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A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Language Styles of Pakistani Teenage Instagram Users

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Abstract: *The objective of this research is to identify the language styles used by teenage Instagram users in Pakistan and their frequency. 'Style' refers to the language variation used based on the degree of formality or informality of the situation. To collect data, the researcher focused on the posts and stories of teenagers and pre-adult Instagram users and used a quantitative approach. The collected data was analyzed according to the theoretical framework provided by Indra, I., & Hamzah, H. (2018). The analysis revealed that the most common language style used by Instagram users in Pakistan is casual.*

Key Words: Language style, Instagram Users, Teenager, Pre-adult

Introduction

Language is any system of gestures, sounds, signs, and symbols used to communicate. Language is a tool for communication that helps people convey their ideas and thoughts to others. The language which people use reflects their cultural identity. Languages perform different societal roles, observed in educational institutions, business, politics and many other fields. The importance of language lies in the fact that it is the primary source with which humans can communicate and interact with one another. Some linguists emphasize that acquiring language skills is the primary means that helped our ancient forefathers thrive and succeed over the other species (Mayell, 2003). Modern times, while intensifying the effective use of language, have provided unique platforms to all in general and teenagers in particular to communicate and interact.

In today's world, using language effectively is crucial for building good interpersonal relationships in various areas of life. As language reflects the cultural background of the speakers, they choose the most appropriate variety of language based on their roles and the context in which they are speaking. It is important to keep in mind that the chosen variety of languages must match the situation in which they are speaking. This results in a language variety known as 'Style'. Sociolinguistics defines 'Style' as a set of linguistic expressions that carry specific social meanings and functions related to group membership, individual characteristics, attributes, and speakers' beliefs.

William Labov is credited with introducing the idea of style in sociolinguistics during the 1960s. Although he did not provide a clear definition, his research focused on how linguistic variants are associated with specific social groups.

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Style refers to the way people speak, which depends on their social interactions and the language they use to convey meaning. It's important to note that style is not a fixed attribute of speakers, as they often switch styles depending on the context. Additionally, speakers may combine elements of different styles to create a unique one that best suits the situation. Style and stylistics have a long history both inside and outside the field of sociolinguistics. In fact, the history of style in sociolinguistics goes back to the very beginning of the field.

According to Kiesling (1998), the personal styles of the speakers consist of a set, or repertoire, of stances, and the speaker's way of speaking does not simply represent a personal style but also the stance that the speaker repeatedly adopts. Stance indicates the speaker's position concerning the conversation, utterance and the other interlocutors. Adopting a particular style is based on the desire of the speaker to project a specific social image. Speakers who wish to represent themselves in a certain manner may consciously shift their linguistic style to produce a specific impression on the other interlocutors. Studying style variation in social media will be interesting, but it does not provide face-to-face linguistic clues to the analysts and researchers.

Social media is an internet-based technology that enables people to share their thoughts, ideas, and personal lives with the public, thereby extending their friend circles and establishing intimacy. It plays a significant role in several fields of life, such as connecting people in business and marketing, advertising, raising awareness, and creating brand recognition. Nowadays, social media has gained massive popularity, especially among the youth, and it allows them to make new friends and express themselves. The most popular social media websites include Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and others. This study has been limited to teenage Instagram users residing in Pakistani society.

Literature Review

The study of style is one of the essential elements in sociolinguistics. The way style is perceived in sociolinguistics depends upon the various theories and concepts proposed by the scholars. According to (Eckert, 2001) and (Schilling-Estes, 2002), sociolinguistics analysis studies style from two perspectives:

a. Depending upon the relationship between linguistic variants and social factors.
b. Depending on the speaker's or group's use of language within the given speech community.

As stated by Moore, the speaking style of speakers involves how they bring off their social positions and goals about their society (Moore, 2004). The style of the speakers is influenced by many factors, viz., social status, sex, age, educational background, situational context, and participants. The teenagers engaged in communication and interaction on social media incorporate all these factors unconsciously, which need to be brought on the conscious level to help them make informed decisions and choices in linguistic communication patterns and pay proper attention to make themselves communicatively polished and attractive.

As Labov initiated the study on the style, he analyzed the stylistic constraints based on the attention paid to the speech (Labov, 1966). According to Labov's model, the style of the speakers depends on the amount of attention paid to their speech and the level of formality of the situation. If more attention is paid to the speaker's speech, it will limit the speaker's use of his vernacular style. Additionally, based on the formality of the situation, speakers' attention to their speech is enhanced, and they try to make their style more formal. Moreover, the style also depends on the other interlocutors involved in the conversation. This relates to Lee's theory of audience, according to which the speakers adjust their style based on the audience they communicate with (Lee, 2017). Such mindful attention to the style helps in positive identity construction, especially in teenagers already in the shaping process.

The style the speakers adopt not only projects their identity but also reflects their educational background, social background, economic background, and biological-intellectual age. People are always worried about how to present themselves better; they incorporate the elements of multiple styles in their speech and form a unique style. Stylistic variation not only exists in speech but also in writing. The variation of language style in writing can be extensively found in social media. The language found in social media can be very similar to the spoken language used in casual, informal situations (Paris, 2012).

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According to some researchers, the increased number of stylistic variations in the English language under social media threatens the standard English varieties (Abbasova, 2019). Because of the style variation in social networking, the meanings of many words have changed.

Nowadays, social media has become a platform for self-presentation and identity construction. According to (Goffman, 1959), identity is like a mask people can wear and take off while interacting in different social contexts. Wearing the wrong mask on public forums may lead to dire social consequences. People publicly share their personal lives on social media (Lange, 2007). In the case of teenagers, if they are not made aware and educated about the style selection, it can lead to identity crises. It is because by exploring the language style they use in social media, one can learn about their backgrounds and the social groups to which they belong. The right perception of style depends heavily on constructing an identity based on the right kind of theories and ideology. Also, the perception of styles depends upon the different theories and concepts given by the scholars. In the view of Joos, the language style is categorized into five types: frozen, formal, consultative, casual, and intimate (Indra et al., 2018). The explanation of these is as follows:

- Frozen style: It is the style used in the most formal situations. The frozen style is used in respectful events and ceremonies. It is used in writings with symbolic value, such as court or state documents. It does not require any feedback from the readers or listeners.
- Formal Style: Formal style is used in everyday formal situations. It is a style which is orderly and controlled. It does not signal any close personal acquaintances. According to (Richards, 1985), formal style is characterized by the careful choice of words, proper pronunciation and proper sentence structures. The formal style also includes standard language, technical vocabulary, complete forms and complex grammatical structures.
- Consultative style: In the view of (Penalosa, 1981), the consultative style is the most impartial language style. It is more formal than casual and intimate style. Such style is used in semi-formal situations such as everyday conversation at school, workplace, etc.
- Casual Style: It is the language style used in casual situations. It is the informal style used in conversations between friends and insiders who share the same background, such as age, sex, education, social status, etc. Casual style can also be characterized by informal words such as slang.
- Intimate Style: Intimate style is the most informal style. It consists of private code words, words reflecting intimate relations between the interlocutors, vague language, short words and non-standard forms. It is used by those with very close relationships, such as family members or close friends.

Research Methodology

In this research, a quantitative and descriptive approach has been used. It describes the different styles and the frequency of styles used by Instagram users in Pakistan. Quantitative research aims to obtain the data in quantified terms and provide a statistical treatment of the observed data. The quantitative design also uses tables to provide the exact values of the research findings and the final results. The collected data was analyzed by considering Joos's five types of style in view (Martin, 1967).

The data for this research was collected from several Instagram users in Pakistan. In order to collect data, the main focus was laid on the posts and stories of the teenager and pre-adult Instagram users. Instagram is a free social networking website which has gained massive popularity worldwide in the present time. It allows the users to share their views and personal lives by editing and uploading pictures, videos and stories along with captions, hashtags and location. In this way, people have made new friends and have shared their identities with their extensive friend circle.

Moreover, it is not only a tool for connecting with friends but also for business. According to the Instagram website, there were approximately 855 million global users of Instagram in 2020, and by 2023, this figure is expected to surpass 988 Million. In order to investigate different styles and their frequencies, the researchers collected 50

samples from the captions and stories of Instagram users in Pakistan.

Data Analysis

The collected data was analyzed according to the styles proposed by Joos. The following table shows the percentage of the language styles found by Instagram users:

Table 1

Frequency of language style used by Instagram users

Style Type	Users 'Frequency	Percentage
Frozen	0	0%
Formal	2	4%
Consultative	10	20%
Casual	25	50%
Intimate	13	26%
	=50	=100%

Out of 50 data, only 4% of the users used 'Formal Style'. Because social media is a social networking site where people try to interact and enhance their intimacy with one another, they mostly use less formal language. That is the reason why the formal style is used only by two users, one of which is a CSS officer and the other is the person handling a public account containing all the essential information about celebrities and famous people and the latest news regarding any critical incident that occurs in Pakistan.

'Consultative Style' was about 20% among Instagram users. Since the consultative style is usually used in semi-formal situations, the 10 Instagram users who used the consultative style were mainly those handling some small online businesses and the official handlers or the Brands' accounts.

The most frequently used style among Instagram users was 'Casual Style', used by 50%. It was used by those who shared the same background, such as students, writers, artists, and those belonging to the same fields of education, same institutions or having some common interests. The use of casual style by Instagram users was characterized by the careless choice of words, unconscious mistakes in spelling, informal words and improper grammatical structures. This means that the users were not conscious of their language and were at ease not strictly following the language rules. This finding implies that they enjoyed it as a social media platform irrespective of the fear of judgment.

Instagram users also used the 'Intimate Style' of language. The frequency of intimate style used by the users was 26%. It was characterized by using short forms, code words, non-standard language, and incomplete sentences signalling close relationships, and a greater level of intimacy among the users. The intimate style 13 users used contained some private code words that could only be understood by the user and his/her close friends. Moreover, the users also used a lot of short, such as 'u' instead of 'you', 'Ty' instead of 'Thank you, 'n' or 'nd' instead of 'and', 'r' instead of 'are' and many more.

The data analysis shows that Instagram users most commonly use the casual style. Consultative and intimate styles are also somewhat used, and formal style is least commonly used. However, the frozen style, which is the most formal style, is not used. The 0% use of frozen style and only 4% use of formal style shows that the users do not want to use any formal style while using social media. Most users prefer to use their language freely without being bound to specific rules and restrictions. Moreover, Instagram users, using Instagram as a means of entertainment and as a tool for connecting with others, want to enhance their intimacy with one another, so they use less formal language.

Conclusion

In conclusion, people use different language styles on social media platforms like Instagram. This research explains how people project their backgrounds and social identities and create social relationships through different language styles. Research findings showed that style reflects the backgrounds to which people belong and how

people construct their social lives. Because people use Instagram for entertainment, casual style is found among most Instagram users in Pakistan. On Instagram, people use a casual style, which shows that they are not conscious or worried that their language use will be judged.

Moreover, a casual style is used in everyday conversations, showing that people want to be friendly with the people they connect with via Instagram. Another reason for using a casual style is to seem more natural. As people share their personal lives on Instagram, they prefer a casual style to express their identities and personalities better. In other words, people use a casual style to gain familiarity with others and want to increase their acquaintances. Other than casual style, many users use an intimate style that reflects their close relationship.

Besides reflecting the backgrounds of the users, language styles can also be influenced by different factors such as age, education, sex, social status and the social roles of individuals. This research also shows how people have started using informal words, short forms, improper sentence structures and non-standard forms under the influence of social media. This informal use includes lexical and grammatical differences, misspellings, etc., which can negatively impact the standard language varieties.

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