Using English Abbreviations by Bosnian Social Network Users

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Abstract: People have been using languages for centuries to express their feelings and emotions. At first, they only used signs and later, it evolved into world languages. The most famous and the most influential language globally, i.e. English, has become a global lingua franca. It has been widely used in technology, literature, trade, politics, entertainment, music and as well as on social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, different forums and many others. Having taken into account the fact that we live in a busy world and try to save our precious time as much as possible, we often reduce our online communication by using online internet abbreviations. Even though it may be argued that the usage of abbreviations, particularly in online communication, reduces learners' communication skills, these forms of expression are increasingly used on a daily basis. This is also the case in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which aspires to follow popular communication trends. Thus, the current research has shown that the trend of frequent internet and social network usage is widespread in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well and that the usage of abbreviations is widespread across the country.

1. Introduction

We live in a busy world, and we try to save our precious time as much as possible. We often reduce our online communication by using different abbreviations. The way we use our language online significantly differs from the way we use it in our everyday speech. The online language is based on features found in written and spoken language (Crystal, 2001). Moreover, online language often contains more slang than written language (Coleman, 2012). "Netspeak" contains initialisms – a general term for acronyms, abbreviations, and multi-word phrases that are compressed into a single word (Crystal, 2001). Initialisms are a type of word formation mostly used to form the names of the organizations and scientific discoveries (Marchand, 1969). However, people began creating new kinds of initialisms that deal with everyday things and turning them into abbreviations and acronyms. Previous studies have investigated the use of new initialisms as a part of Internet speech and they have also focused on those who use them as well as on their impact on adolescent literacy.

English is taught as the first second language in elementary and secondary schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but it is also acquired informally through watching TV, listening to music, and technology involving activities (Brdarević-Čeljo & Dubravac, 2022; Dubravac et al., 2018; Kovačević et al., 2018). Still, no studies have investigated the usage of English abbreviations by Bosnian network users, especially when it comes to the relationship between the occupation and using abbreviations.

Thus, the current study aims to explore the usage of English abbreviations by Bosnian social network users. It is particularly significant as it investigates to what extent Bosnian people from different professional backgrounds follow the world's trends in terms of using abbreviations particularly in their work environment, what is their general knowledge about the most commonly used abbreviations and what is the level of their awareness of the significance of social media in general.

2. Literature Review

Due to a modern lifestyle, busy schedule and many other reasons, the majority of communication happens online through social networks or instant messaging. Taking into consideration the fact that English is widespread around the world as a global lingua franca and it has the largest number of foreign-language speakers (1.6 billion according to Crystal, 2012), the language is slowly changing and acquiring new dimensions. Thus, a new, unique language with a large number of internet abbreviations has developed.

Marchand (1969) states that abbreviations and acronyms, also known as initialisms, are used to create the names of certain scientific discoveries, organisations, offices, foundations, trade names, and personal and geographic names mainly in American English. Nevertheless, the initialisms described by this author are different from initialisms used on the internet, such as "LOL", "BRB", GTG", and others.

According to Bauer (1988), acronyms are "words formed from the initial letters in a name, title, or phrase. In addition, acronyms are different from abbreviations because acronyms are pronounced as new words and not just letters (Bauer, 1988). Even though Bauer identified only two types of initialisms, Ljung (2003) identified four different kinds. According to Ljung (2003), abbreviations are strings of letters written with capital letters, such as "DNA", and they differ from acronyms in that acronyms can only contain letter sequences in ordinary English words, as in "NATO", which is listed as an example of the acronym by Ljung (2003). The third kind of initialisms can be treated as acronyms or abbreviations, such as the word "RAF", while the fourth kind is a blend of acronyms and abbreviations, such as "email" (Ljung, 2003). Harley (2006) states that new kinds of initialisms have become popular in recent years and describes them as initialisms that are used mainly in electronic communication such as emails and instant messaging. Ljung (2003) also mentions these types of initialisms and gives the word "ASAP" (as soon as possible) as an example. Coleman (2012) states that the expression "LOL" (laughing out loud) can be an abbreviation or an acronym and this author also lists some other abbreviations used for laughing, such as "ROFL" (rolling on the floor laughing).

2.1 Internet Language and Abbreviations

In the last few decades, there were many debates about the influence of English abbreviations and English slang on the language as such. Some researchers (e.g., Thurlow, 2006) claim that the impact of the Internet on the English language is negative and that it will significantly influence its future development. This is

particularly the case with Standard English, which is believed to be endangered by the increasing popularity of internet abbreviations which negatively impact literacy.

On the contrary, some other researchers (e.g., Tagliamonte & Denis, 2008) claim that internet abbreviations allow users (especially younger ones) to express themselves better and their use reflects good command of. Hale & Scanlon (1999) even state that it is not necessary to insist on the usage of Standard English in some types of communication, because when writing an e-mail, people use the same language they use when they talk. Using English abbreviations also defines the person's individual linguistic and communicative competence. It is interesting to mention that some German linguists oppose using Anglicisms in the German language, such as Schneider (2008), who states that "German is a global language" (p.18). However, Germans still feel a pang of guilt because of the outcomes of World War Two. It has also prevented the German nation from developing a sense of pride (Schneider, 2008). According to him, lack of national pride is one of the reasons for the increasing anglicization of the German language in general. On the contrary, according to my research, Bosnian social network users only use English abbreviations when they communicate online. The majority have never considered using equivalents in the Bosnian language.

Abbreviations on social network are mainly used by young people, as investigated by Kadir, Idris and Husain (2012), who confirmed that young people are most likely to use abbreviations in their social networking. An interesting observation was made by Kinsella (2010), who claims that the internet language has become a code used by teenagers to create the ingroup feeling as it cannot be deciphered by their parents. Farina and Lyddy (2011) reported that online communication and text language became a form of youth communication in past decades and consisted of predominantly non-standard language forms. According to Blair (2004), young people are too dependent on technology, and that dependency has brought them down with poor communication skills, which downgraded their language. Still, there are some researchers who believe that the internet language does not influence teenagers' literacy and that some abbreviations such as "BRB" or "LOL" would find their way to offline language (Baron, 2011). Tagliamonte and Denis (2008) conducted a study among Canadian teenagers in which they revealed that the most commonly used abbreviation was "LOL", followed by "OMG" and "BTW". Baron (2011) conducted a similar study and found out that the use of abbreviations and acronyms was generally low. There were 121 initialisms like "cya" for "see you", and "lol".

2.2 Why Do People Use Abbreviations?

According to some studies, using abbreviations originates from the desire to communicate as fast and efficiently as possible, create a feeling of belonging to a certain group, or build social identity by using a unique language (Kinsella, 2010). According to Crystal (2001), even though this kind of Internet communication is fast and convenient, linguistic features typical for conversational discourse are absent and even spontaneous messages involve preplanning, pausing to think, and checking before being sent, the property which is not present in everyday communication.

2.3 English Abbreviations around the World

There is no doubt that the internet has connected people around the world. It is important to mention that

the English language, a global lingua franca, enables forming relationships between different parts of our planet. Interestingly, using internet abbreviations depends on the cultural background. In China, people sometimes use abbreviations to talk about government issues due to the internet regulations imposed. To conclude, every community has different motivation and reasons to use abbreviations. The expansion of internet abbreviations led to a more homogenous but still unique online culture.

English is used as a foreign language in Bosnia and Herzegovina or as an exonormative variety (Brdarević-Čeljo & Dubravac, 2022), and it is strongly present in different spheres in this sociocultural context (Brdarević-Čeljo et al., 2021; Dubravac et al., 2018). It is acquired formally through education, but it is also acquired informally, via listening to music, watching TV, and using social networks (Bećirović et al., 2018; Brdarević-Čeljo et al., 2018; Dubravac, Brdarević-Čeljo & Bećirović, 2018; Dubravac, Brdarević-Čeljo & Begagić, 2018) and young people, in particular, seem to be under a large impact of English and tend to mix it frequently with their native language in their everyday expression (Brdarević-Čeljo et al., 2021; Dubravac & Skopljak, 2020). Though there are some studies related to the usage of English borrowings or Anglicisms in this sociocultural context (Dubravac, 2016), there is a lack of studies about the usage of internet abbreviations, and the current study aims to fill in this gap by investigating the following research questions:

RQ1: Why do Bosnian social network users use English abbreviations?

RQ2: What are the most commonly used English abbreviations by Bosnian social network users?

RQ3: Do people from different professional backgrounds follow the world's trends in terms of using the internet and social networks?

3. Methodology

In order to gather data to answer the research questions, a qualitative method was used. An interview consisting of 10 questions was made to provide an insight into the participants' views on the given topic.

The research was conducted in three different places: Up Trend Marketing Solutions (an advertising company that deals with marketing campaigns, video production, creative design, digital arts and branding); Liberation War Heroes Museum (a museum dedicated to nine people with the highest war medals) and Fourth Primary School (teachers only). The participants were informed earlier that they were going to take part in this research, and all of them were very cooperative and showed interest in the topic of the research.

3.1 Participants

The participants in this research part have different backgrounds, education, occupation and age. They were chosen for the purpose of investigating whether these factors influence the answers to the questions given in the interview. 70 participants took part in this research – 30 participants from Up Trend Marketing Solutions, 20 from Liberation War Heroes Museum and 20 teachers from the Fourth Primary School in Sarajevo. Participants from Up Trend Marketing Solutions deal with web design, google advertising, social media marketing, media buying, content creation, event management, modelling and animation,

Viber campaigns and PR. All participants have a university degree in economy, law, graphic design, visual arts, management, marketing and public relations.

They communicate with clients on social media on a regular basis. They create advertisements for famous brands like VISPAK, PORSCHE, SAMSUNG, SONY, AMKO, SPRIND, etc. The emphasis is on digital marketing, which means advertising products on the Internet, including social media such as Facebook, Instagram, Viber etc. The average age of the participants from this group is 24.

Participants from the Liberation War Heroes Museum have education in history, geography, politics, and tourism, and some participants have a degree in English language and Literature and Turkish language and literature. Their job is mostly related to giving tours to the visitors in one of the three languages: Bosnian, English or Turkish, taking part in exhibitions, attending seminars about the history and culture of our country, presenting the significance of their museum to the public media (TV, newspapers). The average age of the participants is 30.

Participants from the Fourth Primary School are primary school teachers. They teach subjects such as Bosnian, English, Maths, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Art, Computer Science. Their job description is to teach the subject matter, organize parents' conferences, cooperate with their students, and attend education seminars for teachers. The average age of these participants is 42.

3.2 Materials

In order to find the answers to the research questions, an interview was conducted. It consisted of 10 questions that were supposed to lead to the answers to the questions that were asked at the very beginning of the research. The questions were simple, short, related to the research topic and adjusted to their level of English language proficiency. The participants who were unsure about their English language proficiency were given the questionnaire in the Bosnian language.

3.3 Procedures

From their responses, we could conclude that their understanding of the interview questions was pretty good, and thus their answers were valid and reliable. In order to get reliable and valid answers and to decrease the amount of stress, the interview was anonymous (participants were not required to tell their names and surnames).

3.4 Interview Questions

1. How old are you?
2. What is your occupation?
3. Do you speak English?
4. Do you use internet abbreviations when you communicate online with your clients?
5. Why do you use English abbreviations?
6. Does it have a bad influence on Standard English?
7. What are the abbreviations that you use the most in online communication and social media?
8. Are the abbreviations some kind of "opposition to a mainstream language"? Why?

9. Has the English language connected people on the internet and how?
10. Does using abbreviations improve our linguistic and communicative competence?

4. Results and Discussion

The occupations that were present the most in this research were: Manager, Public Relations Manager, Visual artist and English teacher. 60 out of 70 participants reported that they can use English at a satisfying level, as shown in the figure below.
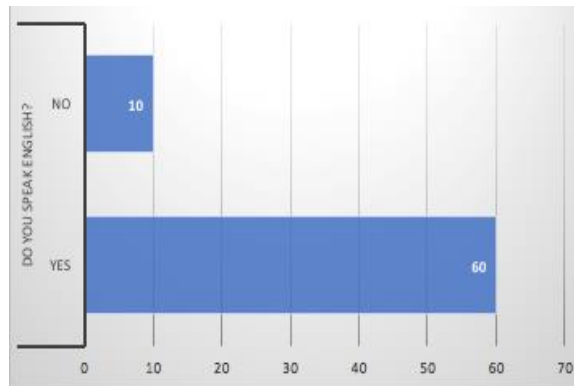

Figure 1: Participants' level of English

The majority of the participants (58) answered positively to the question: Do you use internet abbreviations when you communicate online?

Younger participants tend to use abbreviations on a daily basis when compared to older users. This is in line with the research results conducted by Kadir, Idris and Hussain (2012), which also confirmed that young people are more likely to use abbreviations in their social networking. The type of occupation plays an important role as well. Participants whose jobs required more online interaction with their clients are more exposed to abbreviations, internet slang and correct usage of these abbreviations as well, as shown in the figure below:
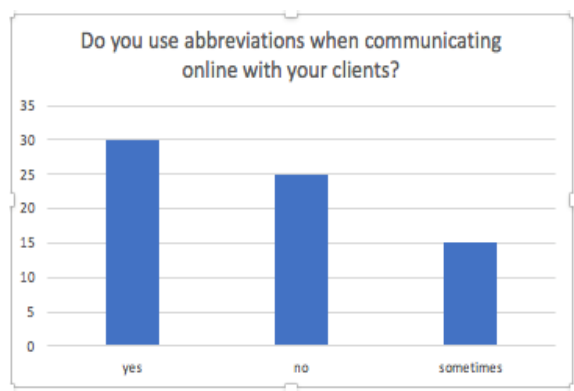

Figure 2: The use of abbreviations in online communication

The participants from the Up Trend company responded positively to this question. It was a very predictable answer because most of their communication with the clients is via social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Because of a lack of time, they use abbreviations as much as possible. This group consists of the youngest participants, which shows that there is a relationship between age and the usage of abbreviations.

On the other hand, the participants who responded negatively to the aforementioned question were from the Fourth Primary School. Their job description did not involve interaction with clients, especially online. They are limited to communication with their students and parents. Avoiding the usage of abbreviations may be related to their occupation as well, since teachers tend to use standard language more. The participants from this group were the oldest. They mostly communicate face to face.

The participants from the third group (Liberation War Heroes Museum) answered that they sometimes use abbreviations when communicating online with their clients. Like the participants from the second group, their interaction is mostly "face to face", so they are not too exposed to online communication like the participants from the first group.

The majority of the participants responded that they use abbreviations when they want to communicate in a fast, precise and convenient manner and to keep up with the latest trends in online communication. They also use abbreviations when they want to create a feeling of belonging to a particular group, which is aligned with Kinsella (2010). Moreover, they believe that using abbreviations does not negatively impact standard language unless we overuse them and use them incorrectly. They believe that abbreviations are ways of expressing emotions and increasing communicative competence. This is aligned with Baron (2011) and Tagliamonte and Denis (2008), who also stated that abbreviations and this type of language in general does not influence teenagers' literacy and it simply allows them to express themselves better.

According to this research, the abbreviations that are used the most by Bosnian users are BRB, LOL, OMG, TC, OMW, ASAP, and L8. This is in line with the research made by Tagliamonte and Denis (2008), in which they revealed that the most commonly used abbreviation was "LOL", "OMG", and "BTW".

Studies mentioned in the literature review show that English is changing every day. It has become the language of the Internet and connected people from different parts of the world. The previous studies that supported the positive impact of using English abbreviations were also connected to my research. The majority of the participants agreed that abbreviations allow language freedom, creativity and expressing attitudes. Crystal (2001) claims that using this kind of language can affect its linguistic features because it includes pre-thinking, mental pauses etc., but this is slowly becoming the most frequent way we communicate due to busy schedules, lack of time and desire to follow the world's latest trends. The participants in this research did not oppose to using abbreviations on social networks because they are universal and worldwide familiar words common to different cultures. They are a medium that allows more straightforward communication between different groups. Previous studies mentioned in the literature provided an idea of what new aspects should be discussed, the relationship between the occupation, age, background and using English abbreviations, and the general attitude of Bosnian social network users on using English abbreviations. This research has answered the research questions mentioned above, emphasising that no previous studies investigated this problem.

5. Conclusion

A general conclusion that can be drawn from this research is that Bosnian people use English abbreviations on social networks on a daily basis. They are exposed to online communication every day, and they show a high level of proficiency when it comes to using English abbreviations in the correct way. Moreover, they follow the world's trends in using the internet and social networks. Even though abbreviations can be tricky sometimes because the person we are communicating with does not know what we are trying to say because of the differences in age, culture etc., they are becoming more and more popular every day. They are used because they increase the ingroup identity, occupy less space on a page, and words can be pronounced by using fewer syllables. Regardless of the reason lying behind the usage of abbreviations, they are slowly becoming a part of our everyday lives among people in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The majority of people who use abbreviations are younger people, 18-25. Still, according to this research, even people who were not exposed to the internet at an early age learn now and try to be technologically aware as much as possible. This research has answered the questions that have not been discussed before, such as the relationship between age, occupation and similar factors and the usage of English abbreviations and to what extent Bosnian users use abbreviations in online communication. The question that remains unanswered and could be done in the future is the difference between the reasons for using English abbreviations by the Balkan countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and technologically developed countries such as China, Japan, and Finland. This research topic would provide an insight into different cultures, different views on this topic and how technological development influences the use of English abbreviations on social networks.

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