"Mah 3 favrits": The Use of Netspeak Language in a Selection of Literary Texts

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ABSTRACT

This paper tackles the use of netspeak language features in three texts of different literary genres: "Give Me Women, Wine, and Snuff," a poem by John Keats; *Hamlet*, a play by William Shakespeare; and *Yellow Dog*, a novel by Martin Amis. The first two works are rewritten by contemporary bloggers and satirists in netspeak as an attempt to make these classics better suit the spirit of the current age. The third example is a novel that comprises formal and standard English on the one hand and informal and netspeak language on the other. Thus, this research examines the literary effects of netspeak language features in the selected texts and investigates the main reasons behind the authors' reliance on such a language style. To further discuss the origin and emergence of certain netspeak terms, this paper deploys some website tools such as Google Search Trends and the Corpus of Contemporary American English.

KEY WORDS: John Keats, literature, netspeak language, Matin Amis, William Shakespeare

1. Introduction

The rapid technological progress in recent years has indicated a new era in our understanding of promoting literacy. Under the influence of technology and the relentless advancement of social media platforms, the written language has acquired some new and unique characteristics that originated from the internet and are commonly referred to as netspeak features. Netspeak has surpassed the online milieu and infiltrated other fields of life. As a result, literacy, and writing are being modified continually. For instance, some classical masterpieces of literature are rewritten entirely in the so-called netspeak language to be more compatible with the emerging technology-driven generations. Additionally, some other writers compose excerpts integrated into their works of fiction to give glimpses of virtual reality. This study primarily focuses on the utilization of netspeak language features in John Keats' poem "Give Me Women, Wine, and Snuff", William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, and Martin Amis' *Yellow Dog*. It examines the authors' purposes and objectives behind writing/rewriting the selected texts with the features of netspeak.

2. NETSPEAK AND THE LOLCAT BIBLE PROJECT

Netspeak is defined by David Crystal (2006, p. 20) as "a type of language displaying features that are unique to the Internet, and encountered in all of the above [internet-based] situations, arising out of its characters as a medium which is electronic, global and interactive". Lauren Squires states that acronyms, abbreviations, and respellings characterize netspeak language. It is classified as a nonstandard form of language that is almost exclusively related to the young generation (Squires, 2010, p.468). Building on these definitions, this essay endeavors to identify the origin and objectives of the used features of netspeak language in the three studied texts of literature. References are made to Martin Grondin's "LOLCat Bible Project", a project that is mostly influenced and inspired by netspeak features. Furthermore, several electronic tools such as Google Search Trends and the Corpus of Contemporary American English are used to investigate further the origin of certain netspeak terms and their usage in different contexts.

Martin Grondin, an American software installation support engineer, created a project in July 2007 called "The LOLCat Bible Translation". The main aim of this project was to rewrite Bible in "LOLspeak". The term "LOLspeak" means combining a cat image with a peculiar and grammatically incorrect text. In other words, the term LOL is taken from netspeak and is almost synonymous with its use of LOL to indicate laughing out loud. The editors of this project have revised the entire text of the Bible into LOLspeak with radical changes in the original material, for instance, all the major personas in the Bible are renamed. Jesus Christ is converted to the "Happy Cat", God to the "Ceiling Cat", and Satan to the "Basement Cat". By the same token, the "gifts" and "blessings" of Gods are changed to "cheezburgerz" and common people to "kittens". (loc.gov)

The writing style adopted by the editors of this project is mostly satirical. However, sacrilege is the main accusation the originators of the LOLCat Bible received. In addition, the readers criticized the project for its poor language, which seems too difficult for many to cope with because of its grammar

inconsistency, odd acronyms, and internet jargon. It has also been claimed that only those people who are frequent users of the internet can understand the humor depicted in the project. The project owners have praised the positive influence of their creative piece of work as it has inspired other people to rewrite and translate certain texts. They have paved the way for the rewriting of the first literary example in this research, "Give Me Women, Wine, and Snuff", a poem by John Keats.

3. THE USE OF NETSPEAK LANGUAGE IN LITERATURE

With the emergence of online blogs in the first decade of the 21st century, several outstanding literary texts have been rewritten on one online blog called "LiveJournal". This blog was rooted in a tradition of global participation and was at the forefront of personal publishing, community involvement, and individual expression for over a decade. It was described by its editors to be one of the world's most respected blogging platforms. Many of this online community's literary publications are either written or rewritten with netspeak features. One of this journal's blogs is entitled "dmjones" which is clearly inspired by the LOLCat Bible Translation Project. Among the many interesting pieces on this platform is "Give me Women, Wine and Snuff" by John Keats, the prestigious English Romantic poet known for his prolific eloquence and mastery of the English language; appearing to be the most unexpected poem rewritten in netspeak language. It appears as follows:

Gimme wimmins, cheezburgers n catnips
Till I sez DO NOT WANT real lowd
Gimme mah stuffd an no complaynin
Till Ceiling Cat shoots meh wif his lazer beem eyes. Srsly.
Fur, bless mah whiskerz, them are
Mah 3 favrits! (dmjones.livejournal.com)

Various features of netspeak language can be perceived in this one-stanza poem. The first example is the assimilation between the spoken and written language such as in "Gimme wimmins", "n", "lowd", "complaynin", and "eyez". The second point is grammar; it comprises some nonstandard structures like "I sez". Random capitalization, closely linked to netspeak language, is apparently utilized to highlight certain aspects in the poem depending on the speaker's intention. What is noteworthy about this poem is the direct adaptation of LOLCat terminology. By having a look at the original version of Keats's poem, a striking contrast is conspicuous, and the LOLCat language is evidently revealed:

GIVE me women, wine, and snuff
Until I cry out "hold, enough!"
You may do so sans objection
Till the day of resurrection:
For, bless my beard, they aye shall be
My beloved Trinity. (Stillinger, 2003, p.18)

Implementing the rules of the LOLCat Dictionary, the words "wine, and snuff" are replaced by "cheezburgers and catnips" and, similarly, "the day of resurrection" is referred to as "Till Ceiling Cat shoots meh wif his lazer beem eyez. Srsly." The netspeak version of the poem hardly includes a term used by Keats himself in the original poem. That is to say, the poem is rewritten in a way that makes it difficult to identify it as Keats's poem if no reference is to be made to the original version. The writer chooses this style of writing to parody the poem, or it is mainly used for comic purposes. Some subscribers of the LiveJournal blog commented on the revised version of the poem and mentioned that they could not prevent themselves from laughing while reading it; others scorned it for its profane language. For instance, the last line of the poem 'My beloved Trinity' is modified to 'Mah 3 favrits' which is trivial. Trinity, which refers to The Father, The Son, and The Holy Spirit in Christianity, is vaguely and sarcastically paraphrased as the poet's three favorites.

After using Corpus of Contemporary American English and Google Search Trends to analyze the features adopted in Keats' translated poem, the outcome was unexpected. Both tools have no records for the word "cheezburgers". As far as "Ceiling Cat" is concerned, no matches are found in the Corpus of Contemporary American English too. At the same time, the same term has its existence, according to Google Search Trends. It is shown that this term has been used since 2006, and its usage reached a peak in 2008. It is most frequently used in New Zealand, the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom. Even though the term is used in more than eight languages, such as English, Finish, Dutch, and German, the tendency to use the term has been decreasing lately. However, it is noted that these European countries use the phrase 'ceiling cat' to refer to a different meaning as it originates from a small photograph captured by the British portrait photographer Harry Pointer in the 1870s that contains a cat looking out of a hole in a ceiling. What can be derived from these instances is, firstly, netspeak language is not an entirely random combination of words/letters, and secondly, it is not likely to disappear anytime soon as new words are continually originating in the internet discourse.

Martin Baum, who is known as a British blogger,

satirist, and bestselling author, rewrote the works of, arguably, the most widely renowned writer in the history of English Literature as a whole. As part of his project of rewriting William Shakespeare's most famous plays, Baum chose fifteen of his plays to rewrite in what is called "Yoof-Speak" language and published them in a book entitled *To Be or Not to Be, Innit: A Yoof-Speak guide to Shakespeare*. Yoof-Speak means the mixture of text spoken with street slang language. Although it is not exactly similar to the netspeak language, there is a strong overlap between them. Inspired by the gist of the slang language, Baum has modified the titles of the plays in a rather humorous way. For example, he has used abbreviations, a common feature of netspeak, in providing modified titles for Shakespeare's selected plays. *Antonio and Cleopatra* is shortened to "Ant and Cleo". Similarly, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth* are amended to "De Taming of de Bitch", "Jools Caeser", and "Macbeff". This collection of plays has been one of the most controversial books since the date of its publication in 2008 and received a harsh censure as it demolishes the form and the content of the original plays of Shakespeare. Many Shakespearean readers and critics could not accept replacing Shakespeare's formal and standard poetic language with a seemingly poor and slang one.

Hamlet is considered one of Shakespeare's best tragedies as it is unique in terms of its high-standard language and verse forms. The well-accomplished play is altered into a short story written in prose, comprising non-standard expressions. The following extract is the introduction to Baum's adaptation of the play, which he has entitled "Amlet":

> Dere was somefing minging in de State of Denmark which was making Amlet all uncool. First, his Uncle Claudius had married his muvva, de main bitch Queen Gretrude. Then de Norwegian Fortinbras massive was freatening to invade de Danish truf and finally, and quiet unexpectedly, de rank ghost of his nutty farva was spooking de crap out of him. (Baum, 2008, p.9)

After reading this paragraph once only, one can realize immediately it is written in a language that is a mixture of slang terms and internet vernacular. Many words are respelled in assimilation with the way they are pronounced according to some local accents. The examples that can be observed in this paragraph are: "somefing" which means "something", and the slang "minging" which is commonly referred to as "dirty", "disgusting", or "ugly". "Muvva" and "farva" which

stand for "mother" and "father" are also some clear examples. In the same way, "fhreatening" means "threatening", "truf", means "truth" and "de" is "the". Punctuation and grammar are non-standard in this text. In "making Amlet all uncool", uncool is not a common way of negating the adjective which should have been written as "not cool", according to the standard English language rules. The word "uncle" is capitalized in the second line, which does not have any justification in punctuation.

The word "dere", derived from "there", is the outcome of the assimilation between the spoken and the written language. It has been used in 81 published sources up to now, as the data of the Corpus of Contemporary American English reveals. The term is found in journals such as The New Yorker and National History. According to the same tool, the first appearance of this word was in 1990 in a journal called American International Studies. To be more specific, "dere" was used in an article entitled "Blackface minstrels in cross-cultural perspective" written by John Blair as the following: "Dey put me in de Calaboose, An' keep me dere all night. # When I got out I hit a man, His name I now forgot; But dere was not'ing left of him' Cept a little grease spot.#" In addition to this, "dere" is commonly used in different websites, as the Web as Corpus tool shows. "Dere" is utilized variously in more than 43 web pages, and among these pages, Wikipedia, YouTube, and Twitter are the most prominent examples. Adopting this overlap between the characteristics of Netspeak and the Yoof-Speak in paraphrasing Shakespeare's writings, Baum's main aim, as he himself states, is to provide easier access to the people who find Shakespeare hard to understand and give them the opportunity to enjoy reading this exceptional dramatist in a more familiar language.

Published in 2004, Martin Amis' *Yellow Dog* is a British novel that shifts back and forth between standard and netspeak language. Pornography, sexual dysfunction, male violence, and masculine anxiety are the primary strands shaping the key lines of the plot of the novel. Clint Smoke, who is one of the major characters, is depicted as sexually dysfunctional in the novel. To compensate for his weakness in sexual incapability, Clint is introduced to a girl named Keith, or "K8", as she spells her name. The only means of communication between K8 and him is via e-mails, eventually leading them to perform verbal sex. The language K8 employs in her correspondence with Clint is noticeable in this communication. Her language is commonly an example of the internet language, which is quite playful, as Clint himself refers to in the novel. All K8's e-mails, with no exceptions, are written in the netspeak language. Such language sets K8 apart from

other characters in the novel and gives her a sense of identity. In a rather general sense, this sense of identity is what most online users are after while communicating in netspeak language on different blogs, as they claim. To have a character in the novel who exploits the netspeak language is something that gives the novel itself a sense of authenticity. It makes it more reliable as the language shifts from a standard one to the internet language in accordance with the social and educational background of the characters. K8 is a girl who belongs to the social network generation. Hence, the language she uses is entirely suitable for her generation.

Since K8 herself is a person who is described to be playful and deceiving in character and, on top of that, she is a transgender person, the use of netspeak language creates a mask to disguise her playful nature. Her playfulness is shown in her unique use of abbreviations and nonstandard grammar and even in the way she spells her name, all implying a fake façade displayed in language. Moreover, her language adds a certain kind of reality to the plot, making it more genuine. The following extract is an e-mail K8 sends to Clint describing her appearance:

> as 4 my face. my i's r green(tho
> not with n v!). my hair is s&y &
> 'flyaway'. men have a habit of saying
> th@t i am blessed with a submissive
> & yielding manner, in an old-fash-
> ioned way: quintessentially femi9
> i'm 5'7", and i no u r taller man,
> clin t. which is as it should be. Height
> m@ters: th@'s as axiom@ic rule of
> @traction. (Amis, 2004, p.104)

The netspeak features used in this email, emulating the form of a poem, illustrate more traits of K8's character, such as her age. The reader may predict that she is a teenager because of the language characteristics she depicts, which are mostly predictable for young people. However, no clue is given about her real age in the novel. The first striking feature is her use of numbers instead of words or to replace certain syllables. For instance, she uses "4" instead of "four". "9" is used in "femi9" as an alternative for the "nine" syllable in the word "feminine". In the same way, she makes use of some symbols in some other words to stand for syllables, such as "&" in "s&y" and "&" refers to "and". The symbol "@" is used in place of "a" as in: "th@t", "ma@ter", "axiom@ic", and "@traction". Grammar, spelling, and punctuation are also used in a rather peculiar way. In the third sentence, K8 uses the article "a" instead of "the". She uses zero articles instead of "a" in the seventh sentence. A prominent example of spelling is that of "eyes" as "i's", and she seems to pay no attention to capitalization even in mentioning Clint's name, in which she writes as "clint".

According to the Corpus of Contemporary American English, the short form "u" is used in more than 7300 contexts. In Amis's novel, "u" is an abbreviation of the personal pronoun "you", and, similarly, in most of the contexts given by the mentioned tool, "u" refers to the same pronoun, and its use has been common since the 1990s. Google Search Trends shows a significant increase in using "u" from the 1990s to the current times. Interestingly, this short form was more frequently used in 2008 than ever. In addition, "u" is used by the speakers of Siberian, Bosnian and Croatian languages on a larger scale. At the same time, the tool interestingly indicates that it is less frequently used in the English language and countries of this spoken language like the United Kingdom and the United States of America.

4. CONCLUSION

The common thread between the three literary genres examined in this research is the essential purpose for which they are written. The three presented examples function as literary comic pieces in the first place to either ridicule the high formalities of the English language or better fit the internet social settings. However, each of the analyzed texts has some other key roles. The translated version of John Keats's poem carries features of the LOLspeak language, which originated from the LOLCat Bible project. Similarly to the main aim of the inventors of the project, the poem is initially rewritten to be parodied. Additionally, it is meant to be more widely available and comprehensible for internet users in a language similar to theirs and their online environment. Baum's efforts in translating Shakespeare's work into Yoof-speak are for a crucial reason, as he himself claims. He defends his version of Shakespeare's plays by stating that he is making literature fun and more accessible. In one of his interviews, Baum stated that he decided to rewrite Shakespeare when he discovered that his teenage son knew almost nothing about this leading author. That is why he has even considered rewriting all the important classical literature in his style to provide the young generation with convenient access to classical literature. The appropriateness of introducing the young generation to the classics such as Shakespeare remains a controversial question.

Amis's *Yellow Dog* is different from the first two studied examples as it is primarily written in standard English. The novel shifts from the standard language to a nonstandard one to portray the sketch of one of his

characters, K8. Amis utilizes netspeak language to satirize some critical issues in his novel, such as the question of sexuality and desire. In addition to that, the employment of such a language adds more humor and realism to the novel. All in all, the use of netspeak language reflects new mediums of expression and communication in today's technology-oriented life. Thus, it is no surprise to witness an augmented number of literary outputs of various genres following this new language trend.

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NOTE: Website Tools used in this paper to analyze the corpus:
https://trends.google.com/trends
https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/