EUROPEAN ACADEMIC RESEARCH

On social injustice and word creation on the web, 2020 BLM movement in relation to neologisms

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Abstract

In the present study the topics of social injustice and word formation related to such phenomenon are discussed and analyzed. The paper analyzes how social injustice can lead to linguistic neologisms and how such words are used in the everyday language, explaining how these linguistic creations not only enrich our lexicon but also contribute to fight social injustice. In the present paper the main case of study talked about is that of the murder of George Floyd and the resurgence of the Black Lives Movement, and the unacceptable way the black community is being treated in the US. In both instances neologisms are analyzed and explained. In this paper social phenomenon of injustice are overviewed to investigate on language evolution.

Keywords: Social injustice, BLM, Black rights, Sociolinguistics, Word formation

1. INTRODUCTION

The internet is not only a tool for connecting people from all over the world using Facebook, WeChat and other social medias; it is in actuality also an incredibly rich and diverse linguistics cradle full of brand-new words that are being used every day by millions of users connected from anywhere on the globe. We could in reality say that the internet is also a greatly useful tool for researching. In the present paper we will analyze the growing phenomenon on the internet of social injustices being tackled with neologisms, by taking the popular

website Urban Dictionary and the overly used Twitter as main references for this research. We will conduct qualitative research on the words used to fight social injustice that are considered to be trending at the present moment, by only taking into consideration those term that have been created within a window of time of fifteen years, with the exception of words that had been created before that period of time but have now been re-popularized by the web. These new words will be taken from any social media platform as long as the following criteria are met: one, the word used must have one or more definition on Urban Dictionary or the said word used must have been used at least once on Twitter by someone influential or somewhat famous; two, the word used must be a new creation, either morphologically, or a total new word; three, the word that is not a neologism must possess a new semantic meaning to it. In this research we will be borrowing some of the paradigms of Critical Discourse Analysis to explain how such terms have become popular and also, we will try to explain when possible, what their etymology is based on. The current paper will mostly focus on social injustice within the realms of racism and transphobia.

2. ON THE URBAN DICTIONARY

The Urban Dictionary is an online dictionary for slang words and phrases founded in 1999 by Aaron Peckham[1], at the time still a college student at the California Polytechnic University of San Luis Obispo. Urban Dictionary was initially created as a half-serious parody of traditional dictionaries, mostly to compare the different slangs used by students in campus. In 2003 eventually, Urban Dictionary gained popularity after the website had been used by the High Court judges of the United Kingdom in a case involving two rappers who had allegedly used slang words the judges could not understand and needed translation[2]. Over the years Urban Dictionary gained increasing fame eventually reaching extreme popularity among the web, so much so that the website had been translated in

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[1]Aaron Peckham (Author of Urban Dictionary). https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/815664.Aaron_Peckham.
[2] BBC. (2003, June 6). Entertainment | Rap lyrics confound judge. BBC News. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/2966646.stm.

multiple languages and an app for mobile phone had also been created.

2.1 Structure of the dictionary

Urban Dictionary is structured as a regular dictionary, as such entries are arranged alphabetically just as in any other online lexicon; beside the more traditional arrangement, Urban Dictionary is also subdivided in categories. These categories are college, drugs, food, internet, music, name, religion, sex, sports and work. Each category contains multiple entries that seem not to be following any apparent rule or sequence, they do appear to be written randomly.

Following the categories, the next section we find is the Vote section, where registered users can vote for their favorite definition and contribute to making new terms trendy.

The website also has a store and a blog, which has not been updated since February 5th, 2013[3].

2.2 On the content of Urban Dictionary

As the name suggests, Urban Dictionary is mostly written by people who use an *urban* slang, as such the definitions found on the websites are mostly a description of a word or a phrase used in a given slang – mostly English –. Anyone can write a definition on Urban Dictionary; registration is not needed however a valid email address will be asked upon submission. By definition, the Urban Dictionary distances itself from regular dictionaries, though in most recent years more and more *regular* entries had been added to the list, enriching the website. Quality check can often be a problem, since there is no way to ensure whether the new entry submitted is valid, however other users are encouraged to upvote truthful entries and downvote untruthful ones, ensuring the reader will have access to the most reliable definition – clearly to a certain extent considering the nature of the website –.

2.3 On the usefulness of Urban Dictionary

As any other tools, Urban Dictionary should only be used when needed; being the website a dictionary for slang words and phrases, it is mostly used to understand contemporary speech and expressions people are not yet familiar with. Just like any other dictionary, Urban

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[3] Rethinking the Dictionary. Urban Dictionary Blog. https://urbandictionary.blog/.

Dictionary can be used as a tool for learning a new language, mostly English, and also a tool for linguists to see how language is constantly evolving especially in the world of teenagers, young adults and internet users. As such, it does provide a great insight for whomever might need to have a better understanding of slangs. While in many cases Urban Dictionary is mostly used for personal uses, the website had been used for legal purposes (as already stated in the previous chapter) and academic purposes, especially by linguists tracking the constant evolution of the English Language[4].

3. SOCIAL INJUSTICE, POWERLESSNESS AND THE TWITTER PHENOMENON

Social Injustice has always been part of the human experience, there is no need to sugarcoat it. Slavery, violence, nepotism, corruption, dictatorships, homophobia, misogyny, all of the above have been part of our society since the beginning of time, however as 2020 there had been resurging cases of intolerance toward minorities everywhere in the world[5,6,7]; one of the most most notable case is the one of George Floyd in the United States, ruthlessly murdered in front of camera by police officers[8], which started a new wave of Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests all around the USA. To define social injustice in a more objective way, we must first define the opposite, *social justice*. Social justice is considered to be a concept of fairness and justness in relation with the individual and society; it is measured by the distribution of wealth, opportunities for personal activity, and social privileges. When there is a disparity in one or more of these factors, we have what we call social injustice.

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[4] JSTOR. (2019, December 2019). How Linguists Are Using Urban Dictionary. https://daily.jstor.org/how-linguists-are-using-urban-dictionary/.

[5] US: Covid-19 Disparities Reflect Structural Racism, Abuses. Human Rights Watch. (2020, July 8). https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/06/10/us-covid-19-disparities-reflect-structural-racism-abuses.

[6] AU must keep momentum to end structural racism. Human Rights Watch. (2020, July 8). https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/01/au-must-keep-momentum-end-structural-racism.

[7] UN Environmental Emergency, Children Rights. Human Rights Watch. (2020, July 8). www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/01/un-environmental-emergency--childrens-rights

[8]Crump, B. (2020, May 29). The death of George Floyd was an act of murder, plain and simple | Ben Crump and Jasmine Rand. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/may/29/george-floyd-death-benjamin-crump-jasmine-rand.

3.1 Social Justice on the internet, PC and SJW's

Social justice should be regarded as one of the most important issue of our times, not only it deals with every and each of us, but also lays the basis for a fair society where everyone is equal and has the same rights. The same can be said of social media and online platforms, that had become more and more aware of minorities that keep on being treated unjustly on a daily basis. On the internet, social justice has become synonym with *PC* or *politically correct*. The term politically correct refers to the usage of language, policies, or measures that are meant to avoid offense to members of particular groups in society, mostly minorities.[9] In recent years, the term had become widely used by masses, so much so, that in the United Stated most people had said to dislike the phenomenon[10], saying that freedom of speech is more important than being *butthurt[11]*. Fascinatedly, the term *butthurt* is the very exact reason why politically correctness should be integrated in our speech and society to a certain extent. The word butthurt allegedly comes from spanking, describing the act of complaining about being offended, just like a child who is whining about having been beaten[12]. In recent years though, the term assumed a new connotation that refers to anal sex and gay men, becoming in some circumstances a derogatory term for gay people[13].

To wrap up everything that has just been said, social justice and politically correctness lead us to another phenomenon, SJW's or social justice warriors. According to Urban Dictionary, "[...] a social justice warrior is a person that uses complex serious social, economic and political issues as a way to further their own agenda by claiming they are fighting to 'correct a wrong'. Specifically, it is used to refer to people claim to be fighting for social justice but are actually validating

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[9] POLITICALLY CORRECT: meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary. https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/politically-correct.

[10] Mounk, Y. (2018, October 30). Americans Strongly Dislike PC Culture. The Atlantic. https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/10/large-majorities-dislike-political-correctness/572581/.

[11] Elfity, A. (2013, November 10). Can We Please Stop Using the Term "Butthurt"? Persephone Magazine. http://persephonemagazine.com/2013/01/can-we-please-stop-using-the-term-butthurt/.

[12] Dictionary.com. Butthurt. Dictionary.com. https://www.dictionary.com/browse/butthurt.

[13] Leventry, A. (2020, February 4). 'Bromance' And Other Homophobic And Transphobic Phrases To Stop Using ASAP. Scary Mommy. https://www.scarymommy.com/stop-using-these-homophobic-transphobic-phrases/.

their own ego, looking for special treatment, or attention.". (Urban Dictionary) The term social justice warrior then is used as derogative to describe a person who is either exaggerating or being hypocritical, at the same times, goodhearted people denouncing social injustice are being called out to be SWJ by internet trolls and people who have a different opinion from theirs.

3.2 Twitter and hashtags

As we have been seeing, social injustice is being mostly talked over the internet; one of the most prolific platforms where such topic is being discussed on a daily basis is the popular – or notorious – website Twitter. Most activists and supporters use twitter every day to discuss about social injustice. One way to assure that a topic will become relevant (trending) on Twitter, is to use hashtags (#) to facilitate the research of the topic. Recently, one of the most trending topics has been #BLM (black lives matter) who has been on and off trending on Twitter for years, having its peak last June after the murder of George Floyd. The BLM movement is the main topic of this paper and will be analyzed in the following chapters.

4. THE BLM MOVEMENT AND HOW TRAGEDY HAS LED TO WORD CREATION

Black Lives Matter (BLM) is an organized movement created in 2013 to advocate for non-violent civil disobedience in protest against the large number or incidents of police brutality against African-American people in the United States. As we have seen in the previous chapter, BLM has been trending on Twitter after recent events that led to protests and riots all over the country. The BLM has been becoming synonym with social injustice all around the world, prompting supporters of the cause to join the movement and start conversations on inequality. Some people in the US are against the movement, saying it is racist and anti-American[14], while in reality the movement only seeks for justice and equality for African-Americans. Linguistically speaking, we can explain the term by simply reminding the reader that saying *Black Lives Matter* does not preclude others'

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[14] CBS News. (2016, October 1). Rudy Giuliani: "Black lives matter" is racist, anti-American. CBS News. https://www.cbsnews.com/video/rudy-giuliani-black-lives-matter-is-racist-anti-american/.

lives, it only wants to emphasize on the black community because it is been targeted for centuries by the American society. BLM helped – unfortunately – to the creation a new word and movement opposite to Black Lives Matter, All Lives Matter.

4.1 All Lives Matter, Racial Issues and

All Lives Matter, is what conservative white America says in regard of the BLM movement. According to Urban Dictionary is "a racist hypocritical response to the Black Lives Matter campaign. At a cancer fundraiser, you don't go hold up a sign that says 'There are other diseases too!'. If a house was on fire, you don't take the firehouse and spray it on a stable house saying 'All houses matter'. That is literally what y'all are doing with this 'All lives matter' bullshit.". (Urban Dictionary) What believers of ALM movement are saying is that people should not focus on black people because other people are having a hard time too. People who state that *all lives matter*, clearly do not have a strong understanding of what is happening or what the Black Lives Movement stands for. Only in 2020 there had been several crimes towards innocent African-Americans, most of which ended up with deathly incidents. The case that sparked a new life into the BLM, is the one of George Floyd, murdered by the police for no apparent reason, unless alleged petty crime does indeed deserve the death penalty in America! Concluding this section, BLM is to be considered a term with positive connotations, people striving for their rights and for equality, while ALM should only be considered derogatory and non-informatory, having been created by people who have no understanding of what social justice actually is. We can then say that Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter are polar opposites.

4.2 George Floyd and the Many Others Still Seeking Justice

This paper's main goal is to understand how social injustice leads to the creation and use of neologisms; therefore, it is our job to also analyze the reasons behind why such terms had been created. George Floyd was an African-American man who had been killed during an unjust arrest in Minneapolis[15], Minnesota, after *allegedly* using fake money to buy cigarettes, which has not been proved yet. One of the

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[15] Bennett, D., Lee, J. S., & Cahlan, S. (2020, May 30). The death of George Floyd: What video and other records show about his final minutes. The Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/05/30/video-timeline-george-floyd-death/.

police officers, knelt on his neck for nearly eight minutes as Floyd laid handcuffed on the ground, begging not to be killed. After Floyd's death, as we have briefly said in the previous section, protests against the police and police violence toward black people spread across the United States and eventually internationally. The case prompted a social media uproar, leading to many other cases similar to Floyd's to finally gain popularity on the internet. These events of brutal violence rapidly evolved the language used on the internet, creating neologisms to describe the conditions of minorities in the United Stated.

4.3 Rest in Power

The first term we are going to analyze is rest in power[16], a word that derives from the common saying rest in peace (RIP); what we are seeing is a case of lexical substitution that maintain the initials and the acronymic form of the saying. Rest in power, according to the Urban Dictionary is a "phrase meaning that a deceased cannot rest in peace until society changes due to the circumstances of a death." People who had been murdered by abuse of power, in this case the police, cannot rest in peace because their death was unjustified.

4.4 How *The Police* Have Become Derogative in the Public Eye

When we think about the police, most of us thinks of the public force that is supposedly making people respect the law. However, in the eye of people who have been abused by them, the police became a derogative verb. On Urban Dictionary we find a few entries on the matter[17]; *"a Ridiculously Large Gang that is known for playing dirty and using the law as their excuse for their bullshit actions."; "legal criminals"; "Law enforcement. If they see someone breaking the law, they might arrest them. They are there to protect you. A small subset of police are extremely racist and are cruel to innocent black people."; "the most corrupt and useless institution that has ever existed next to education of course.".* What happened is that the institution *the police* became being seen as something the opposite of what is should be. If we take the perspective of the average African-American man, he is

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[16]Rest in power. Urban Dictionary.
https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Rest+in+power.
[17]The Police. Urban Dictionary.
https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=The+Police.

likely to get shot by the police for no reason. This negative environment transformed the semantic meaning of the word, creating a homonym with an antonymic meaning; this linguistic process is called autantonymy.

4.5 Gaslighting

Another phenomenon that is happening in regard to BLM, is gaslighting. Gaslighting, refers to the action of manipulation toward someone by psychological means reaching the point where the victim will start questioning about their own sanity. Majority of victims of racial social injustice are said to being exaggerating[18], that racism is not a real problem, that casualties are normal in a big country like America. This rhetoric not only is very toxic, but also false! Minorities, especially the black one, have been abused for centuries and there is not hiding that anymore. Gaslighting is a word that originated from a British play titled Gas Light (1938) and has been used ever since. It has recently become trending on the web in light of the BLM movement and how media have been trying to give the blame to the black community for being dangerous[19,20], not the police. This leads to the next word that have been on every social media for months, *white privilege.*

4.6 On White Privilege

White privilege is a phenomenon that sadly afflicts our world, it refers to the fact that people with a fair skin are likely to receive benefits, better opportunities and better treatment because of that[21]. White privilege has become a term to describe our reality, where white skinned people are way more advantaged and likely to succeed over non-white people. The term itself became popular in the early 2010's

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[18] Bjerstedt, R. (2016, November 17). Dear White America - Can we please stop gaslighting our black friends and family?? Medium. https://medium.com/@rachellaughing/dear-white-america-can-we-please-stop-gaslighting-our-black-friends-and-family-7370c6a6a462.

[19] Philimon, W. (2020, July 7). Black Americans report hate crimes, violence in wake of George Floyd protests and Black Lives Matter gains. USA Today. https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/07/07/black-americans-report-hate-crimes-amid-black-lives-matter-gains/3259241001/.

[20] Waller, A. (2020, June 21). Public Employees Are Accused of Vandalizing Black Lives Matter Sign. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/21/us/black-lives-matter-ventura-county-vandalism.html.

[21] Dictionary.com. What Does white privilege Mean? Dictionary.com. https://www.dictionary.com/e/pop-culture/white-privilege/.

after the first wave of BLM movement, even though the word and concept itself had existed for longer than that. On the Urban Dictionary, white privilege is defined as "the idea that being treated without discrimination is somehow a "privilege", instead of a right. Calling basic human dignity "white privilege", is a subtle way of justifying the oppression of minorities, by implying that white people have it better than anyone deserves.". The term is used nowadays with a derogative meaning, both by white and non-white people, to refer to the injustice of the phenomenon itself. The term itself became a synonym of racism and social injustice.

4.7 Black Trans Lives Matter

Lastly, the last phenomenon in this chapter will be Black Trans Lives Matter. In light of what the BLM movement stands for, we should address a minority into the minority, the trans community. Transpeople, despite their background, social status, economic power and skin color, are still being discriminated and assaulted on a daily basis. Black Trans Lives Matter is a natural evolution of the Trans Live Matter, being trans women the minority with the largest number of victims of hate crime[22].

5. CONCLUSION

We have seen how language evolution can be found pretty much anywhere, and the web seems to be one of the most prolific platforms for people to create neologism and new ways of communicating. We have now seen how social injustice can lead to language evolution and how language itself may be shaped to adapt to a certain social phenomenon. In the present study we took the examples of the BLM movement to show how language across the United Stated of America has been evolving and how racial injustice had led to the formation of new way of expressing the unjustness of the situation. Language is indeed a tool for us to use, and as such it should be used to fight social injustice in every way possible, finally breaking the walls of obsolete ways of thinking and contributing to not only language evolution but society itself.

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[22] hate-crimes-and-violence-against-lesbian-gay-bisexual-and-transgender-people-may-2009-19pp. Human Rights Documents Online. https://doi.org/10.1163/2210-7975_hrd-9800-0005

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15. Mounk, Y. (2018, October 30). Americans Strongly Dislike PC Culture. The Atlantic. https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/10/large-majorities-dislike-political-correctness/572581/.
16. Leventry, A. (2020, February 4). 'Bromance' And Other Homophobic And Transphobic Phrases To Stop Using ASAP. Scary Mommy. https://www.scarymommy.com/stop-using-these-homophobic-transphobic-phrases/.
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