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**PHILOLOGY**

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UDC 81

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IN THE CONTEXT OF MODERN LINGUISTIC  
AND SOCIAL CHANGES****[Гришечко О.С. Информализация английского языка  
в контексте современных языковых и социальных изменений]**

One trend which has massively impacted on the shape of both written and spoken English in the course of the past century is what scholars refer to as ‘informalisation’. The present paper aims to describe informalisation as a trend premised on transformation of language practices following the alternation of social practices. The study presumes that arguments justifying the proliferation of informal language can most accurately and prominently be recorded by investigating current trends of media and electronic discourse, as well as against the backdrop of marketisation featuring as one of the most influential trends that affects a variety of spheres of human activity, including people’s communication practices. The article also offers a critique of informalisation as a linguistic phenomenon, as well as a review of a number of studies suggesting such related terms as ‘conversation-alisation’, ‘colloquialisation’ and ‘individualisation’.

Key words: language informalisation, informal style, social changes, spoken language, written language, marketisation.

Only a short time ago scholars were wondering if the English language was becoming increasingly informal [8]. Today, however, the overriding argument suggests that the once prominent borderline separating the language of personal and formal communication is being filed as history. This argument not only rings true, but can basically be accepted as fact: as T. Nevalainen et al. note, ‘in many ways, the public and professional domains have now become saturated with informality, both in terms of content and form, and this saturation is something one can see with the naked eye’ [18, p. 112]. Informal language is a type of oral literary language servicing day-to-day social interaction and functioning as a means of communication. In general terms, it can be referred to as speech marked by a casual,

offhand, colloquial 'mode' of verbal or written expression, commonly described as direct and characterised by extensive use of ellipses, contractions and generally 'patchy speech patterns' [1, p. 32]. To put this into perspective, formal language is more rigidly 'legitimate', as Akmajian et al. [3, p. 87] put it, employs elaborate sentence composition and distinctive, explicit, often field-specific lexis. Informal language is less strictly grammatical, deploys simpler constructions and vocabulary, and relies extensively on the use of fragmented utterances, colloquial expressions, vulgarisms and essentially plainer language units [7]. However, as Australian researcher C. Lee notes, 'plainer narrative does not inherently imply plainer apprehension, cognition or conceptualisation' [14, p. 55-56].

The colloquial 'mode' of expression is also characteristic of informal writing style in standard English, which can be evidenced vividly in personal e-mail correspondence, non-fiction books and mass-circulation publications. In this case, one of the key features of writing output can be described as shortened distance between the narrator and the addressee, which is mainly due to the more personalised format of message composition. Yet, according to Alred et al., the spoken and written varieties of informal English do differ, inasmuch as informal writing is more prone to adhere to the grammatical conventions established in the language system [4]. However, this particular statement might still appear debatable, since most of our linguistic choices, made both while speaking and writing, are sensitive to the context of the communicative exchange and the specific speech register underlying this context. Thus, for example, a message exchanged via social media is likely to be less grammatically consistent than a letter drawn up as a personal e-mail.

Thus, at the level of linguistic speculation, informalisation can be viewed as the expansion of informal elements of speaking and writing practices. One of the most pinpointing descriptions of this phenomenon was proposed by one of the founders of critical discourse analysis Norman Fairclough, who qualified the process of informalisation as 'border crossing', which essentially implies that the advent of new social relationships brings about modification of behaviour, including linguistic behaviour [11, p. 18]. As informalisation of the English language has become an ongoing trend persisting over the last several decades, some linguists found that the term itself might not be enough to incorporate everything the phenomenon actually stands for. Thus, for example, Norman

Fairclough suggested that the spread of informal communicative ‘mindset’ entitles us to discern a specific type of informalisation that can be referred to as ‘conversationalisation’ [10]. The term is closely modelled on the concept of public colloquial introduced by Geoffrey Leech [15] and denotes a style of public discourse that imitates familiarity by assimilating the qualities of informal, conversational language and ‘building a somewhat personal relationship between the originator and the consumer of public discourse’ [5, p. 112]. Conversationalisation employs colloquial lexical, phonetic, prosodic, grammatical and stylistic elements of discursive practices, as well colloquial genres (conversational narrative) which poses a distinctive manner of topic elaboration.

In light of this, the present paper aims to describe informalisation as a trend premised on transformation of language practices following the alternation of social practices. The study presumes that arguments justifying the proliferation of informal language can most accurately and prominently be recorded by investigating current trends of media and electronic discourse, as well as against the backdrop of marketisation featuring as one of the most influential trends that affects a variety of spheres of human activity, including people’s communication practices. The article also offers a critique of informalisation as a linguistic phenomenon, as well as a review of a number of studies suggesting such related terms as ‘conversationalisation’, ‘colloquialisation’ and ‘individualisation’.

#### *Informalisation and marketisation*

As British researchers Sharon Goodman and David Craddol suggest, one of the driving forces behind informalisation of language is the overwhelmingly pervasive process of marketisation [13] defined as the exposure of a service to market-oriented objectives [9, p. 136]. Although marketisation might seem like a strictly domain-specific phenomenon, largely pertaining to the spheres of economy and commercial relations, its incidence can actually be witnessed across the board, including in the realm of language functioning. Just like most of the people all over the world, English speakers today have to respond to the ever more market-minded context of everyday life – and as things currently stand, being involved in this process implies following the trend of language informalisation.

This argument is best illustrated by the growing need to ‘sell yourself the right way’ in order to find a job or progress up the career ladder: to do that one will have to (apart from everything else) use appropriate conversational strategies and tactics

and have at one's hand a set of 'prearranged self-PR stunts' [13, p. 71]. To put it in other words, what you have to do is become a fluent fabricator of marketing texts. This, in turn, has obviously affected the shape of the English language in a number of ways, including making it increasingly informal.

#### *Electronic communication and education*

A sensitive issue in regard to language informalisation is the one pertaining to education, because in this context the younger generation comes into the picture. Naturally, it is beyond dispute that youngsters' 'intoxication' with electronic media has by now assumed epidemic proportions, and the informality that is inherently embedded in electronic communications is infiltrating their speech practices. Most importantly, these practices are now steaming into their schoolwork, which trend has been documented in a recent study introduced by American researcher Tamar Lewin [17]. The study relied on a survey with over 700 participants involved, of which as many as 460 respondents admitted their e-communication style occasionally penetrated into their classwork and homework. About 350 respondents noted they had a tendency to ignore punctuation and capitalisation rules in their schoolwork, while using emoticons (e.g., smiley faces) and informal acronyms (e.g., IMHO, LOL) was a commonplace practice for the rest of the respondents.

#### *The media*

Notably, Fairclough finds the connotation behind informalisation to be controversial, insofar as the concept itself is associated with both positive and negative influence on language functioning and social operations. Thus, on the positive side, whenever formality is being 'outlawed', the corresponding domains that used to be exclusively premised on rigid and official practices of interaction eventually assimilate discursive traditions that are familiar to a wider public, which, in turn, leads to democratisation of the various realms of social activity [12, p. 138]. On the negative side, however, the genre-specific nature of language operation is thus being demoted, making way for a somewhat artificial mode of linguistic interaction [21]. As Fairclough sees it, any setting that is supposed to be formal, but ends up ripped off of its formal essence, becomes synthetic, thus making any attempt towards personalised relationship just as farfetched and unnatural [12, p. 145].

Besides, renunciation of formality in favour of informality can be considered one of the most efficient and widely-used strategies of manipulation, especially in the media sphere [20], and so when it comes to tracing the evidence for informal-

isation processes, it would be safe to argue that the aftermath of increscent linguistic informality can be comprehensively pinpointed by analysing the language of the media. Thus, news reports used to be one of the most formal segments of television broadcasting that has always been discernibly associated with scholastic, ceremonial, scrupulous, watchful, regimented mode of data reporting. The past decades, however, have seen a marked slant away from conventional composed detachment towards some sort of unprompted downrightness (through typically faux) that turned media discourse into something Alan Westin of Columbia University described as ‘a proxy of verbal practices of communication’ [26, p. 60]. This is evidenced across the board as sustained efforts are now being made in order to produce an impression of informality and spontaneity and reconfigure the very format of print, online and broadcasting media. This is why British researcher Mary Talbot compares news reports with ‘chat shows giving an impression of people having an ordinary conversation, while as a matter of fact we are watching actors performing in front on the cameras and trying to make us envision a commonplace dinner table conversation’ [25, p. 22].

The ongoing trend of media informalisation has been subjected to quantitative analysis [16] within a case study of English-speaking ‘quality’ press covering the period of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century up to the present day. The corpus-based study has vividly illustrated that the body of informal language units has been growing at an exponential rate, ramping up towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and finally snowballing into the prevailing set of linguistic means used in the media.

Another study conducted back in 1993 by José Sanders of Radboud University and Gisela Redeker of the University of Groningen targeted viewer/reader assessment and established that while perfunctory ideas ‘injected’ casually into news reports did strike a chord with the audience, most of the respondents classified the informal insertions as inappropriate for the genre in general [24, p. 72]. Approaching this subject once again in 2012, Sanders concludes that informal linguistic markers have consolidated their hold on the media discourse bringing about the corresponding changes in people’s linguistic behaviour [23].

### *Critique*

The trend of language informalisation receives criticism that comes from both scholars and field-specific experts. For example, German philosopher and sociologist Theodor Adorno incorporates everything he finds to be wrong about the

idea of prevailing informality into a single term of ‘pseudoindividualisation’. The term itself suggests that the biggest ‘vice’ of language informalisation is that it is largely about misleading people and putting on a show that breaks the content of the conversation away from reality and creates what the scholar terms as ‘fictional intimacy’ [2, p. 49]. At the same time, Adorno does not only criticise those promoting informality, but also finds fault with the audience ready to embrace and buy into the new standards of language use. The subtle aspect to it is that pseudoindividualisation is not posed as media industry’s secret weapon: a person is well aware of the deception and chooses to flatter himself that he can actually discern the phony acting, outsmarting everybody else. Thus, if everyone acknowledges the hoax, then unmasking mass deception becomes the impelling power behind deception itself [19, p. 89].

Another point of critique in terms of informalisation of the English language can be summed up in a single statement penned by Jack Rosenthal, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, who claimed in one of his articles that ‘written English has been dethroned’ [22]. The spoken word now wears the crown, saturating the English language with informality and recurrent crudity, and the repercussions can today be witnessed across the board, both on the domestic plane and globally. For centuries, the written language had the upper hand because it was the only way for us to maintain communication, and the beginning of its end, according to Rosenthal, dates back to 1876 marked by the invention of the telephone.

Importantly, informalisation of the English language is now becoming an issue of concern in the context of genre-specific styles that have been establishing themselves for decades. For example, scholars today are anxious that academic writing is losing its former rigidity and objectivity, which is partly because of the devaluation of the scientific prose style that becomes congested with informality, both in terms of content and form [6]. This trend can be described by way of oppositions, such as objective vs. subjective, precise vs. vague, unemotional vs. emotional, and the like.

### *Conclusion*

The shape of the English language has in the past decades been affected by an ongoing trend of informalisation, which can be defined as a process involving incorporation of conversational speech and writing patterns into the corpora of various language genres. The overriding issue associated with language informalisa-

tion can be described as ‘border crossing’, which implies blurring of borders between the public and the private, the commercial and the domestic. The outcome, therefore, is what one might refer to as simulated conversational discourse.

The present paper has illustrated the connection of informalisation processes with the social practices being established at the present time, emphasising humanity’s general inclination towards democratisation of discursive practices, which implies ‘lighter’ and essentially less regimented codes of conduct and manner of expression. While various forms of discourse (such as academic prose, public speech, political discourse) have by now undergone transformation to a certain extent, the prominence of informalisation has been strongest in media and electronic discourse, fueled by marketisation processes.

Summing up, informalisation of the English language cannot be simply dismissed as strategically motivated simulation, or simply embraced as democratic. There is a real democratic potential, but it is emergent in and constrained by the structures and relations of contemporary capitalism.

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