of the message and shows that the message is from the lecturer himself, Dr. S - **Message from Dr. S.:** This legitimizes the content of the message to be academic in nature, related specifically to the course taught by Dr. S. that they are taking and nothing else. The language is wholly English for the message from the lecturer signifying that this is formal. The clause in capital letters acts as a warning or stern reminder – akin to a teacher warning his students if he was face-to-face with them. Here, the motive is to make the message stand out. Having read the capital letters as stern reminder or warning, this participant then code-switches to Malay. The language contrast is stark as it denotes a change not only in speaker/who does the addressing but it also mitigates the harshness of the warning/stern reminder that came previously to this in English. There appears to be a code-mixed lexical item in a Malay sentence- **supervisor** (“penyelia” in Malay). This insertion of “supervisor” is a borrowing as the focus of this message is on thesis presentation. In the program, which is an ELS program, the English words “supervisor” and “thesis” go hand-in-hand and English becomes the obvious choice of words related to the academic exercise jargon. The message closes with “*Muah ciked*”, a jargon used among Malaysian youths to show appreciation and is used similarly to the phrase “hugs and kisses XOXO” which can be seen in message exchanges in the West.

The notable responses gathered from the post are the following:

nate Khalil bakpo mung delete komeng mung nyo?? (Khalil, why did you delete your comments?)

The first and the second response above are responses to a reply by Khalil which is outside the original posting when this participant found Khalil's comment deleted. The above reply is in wholly Malay, a mix of Kelantan and Trengganu dialect (signified by “komeng”- spelled as it is pronounced by a typical speaker from Trengganu) in question form that admonishes Khalil for deleting his comment. “Nate” as used here is a swear word normally used with males who are close friends. The Malay word “nate” in Kelantanese or Trengganu dialect is a shortened form of the Malay word “binatang” which means “animal” in English. The use of swear word in the opening signals light banter, those that are frequent especially with male participants in the group that are close to each other.

“I am proud of you...sek kitoww*name of poster”

In this reply, seen above, it opens with a statement of praise wholly in English followed by a change in language “sek kito” seen here as “sek kitoww” with the elongation of the sound “ww” for emphasis. “Sek” in Kelantan or Terengganu dialect means “geng” in Malay or “gang” in English. “kito” is equivalent to standard Malay “kita” which is an inclusive plural pronoun which means the Kelantan or Trengganu gang in English (geng Kelantan or Trengganu). In this reply, the participant's message was targeted at the previous reply. Both the previous and this replies show camaraderie between friends, specifically friends who are male and those from the same state. This is to show common in-group affiliation and identity marker.

Example 6

“Dr K is asking everyone who still haven't made the RM50 payment for the camp to do so by TOMORROW. According to her, only 10 students so far paid and Dr. T is insisting students to pay ASAP. Thanks – Dr. K.”

In the sample above, the message is conveyed wholly in English without any code-switching or code-mixing as it is a direct command from a lecturer, Dr. K (name repeated twice, once at the initial part of the message and once at the final part of the message coupled with a polite tag - *Thanks – Dr. K.*) passed on to a student to be circulated to other students in the group. In this sample, the student messenger uses linguistic forms of reported speech such as “Dr. K is asking...” and “According to her...”. The use of the present continuous tense

(signalled by “...is asking” and “is insisting”) in the reported sentences is novel and would be treated as a grammar error elsewhere. However, here it seems to bring into play the actual meaning of the present continuous tense usage, i.e., to talk about an action happening “now” or “at the moment” where the participant brings into the talk so to speak, the lecturer in question, Dr. K, as if Dr. K at that very moment is face-to-face with the group. Notice that the tone of the message is stern. The addition of the name of the lecturer twice shows authority. Capitalization of lexical items - TOMORROW and ASAP denote that the message is to be taken seriously and that readers of the message must act on what is instructed immediately.

Example 7

*Good luck for our presentations, you guys. Insyallah, we'll make it through... May the odds be ever in our favour, let's pray that all is well tomorrow *smiley face emoticon.*

In this sample, the participant's post of wishing luck mimic those used in a spoken manner, for example usage of ellipsis makes her sentences choppy. The Arabic code-mixing, in the initial part of the second sentence *Insyallah* or “God willing” or “if God wills” in English shows the understanding of the participant towards the will of God in all that one wishes to do and her affiliation to Islam.

This post has garnered a few responses from the others. The responses are the following:

Ganbatte! *smiley face emoticon

This is a response from a member of the group who expressed her response in a foreign language, specifically Japanese which is used to show support to the previous post. *Ganbatte* as used here is a polite casual version which does not mean literally “Good luck” but “Do your best”. This brings forward the Japanese emphasis on one's own effort rather than merely depending on luck.

*gudluck everyone**smiley face emoticon

The other response gathered is shown to have spelling modification in the word ‘*gudluck*’ where it is supposed to be spelled as ‘*goodluck*’ which may be motivated to be a bit different from the usual.

Although the emoticons used here are image emoticons that signify mood or emotions of the participants (Zaemah, Marlyna & Bahiyah, 2012), the more significant use of the Smiley face emoticons in the post and the responses in this example show us that specific language alone, be they Arabic, Malay, English or Japanese is proving to be insufficient to meet the needs of 21st century online communication (Grathwohl, 2015, cited in Cocozza 2015).

Example 8

Nais job gais. Give a clap to yourself

In this post by another participant, the sentence is written fully in English but the first part of it has two words that have spelling modifications. For instance, ‘*Nais*’ was intended originally to be ‘*nice*’ and ‘*gais*’ is the supposedly misspelled variation of ‘*guys*’.

Discussion of the Findings of the Study

As can be seen from the examples given in the previous section, OCL which is also recognized elsewhere as digital language, or even ‘Netspeak’ shows features of language use that characterises the idea of ‘informalization’, a concept which was introduced by Fairclough (1995). Fairclough explains the concept of ‘informalization’ as the use of informal patterns of language in both formal and informal situations that serve various purposes and functions. Generally in the examples given, the language used by the participants show usage of informal language intertwined with formal language through the use of different linguistic features including those that are found when two or more languages come in contact with one another – code-switching, code-mixing and borrowings. Following Auer (1998) and Bahiyah (2003), code-switching, code-mixing and borrowings are salient as they serve various functions most often as cue to framing, shifting of speaker orientations and participation modes and for pragmatic reasons. It can be seen from the findings that the use of wholly English sentences serves formal functions to affect some actions and tasks to be carried out by students while the use of wholly Malay sentences usually not only fulfills pragmatic and social functions that promotes solidarity and inter-ethnic

understanding but also plays a salient grammatical function, specifically to form the basic sentence structure. The language used in the examples given serves different purposes such as reminding, announcing and relaying messages from lecturers to others where the participant who posts these act as intermediaries between lecturers and students, as well as requesting for assistance (in doing assignments – see Example 2), sending greetings and well wishes (see Example 7) and praising (see Examples 5 and 8) coming from the members of the Facebook group themselves. Another distinctive feature found in the Facebook posts and comments that were code-mixed were *ganbatte* and *konichiwa* in Japanese and *Insya Allah* in Arabic. These were code-mixed as openings and showed not only the linguistic maturity of the participants who used them- (specifically the Japanese examples above) but also “indirectly signals a wholesome savvy attitude towards peoples of different ethnicities” (Bahiyah & Kesumawati, 2012: 70). With regards to the Arabic code-mix above, this also shows a keen understanding of language use for showing religious affiliation.

The next feature of OCL is the use of emoticons which represent emotions in text form as Ross (2006) believes they are internationally intelligible, regardless of the language use. Two sample posts exhibit the usage of emoticons. They are used to emphasize on the emotions and affect moods that come with the response they are expressing. As supported by Derks, Bos and von Grumbkow (2008), the findings also show how emoticons help users to have more control in terms of the tone of message they would like to convey. In this article, we wish to take note of Grathwohl's (in Cocozza 2015) point to emphasize that written language cannot stand alone and language used on its own is proving to be insufficient to meet the needs of 21st century online communication as the examples of the usage of emoticons show. Playful jargon is also another unique feature of OCL found by Baron (2008) as the jargons gathered from the samples are unique among this group, for instance an example from a participant who used ‘muackmuack’ to signify a close relationship among the participants of the online conversation. Although the usage of jargons are less common in this study, another jargon identified was the informal or spoken form of ‘*all of you*’ which is ‘*u olls*’. There is also ‘*cemana*’ to indicate asking for answer to the problem in question (i.e., “how”)

which originates from the Malay word ‘*macam mana*’. These exemplary jargons usually come from the students’ daily spoken communication and are found to be used more often than not in written communication in a less formal, non-academic setting. However, there is indication of a cross-over in the case of Facebook in the academic setting such as in this study.

The usage of fillers or tail words which are very common in Malaysian English are also found in this study. Fillers also define the unique identity of Malaysian English (Lowenberg 1992; David 2000). Fillers can be defined as sounds or words that is spoken in conversation by one participant to signal to others that he or she has paused to think but has not yet finished speaking (Juan 2006). The fillers found in these samples are conversational such as ‘uuuuuuu’ and ‘blablabla’. The former refers to the feeling of difficulty to respond and the latter was used to substitute the whole sentence that the participant is quoting from. These as used in the study are very different from Juan’s understanding of the term. Other findings from the samples taken have also shown occurrences of short forms of certain words such as ‘*no*’ that is written as ‘*x*’ and ‘*u*’ for ‘*you*’. Besides, there were also spelling modifications identified. Instead of the word because, one participant wrote ‘*cuz*’, ‘*nais*’ for nice, ‘*gais*’ for guys and ‘*gudluck*’ for goodluck. The examples from the data analysis are also shown to have various shortenings (missing end letters) such as ‘*tuto*’ which is netspeak for ‘*tutorial*’ and ‘*X*’ as ‘*no*’ thus proving that OCL emphasizes on the nature of short and quick responses due to limited space provided for each online message. With limited space and an urgency for spontaneous feedback (Norizah & Azirah 2009) many online users resorted to this online-writing behavior, which does not meet the requirements of standard writing in form and structure.

Conclusion

This article which was based on a study conducted in UKM, explored and documented the linguistic features of OCL used by a group of third year students of the ELS program on Facebook. The study found that the language used by the participants on Facebook consists of a mixture of code-switching, code-mixing, fillers, emoticons, spelling modifications, foreign language words

and colloquial Malaysian English. This article also took note of two primary languages in contact with each other and used in complementary ways i.e. Malay, the national language of Malaysia and English, the country's unofficial second language. The choice of colloquial Malay forms interspersed with the Malaysian variety of English leads to variations that are unique to Facebook. Code-switching used in this context is not considered as a deficiency in learning a language, but may be regarded as a useful strategy in classroom interaction, if the aim is to make meaning clear and to transfer the knowledge to the group in an efficient way. Furthermore, it is used to overcome an inability of expression as it serves for continuity of speech instead of presenting interference in language. In this regard, code-switching stands as a supporting element in communication of information and in social interaction; therefore serving communicative purposes in the way that it is used as a tool for transference of meaning (Sert, 2005).

The UKM ELS students in this study show that they are active communicators online and more specifically, they are not afraid to be connectors, creators and collaborators online proving that they understand that they can no longer survive alone but need to live collaboratively and inter-connectively. This group of UKM students are not just passive consumers of information but are creative and culturally mindful of others in their group. The examples of posts and comments in Facebook show that they are savvy in social skills and cultural competencies. These university students demonstrate that they are apt at participating not just in the creation of media content but also at circulating media content within social networks. These networks are not only those within their immediate vicinity, their circle of face-to-face friends but also extend to larger communities outside of the confines of the university. The students have revealed that code-switching and code-mixing could be used to build intimate interpersonal relationships among members of a bilingual community. Thus, it can be considered as a tool for creating linguistic solidarity (Sert 2005) not only between individuals who share the same ethno-cultural identity but also in the community they live in.

It is hoped that this study will invite educationists to recognize authentic social practices that youths participate in, their linguistic maturity

and their linguistic adeptness which are much valued in their social world that often go unnoticed and thus invalidated in the education system.

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