

**RESEARCH PAPER****Sociolinguistic Continuity and Change: A Study of Indexical Bleaching****¹Maryam Saba, and ²Liaqat Iqbal**

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With the invention of various social media platforms, new forms of language have evolved. The present study explores the process of indexical bleaching that often leads to various changes in meaning due to re-contextualization, circulation and adoption. For this purpose, the data has been collected from X in the form of Hashtags by using a purposive sampling technique, which is then analyzed by the researchers using indexical bleaching as a framework by Lauren Squires. The findings show that media plays an important role in adoption and circulation of meaning due to recontextualization, where words like moye moye, absolutely not, Islamic touch, and software updated were adopted, recontextualized and recirculated. This helped in meaning variations. This research is useful in studying language change that will assist sociolinguists in exploring the role of media and other important similar contexts in investing language.

Keywords: Adoption, Circulation, Diffusion, Indexical Bleaching, Recontextualization**Introduction**

All languages used by human beings are prone to changes and due to these changes, languages evolve and expand. In the innovation of language, social media plays a vital role due to which new words and phrases are introduced and become in vogue; thus, languages become enriched with various linguistic items. Social media refers to the communication made by humans through the internet (Chaudhuri, 2020) helps in bringing us together and giving the sense of "togetherness" which results in rapid communication. The language of media is considered as contemporary language which helps people to communicate effectively, and the message is relevant across cultures (Perez-Latre, 2007). Bahri et al (2023) in their article "Language Change in Social Media" say that social media is the site where people share information with one another, and users tend to use language while communicating with others on media. The language used on social media sometimes deviates from established rules of standard language, which refers to the process called language change. These changes make readers confused as they are unable to decode the meaning. The example of semantic change from caption of tweet "Kanye West the GOAT" shows how language undergoes semantic changes due to media. As Kanye is famous rapper and GOAT means greatest of all times, this can make readers confuse and might assume it for the animal. These semantic changes can make meanings either expand or narrower. Other example of semantic change is word "cap" which means "topi" but on X (Twitter) it means "lying or faking". Similarly, the word "Troll" which originally refers to Scandinavian folklore, a dwarf and giant living in hills but in context of media, the meaning has changed to "harassing behavior or ill-mannered acts". Social media has not only made communication faster and efficient, but it has also made it difficult to be understood. Language use in digital context is quickly becoming part of formal context and affecting the culture and social behaviour. As in most cultures respectful language is used but due to social media courteous and respectful language is replaced with shortened and informal language. The use of compressed, shortened and abbreviated form of language is due to word limit in social media for example the word limit on X compels the users to use acronyms and abbreviated forms in order to make the writing quicker and faster (Natsir et

al, 2023). In mediatised discourse many different words got new meanings and associations where the existing meanings a word have faded out and weakened. This process of relocation of meaning is known as indexical bleaching.

Indexical bleaching also helps in changing a language as well as the meanings of words. Indexical bleaching is introduced by Lauren Squires in 2014 as an analogy to semantic bleaching. Semantic bleaching is different from indexical bleaching in a way that the word in semantic bleaching loses its lexical meaning while retaining grammatical meaning thus the word acts more like grammatical form (intensifier) rather than having lexical meaning. Semantic bleaching is also known as de semanticization, fading, attrition or weakening. The words which originated as manner adverbs for example awfully behaved and later due semantic bleaching it is converted to intensifier like awfully nice. In semantic bleaching words lose its original lexical meaning and the new bleached meaning is strengthened which leads to the productivity of the word (Luo et al, 2019)

Similarly, indexical bleaching refers (Squires, 2014) to the phenomenon when a word loses its social meaning while semantic and pragmatic meaning is strengthened. Indexical bleaching tends to happen (Squires, 2014) when a word or phrase is repeatedly used by a group of speakers resulting in the change of indexical meaning that a particular word or phrase has thus the word or phrase gets a different meaning in the different contexts used by different speakers. These changes are adding or losing a vocabulary or phrases, or these can be giving new meanings to existing words (Helmita, 2022). In other words, the phrase or word gets bleached, gaining new meanings in new and different contexts. Therefore, the present study explores how social media through indexical bleaching help change language.

Literature Review

For every living language, it is most of the time necessary to be changed and this change could flourish, evolve the language and or even lead to language death. These changes are not obvious for the native speakers to note as they are highly connected to their language, and they are unable to figure out these changes (Mantiri, 2010). As discussed in the introduction, indexical bleaching got an important role in language development, predominantly sociolinguistic changes. Social media has introduced a new language to its users which is spreading but apart from this, social media has also made changes to the existing language. Different research, for example, Squires (2014), and Bucholtz (2016) have carried out on how indexical bleaching occurs; however, the role of social media is very important and that is why further investigations are needed.

Squires (2014) in his article "From TV Personality to Fans and Beyond: Indexical Bleaching and the Diffusion of a Media Innovation" studied media generated phrase 'lady pond' used on Bravo T.V by Andy Cohen in his show, which further circulated and then diffused by those who do not use social media. Thus, the phrase lost its indexical social meaning through the process of indexical bleaching. Squires discussed three major steps which results in the spread of mass media generated language also called as 'public works' (Spitulnik, 1997) becoming part of their linguistic repertoires. The first, adoption is a direct link to the mass media influencing its users' language, the second, circulation is the use of media-induced language by those who use media and the third, when it is further diffused by those who do not use media is diffusion. Due to diffusion, the weakening of social meaning occurs that a word or phrase originally had.

Words or phrases get indexically bleached when they are repeatedly used by people in different contexts giving rise to a variety of meanings. Re-contextualization or de-contextualization of the phrase gives new attributes to it and weakens its original attributes. The word "lady pond" was further diffused by non-Bravos and thus defined on October 29, 2009, by Urban Dictionary, a collaborative online slang dictionary.

This change may lead to sociolinguistic change. Nikolas Coupland cited by Jannis Androutsopoulos (2014) in "Mediatization and Sociolinguistic Change" defines that sociolinguistic change deals with the two traditions, that are social and language. It means that the changes occurring in a language is due to the changes occurring in society, thus social change is a part of linguistic change.

There are many studies which support mediatization and its direct link with sociolinguistic change (Smith et al, 2013; Saha, 2019; Spitulnik, 1996; Bucholtz, 2016; Coupland, 2014). Earlier it was believed that there is no such importance of media in changing language but later, it was concluded that there is vital role of media in changing language and influencing it. As media is considered as an important part of the society, thus when society gets influenced by its language, it will be also affected. From grammar to vocabulary and from listening and speaking skills to reading and writing skills, social media has brought drastic changes in language. The language used on social media platforms is mostly unsupervised; therefore, the language has become more deteriorated and has lost its originality. Many different words coined and were added to Oxford Dictionary and existing words have gotten new meanings in the context of social media. However, it leads to the enrichment of the user's vocabulary, and they have more knowledge of technical terms. Another aspect of social media is that youngsters tend to write more ultimately resulting in the intensification of literacy skills, as the users go for short sentences, therefore, they come up with incorrect spellings or abbreviated forms of words that they use in their verbal language thus negatively influencing their language and the formality in language loses its essence. The use of emojis and emoticons serve as facial expressions or nonverbal parts of language. This has nothing to do with written language, but it has greatly replaced the most sensitive part of the language. This shows that social media has more positive as well as less negative impacts on the users.

This given literature review shows that indexical bleaching is somehow related to social media and how it brings changes in meaning but in the Pakistani domain it is not explored yet. This research article will fill up the gap to see how meanings are articulated, how it is spread, and what kind of changes occur in meanings.

Material and Methods

For the study, data is collected from X (previously known as Twitter). The relevant hashtags and phrases used in different tweets were taken by the researcher through a purposive sampling technique and then analyzed by the researcher thoroughly using the selected framework. The relevant tweets were analyzed. For this purpose, 8 tweets were taken. Out of these 8 tweets, 4 tweets were selected for question one to show what kind of changes occur in meaning after recontextualizing it, 4 tweets were chosen to show the extent to which mass media help in carrying out the process of adoption and circulation.

Lauren Squires differentiated three major processes which help in the spread of innovations that are made by mass media. These steps are given as following:

Adoption: As the word adoption means to adopt something or take something from other. The same phenomenon occurs when a word or phrase is adopted and taken from mass media by those who use mass media. Those linguistic features adopted by the adopters are then spread and come in use. Lauren Squires defines adoption as "the uptake of a linguistic feature directly from the mass media by consumers of the media" (Squires, 2014, p.43).

Circulation: The next step after adopting a linguistic feature from mass media is circulation. According to Lauren Squires, "Circulation is the use-in-practice of the feature by adopters, who are media consumers" (Squires, 2014, p.43). In this phase, the linguistic item

adopted by the adopters use it in their language and thus making it more like a part of language with different meanings in different contexts.

Diffusion: Lauren Squires states “Diffusion is the spread of the features from adopters to new users, who may or may not be media consumers” (Squires, 2014, p.43). When the linguistic item that is taken by the adopters is further spread and consumed by those who may or may not use media is called diffusion. In this step, the link of linguistic item and the meaning is weakened and faded out because of the wide range of its use.

In addition to using the model given above as a part of conceptual framework, the researchers incorporated context and its different types as one of the research questions is to answer the changes occur in meaning due to circulation and re-contextualization. The social, cultural, political, religious, and educational contexts were used.

Results and Discussion

This section contains the analysis of relevant data. For this purpose, the tweets are analyzed according to the research questions using particular frameworks. The first hashtag used was Moye Moye. Moye Moye a Serbian phrase originally written as “Moje More” which in English means “my sea.”

Moye Moye

As far the context is concerned, Moye Moye are the words repeatedly used in a Serbian song “Džanum” (a Serbian word which means “my love”) sung by Teodora Pavlovska. The song is nearly three minutes of duration, released in March 2023 that got viral on social media in October 2023. Moye Moye is written as Moje More in Serbian language which means “my sea”. The song portrays the intense emotions of despair, pain, dejection, distress and longing of the narrator.

The adoption occurs when the phrase Moje More which sounds like Moye Moye took social media by storm in October 2023. This phrase was used by large number of media consumers in different contexts giving a new meaning to it, thus weakening the original meaning it has in its own language. Moje More is linguistically changed into Moye Moye because of the similarity in sounds of both the words as for those who do not speak Serbian the sounds feel similar though both the words have different meanings. The phrase which means “my sea”, due recontextualization it is used in such contexts that it is perceived as “hopelessness and suffering”. This is mostly taken in a humorous way fading out the intensity of emotions it has. Thus, cutting off the ties it has with the meanings.

Moye Moye is used by different tweets in form of hash tags to convey their message but a large chunk of the tweets in which “Moye Moye” has been used is in hilarious and comic way. The hashtags are analyzed by the researchers as below.



Figure 1: *Moye Moye (a)*

The tweet is about a boy whose wife ditched him after he sent her abroad on a study visa and spent 18 lacs. The caption says “Moye Moye moment: an Indian woman named Manvir kaur is facing a fraud case after being sent abroad by her husband on a study visa, costing him Rs 18 lakh” with hashtag of Moye Moye. Moye moye used here two times, one in hashtag and the other in the caption “moye moye moment”. Both have the same meanings in this context but different from the original context, the song. Here it refers to the loss and the fooling done to the boy. A serious incident has been lightened up by the using moye moye. The usage of moye moye in this context has resulted in making the incident a trivial and comic matter.

Figure 2: *Moye Moye (b)*

The tweet shows a picture which is an edited conversation between AI and a man where he had said hi to AI in response AI has asked “Hello! How can I assist you today?” and then he has asked to give him the code for ChatGPT-5 which is the latest version. And then AI has sent a picture of a man who is confused and flabbergasted what to answer him. The caption of the tweet is LOL with laughing emojis and hash tag of Moye Moye. As AI is supposed to answer many questions and ambiguities but here the man has made it unable to answer him thus the moye moye hash tag is used for making fun of AI and its incapability to answer the question. As moye moye was a part of an emotionally loaded song and in actual context moye moye refers to the sea but here, there is no connection of the original meaning with in this context but due to adoption of moye moye in various contexts now it is correct in this context. The meaning it carries has faded out and weakened. Due to the process of indexical bleaching, the phrase has lost its sentiments and feelings it had. In the original context the phrase is used to refer to the singer’s strong feelings towards love but in this context the meaning has been altered.

The data analyzed by the researcher shows that the meaning of Moye Moye has been changed after re-contextualization and it has lost the original meaning due to diffusion. The tweeters have used the phrase Moye Moye in various contexts with different intentions thus bleaching out the meaning it has in the original language. Moye Moye in various adopted contexts refers to humiliation, loss of face, and awkward moments but all these meanings are taken in comic sense. The meanings it has in the adopted context are somewhat relevant but different and changed from the original context. Most of it has been used in funny ways

which shows how due to diffusion, the phrase has lost its deep and emotionally loaded meaning.

Software Updated

Software refers to the set of programs, instructions and procedures which is used to run a computer or a system. The word software is basically used in the context of computers and mobiles for operating it. While “updated” means to renew, modify, change or make something up to date and modernize. In computers’ terminology “software updated” refers to the process and procedures where a new and latest version of software is used to run any system. The latest or updated version of software includes many features, characteristics and attributes to execute a system enabling it to work more appropriately and making it fast.

Having adopted the phrase software updated, it is circulated by many users in different contexts while giving it a new meaning, thus resulting in fading out the original meaning it possesses. On X, various users used it in the form of hashtags and as a phrase in sentences. Originally, as said earlier, software updated means renewing or modifying the old version but due to its recontextualization and spread, it got another meaning and in adopted contexts where it refers to “changing view, statement or opinion one has after a punishment or penalty and most often making a new statement or opinion which is positive and change from the previous one”. The following data collected from X shows how it is recontextualized and re-used giving birth to new meanings and continuing the process of indexical bleaching.



Figure 3: Software Updated (a)

The tweet has a photo of a TV reporter and a police constable. The reporter has asked him “kaise hain app?” which means “how are you?” and the constable has answered “Allah ka shukar hain bhai mehranubani farma kar thora rasta dejiye ga” which means “I am good; brother, please give me way.” The constable in picture is wearing a cap which is edited by someone in order to show how polite and well-mannered he is. The tweet says shareef log with a laughing face and a hashtag software updated. The hashtag refers to the incident when the TV reporter stopped the police constable for not having helmet and number plate on his motor bike, instead of answering him, he pushed and punched the reporter as well as he cursed and used inappropriate words for IG (Inspector General) Punjab and CCPO (Capital City Police Officer). The social media users blasted him with tweets and argued that he should apologize for his misconduct. Later, the IGP Dr. Usman Anwar said in a press conference that the constable has some mental illness for which he is under treatment and has taken leave from the department. Dr. Usman Anwar also emphasized that his

misbehavior is actually due to his disease. As people criticized the constable's attitude and Punjab Police's performance, therefore, the IGP presented justifications to his inappropriate behavior. In the above tweet, the constable has asked the TV reporter in a very polite way to give him way just because of updating his software. Here software updated means that the constable has changed his behavior and has adopted polite tone. Originally, software updated has different meaning but, in this context, it has got a new meaning because human beings do not have software. Due to recontextualization and adoption the phrase has cut off the ties with original meaning.



Figure 4: Software Updated (b)

The tweet is "Rahat Fateh Ali Khan software updated" here the phrase is not used in a hashtag rather it is used in a sentence with bold form. The tweet refers to the incident when famous singer Rahat Fateh Ali Khan's video got leaked by someone where he can be seen physically assaulting his servant and uttering profanities. In the video, he is asking for a bottle that has been misplaced by the servant and he is unable to find it. Rahat Fateh Ali Khan was highly trolled by the netizens for brutally and inhumanly beating his servant. After seeing public outrageous response to the video, he released a video message where he was standing with his servant and explaining the whole situation that the water in the bottle was given to him by a holy man that is why he could not control himself and he asked the public to forgive him. Software updated here refers to the sudden change in the behavior of Rahat Fateh Ali Khan which was updated by the netizens. As he was not ashamed of his act but after public taking action on it that it is unethical and illegal, and he has the fear of losing his fans and audience. He excused to the man and public as well. Here, the phrase software updated is ironically used for his harsh and subhuman behavior which is shown in the leaked and now he is saving his face and presenting a decent image of himself which is the result of the black lash that he faced. Software updated used in this context is breaking off the ties with its original meaning and gaining new meaning in this context thus increasing the productivity of the phrase.

As software updated is a Pakistani slang and it is used in Pakistani media discourse which means the change in opinion after severe wrath faced by someone. This phrase is excessively used by netizens, and they developed a new meaning out of it which has no concern with its original meaning. These bleached meanings reveal that the phrase has undergone the process of bleaching due to which it has gotten new meanings and added to the media consumers' vocabulary.

If we consider the second research question, the degree of adoption and circulation, it is considered as an important step in the spread of innovations made by mass media. Adoption, as the name suggests, adopting or taking of language and its features from media by those who use media. While circulation refers to the use in practice of those linguistic features taken by the adopters. In circulation, the media consumers (adopters) start using the phrases in different contexts with different meanings. The data collected shows how mass media facilitate adoption and circulation is analyzed thoroughly.

Absolutely Not

The first phrase “absolutely not” went viral on social media when the former Prime minister Imran Khan said it to an interviewer. Absolutely not which is defined by Cambridge dictionary as “strong way of saying no” and it can also refer to denying or refusing something. When the show on aired the phrase “absolutely not”, it went viral and Imran Khan became social media sensation after that many social media users and adopters used it in memes, hashtags and videos. This was on different social platforms like Facebook, X, Youtube etc. It was recontextualized in different contexts and with different intention, therefore gaining new colors and increasing its productivity. “Absolutely not” was directly taken by the adopters and then circulated by the adopters by using some of the existing feautres and making innovations to it.



Figure 5: *Absolutely Not (a)*

The phrase “Absolutely not” as said by iconic personality due to which it has meanings other than saying no or rejecting something. It also shows courage, devotion, loyalty and strength. As this phrase got viral and adopted by media users, it is circulating in variety of different contexts giving it new meanings. In the tweet, absolutely not is changed into knot as these both words are homophones with different meaning. Knot refers to the “tying or fastening something”; it also refers to “getting married”. Here the meaning is changed from the original phrase as the word with same sound has been used.



Figure 6: Software Updated (b)

The tweet has a picture of former Prime Minister Shahbaz Shareef tying the knot of his tie. And hash tag of “Absolutely knot” with smiling face emoji. This refers to the politically different views of chairman Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf and Shahbaz Shareef (PML-N). It shows what kind of “not” he can do. This shows the circulation of the phrase absolutely not with different intention by the user.

Islamic Touch

Islamic touch, a compound word which means “having Islamic relevance” or “to give impact of Islamic faith”. As this is a simple phrase but it got attention of adopters when Qasim Suri, the former deputy speaker of PTI (Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf), during a speech whispered to Imran Khan (chairman PTI) “sir thora Islamic touch bhi dein” which means “sir please give an Islamic touch”. This phrase was caught by many media consumers, and they directly adopted it from media and for circulation they used it in different memes and hashtags. Due to adoption and circulation the phrase bleached out and thus lead to cutting off the links with original meanings. As touch can be taken both as a noun and verb, therefore, many different meanings were given to it. Some of the tweets that shows the adoption and circulation of “Islamic Touch” in hashtags are given below:



Figure 7: Islamic Touch (a)

This tweet is about the physical appearance that is modern and sophisticated while offering Salah. This is like giving Islamic touch to the modern appearance by having beads in the hands and wearing sunglasses which are two opposite things. This shows the adoption of Islamic touch in a very different context and then circulated in ironical way in this context.



Figure 8: *Islamic Touch (b)*

As Qasim Suri the former deputy speaker first used these words therefore, this tweet is referring to some past incidents of Qasim Suri where he has been called as traitor then and now, he is giving Islamic touches to his speeches and acts. This phrase is adopted and used by different adopters according to the context of its use. The mentioned tweets show that social media is the site which helps adoption and circulation of some phrases and it also facilitates the process of adoption and circulation of new linguistic items.

Social media has always played a significant role in changing and developing languages and has a vital role in the innovation of meanings. It has positive as well as negative influences on language from affecting pronunciation to changing vocabulary it has been an important factor in language change. Language change is mostly considered harmful and has always been perceived as socially problematic. Different studies have shown how the language used in digitalized context has become a part of formal and standard conversation which has spoiled the essence and crux of languages. Apart from this social media also has impact on innovating meanings of existing language as well as inventing new meanings.

The purpose of the current research article was to study how social helps in circulation of meanings and how meanings are taken from media and then used in different contexts with different purposes which leads to the extension of the meaning. It has also explained the importance of social media in changing meanings and showed the various types of changes occur in meanings when re used or re contextualized by the people. After analysis, it was predicted that social media has taken over the control of evolving and spreading meanings. The phrases are first popularized by media consumers also called adopters and then they incorporate them into their language making it part of the language and after that different changes are made to it. Social media facilitates the adoption, circulation and diffusion of different phrases. After diffusion, different changes are made to it when used in different contexts. The results showed how the original meaning of a phrase is weakened and gains new meanings in new contexts. It also indicated that meanings when taken in different contexts, lead to indexical bleaching where the original colours of meanings fade out in the adopted context and give rise to different meanings. As discussed in analysis, where the original meanings of phrases software update and Moye Moye were different but when it became in vogue social media users gave them different meanings cutting off the links with original meanings. In some context the literal meaning is taken while in other contexts it has been used satirically diverging from one meaning to another in different contexts.

The second question which is, how far mass media helps adoption and circulation. The aim of this question was to show whether or not social media facilitates the spread of innovative terms and phrases. For this purpose, 2 tweets of absolutely not, and Islamic touch were taken. It resulted after the analysis that social media is the site where new terms and

phrases are generated, invented and innovated. Most of the time the meaning is innovated carrying the attributes of existing meaning or changed into another different meaning. The hashtags searched by the researchers show the immense role of media in shaping language and meanings through re-contextualization and circulation.

Conclusion

The analysis of the above-collected data shows that social media is a site where the same things can be taken differently. The tweets gathered by the researchers for each phrase are used by the adopters differently in different contexts giving it a vast range of meanings according to the situation of its use. This also highlights that through social media, popular phrases are adopted by media consumers and then circulated by using them in a variety of contexts. After analysis of the relevant data, it is concluded that the selected phrases underwent some changes which ultimately resulted in the change of meaning. The large corpus of the hashtags shows that these phrases are adopted and then circulated by X users known as Tweeters due to which it has been spread and resulted in the diffusion of these phrases.

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