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Sociolinguistic Implications of 'Cancel Culture': The Prose of Language, Power and Social Dynamics in Digital Spaces

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ABSTRACT

In particular, the language, tone, and discourse techniques of cancel culture a phenomenon mostly on social media platforms are the focus of this paper's exploration. More importantly the sociolinguistic aspects of "cancel culture." Cancel culture is defined by complicated power dynamics, social norms, and beliefs. It entails public calls for accountability, which can lead to social marginalisation. This study uses linguistic behaviours of internet citizens to explore how language is used to support and challenge 'cancel culture'. It also looks at how participants engage different discourse techniques to deal with questions of justice, morality, forgiveness, and exclusion. Principal concerns are the dimensions of language in conveying ethical assessments. The significance of tone in indicating intention and affiliation. Overall, the manners in which linguistic decisions mirror wider societal power dynamics and cultural transformations. In order to shed light on the wider implications for communication and community in an increasingly digital society, this paper will analyse the rhetoric surrounding cancellation of You Tubers and influencers in order to reveal how language not only reflects but also shapes changing attitudes towards social justice and accountability.

Keywords: Social media, Digital activism, Language, Power, and Sociolinguistics.

INTRODUCTION:

In the digital age, cancel culture has become a well-known societal phenomenon. Especially on social media platforms. Everyone is calling for celebrities and regular users to take responsibility. From remarks made or acts performed, everything is being watched. The act of openly shunning people or organisations is the main essence of cancel culture. The primary reason? Transgressing social or professional norms in any way. It generates a lot of discussion about public humiliation. It also mirrors larger social discussions about morality and free speech. According to Stanley,

(2021) cancel culture is not merely about punishment but also about reshaping cultural norms by publicly negotiating what behaviours are acceptable. However, as media theorist John Gray, (2023) argues, the speed and virality of cancelation can often bypass nuanced discussions, reducing complex issues to binary judgments of guilt or innocence. This has increasingly come under scrutiny for its potential excesses. Critics argue that it fosters a culture of fear, where individuals are not given the opportunity for growth or redemption (Nguyen, 2022; Akter MS., 2023).

Social media users, sometimes labelled as "keyboard warriors," engage in public shaming without fully understanding the nuances of a given situation (Alexander, 2021). This can lead to what Perry, (2023) describes as "trial by internet". The digital mob, amplified by algorithms, can rapidly escalate criticism, turning what may have once been private controversies into public reckonings. From celebrities like J.K. Rowling facing backlash for her controversial views on gender identity (Hess, 2020) to Will Smith's infamous slap at the 2022 Academy Awards triggering widespread debate on professionalism and violence (Sarkar, 2022), the dynamics of cancellation vary widely across contexts and issues. Language, tone, and discourse strategies contribute to the rise and fall of public figures embroiled in cancel culture controversies. By examining two key cases from 2020 to 2024, the study will investigate how public statements, apologies, and media coverage shape their trajectories of decline or potential redemption. Understanding the linguistic mechanisms behind these cancellations offers insight into the shifting cultural values of the digital age, where power, identity, and accountability are increasingly negotiated through online discourse.

Language is crucial to cancel culture since the power to 'cancel' is mostly exerted through language. Social media users participate in moral arguments and narratives. Linguistic techniques (such as hashtags, performative statements, and tone) are used to position themselves inside or against. The language used not only determines the mechanics of cancellation, but it also indicates underlying societal power systems and altering cultural norms. Individuals and groups use tone, repetition, and linguistic choices to frame themes of accountability, forgiveness, and exclusion. This paper investigates how the language features of cancel culture reflect and create social dynamics, emphasising the sociolinguistic consequences of this complicated and frequently contentious activity.

Review of Literature

The phenomenon of 'cancel culture' has sparked considerable debate in recent years. Regarding its linguistic implications a growing collection of research investigates how language and cancel-culture are co-related. Linguistic tone is the primary contributor of UniversePG | www.universepg.com

this cancellation. Along with it, discourse techniques play a vital part in this. The digital form of accountability and public shaming start from words. This review brings together a few extracts from previous works that demonstrate the context of culture, dynamics of identity and language. Language is the primary vehicle of social networking sites. It is also the primary vehicle through which power relations are expressed in these sites. Critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013; Wodak & Meyer, 2015) provides a framework for understanding how language operates within the broader socio-political contexts of power and ideology. Public engages in conversations about morality and acceptance. Social sites work as sites of discourse. They amplify these dynamics of power, ideology, culture and norm in real time. Through linguistic choices, participants engage in acts of identity construction, signalling their alignment with or against particular norms and values (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004).

The emergence of digital activism is prominent in recent years. Exemplified by movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, has changed how society approaches questions of justice and responsibility (Ng, 2020). Social media platforms can be used to quickly punish the public. It also holds organisations accountable. Marwick and Boyd, (2011) investigated how the core dynamics of popularity, celebrity, and accountability are influenced on social media sites like Twitter. The language employed in these contexts frequently relies on symbolism. Going viral for the wrong reasons is never a good idea. Hashtags, for instance, is a powerful new innovation. It gathers lengthy debates into little but impactful claims that go viral quickly (Cresci & Hall, 2020). In communication the language of public apologies has been widely studied. When it comes to scandals of public figures, media research shows how individuals use the power of words to manage their reputation. Benoit's, (1997) Image Repair Theory comes to mind when answering questions about how public figures use language to challenge or accept the narrative of cancel-culture. Mortification, shifting blame and then corrective action are some of the most common steps in a typical apology in social sites. Koesten and Rowland, (2004) discovered in their analysis of

celebrity apologies that effective apologies frequently include explicit statements of regret, accountability, and promises of remedial action. These conventional tactics might not work in the world of cancel culture, where social media amplifies outrage. The importance of word choice is very important. The internet is a highly polarised place. So, the tone of humility and authenticity is highlighted by Vásquez and Creel, (2021).

YouTube public apology videos that expressed genuine desire for growth were better received. A defensive tone or an avoiding direct acknowledgement of the mistakes will not gain the trust of the public. In digital discourse, language decisions establish a sense of community or opposition. Zappavigna, (2012) highlights the significance of "affiliation" in social sites in her extensive work. A habitual user of the internet or anyone who participates in any online discourse can be a part of the cancel culture. These people that are part of the cancel culture use words to express their alignment with certain beliefs. This is sometimes done through symbolic gestures. Retweeting or making comments that favour or oppose the cancellation of someone. The moral and social ramifications of public discourse are enacted through language performance. These discursive methods foster collective accountability. That is why the consequences of public speech are swift and intense. The collective linguistic performance eclipses fame.

METHODOLOGY:

Research Design

Using a qualitative case study methodology, this study investigated the language dynamics of cancel culture in a semi structured decorum. In two well-known incidents of cancellation from two different continents. Both had unique outcomes. In terms of wordplay the whole dynamic of these two incidents were very different. The first prominent case is cancellation of Dr. Disrespect. An American YouTuber and game streamer. The second case is the public conflict and subsequent cancelling of two well-known content creators from Bangladesh. They are popularly known as Tasrip Khan and Tawhid Afridi. This study selected these two cases of cancel-culture to provide a brief, albeit diverse cultural and linguistic context. The design of this study employed signal searches, key

phrases with hashtags and indicated numbers of views from YouTube algorithms to culminate the analytics for consideration of two said incidents.

Data Collection

For each case of these two social media incidents, a combination of the discourse analysis, public comments, immediate and long-term aftermaths were collected as evidence for a concluding paragraph. From YouTube and Twitter, the below mentioned hashtags were targeted for the first case. Posts with tags from the timeframe June 2024 to July 2024:

1. #DrDisrespect
2. #TwitchDrama
3. #DrDisrespectComeback

Reddit threads mentioned below provided important insights:

1. r/Twitch
2. r/LivestreamFail
3. r/Destiny

For the second case, public posts from Facebook and YouTube videos from the timeframe July 17, 2024 to August 19, 2024 were looked at. For a comprehensive list of YouTube videos that talked in details about the turn of events were selected with two specific searches:

1. "Tasrip khan vs Tawhid afridi"
2. "Rajakar 2.0"

In these 'searches', videos that had more than 100k live views at the time of recording, this manuscript was selected and analysed for inspecting the cancellation of these two influencers. To determine a pattern of linguistics in these social events, the study simply compiled the timelines and the escalation of words between users and creators of digital platforms. The purpose was to determine themes such as the relationship between language and morality based on public online discourse.

Case 1: The Cancellation of Dr Disrespect: The Timeline of Linguistic Escalation

Background

Gaming YouTuber and Twitch streamer Herschel "Guy" Beahm IV who styled himself as Dr Disrespect or The Doc was a leading content creator on video

sharing platforms like Twitch and YouTube. His fans adored him for being over-the-top. His hyper masculine persona, aggressive gaming style and boastful commentary made him very popular. His rise to fame meteorically. So, in June 2020, when he was suddenly banned from twitch everyone was surprised. This case study is a brief inspection of how the language of his fans and his own discourse shaped the events of his cancellation.

The Cancellation

Despite incredible popularity, Dr Disrespect's career had controversies. First time he came to fire was when he streamed from a public bathroom at that years' E3 convention. That was a clear violation of privacy laws. Despite the temporary suspension he came to the platforms of twitch and gained a massive surge in follower counts in all his socials. In June 2024 evidence emerged against him again. This time it was proven that he sent inappropriate messages to a minor. The lack of clarity intensified the online debates, but one thing was certain. This time, the discussed celebrity would be permanently banned and cancelled from Twitch. The war of words continued between his fans and his detractors.

Drdisrespects' Response

Beahm's initial response to the ban was ambiguous. In his first public statement during the ban in 2020 he tweeted "Twitch has not notified me on the specific reason behind their decision... Firm handshakes to all for the support during this difficult time." This statement highlighted the linguistic patterns typically found of the cancelled celebrity. Using cryptic words to shift the blame and engaging his own community as a shield. His use of the phrase "firm handshakes" maintained his in-character masculinity and integrity. His words were a signal of the refusal to break character, even when he was being probed and monitored.

The second time he was being banned, he issued another statement which went: "Listen, I'm obviously tied to legal obligations from the settlement with Twitch but I just need to say what I can say since this is the internet. I didn't do anything wrong; all this has been probed and settled, nothing illegal, no

wrongdoing was found, and I was paid. Elden Ring Monday."

This was a clear indication of not breaking character. From this post, words and phrases like "wrongdoings" and "didn't do anything wrong" appeared. This time after this post, his words shifted from being cryptic to accusatory. He not only refused to take responsibility for his actions, but also accused twitch of illegally terminating his contract.

Public Reaction

Right after the 2020 ban, people were split into two camps. His supporters launched hashtag #FreeDrDisrespect. Posts tagged with this hashtag focused on his contributions to the gaming industry. They also called out twitch for its lack of transparency and content moderation. The language here framed him as a victim. A victim of corporate betrayal and injustice. Throwing the popular but unconventional guy under the bus. Supportive language was used by his fans in the gaming community. On the other hand, people called out his past and present actions. Phrases like "probably deserved it"; "shady"; "suspicious" were thrown out in the air. One can argue that most of these chants online from the anti-group were speculative in nature.

From the latest ban however, His cancellation was unanimous. Everyone was done with Dr Disrespect. Online magazine Rolling Stone published evidence of him texting a minor. The reddit thread r/Destiny by the user named 'Cottonapapero' uploaded a screenshot of Dr Disrespect admitting to the allegations. This time his tone shifted completely. If we look at the words, He used phrases like "willing to accept responsibility" + "want to apologise to everyone". However, the most interesting line in the entire post was "I've always been up front and real with you guys on anything that I can be up front about..."

At this point, he lost all his credibility. The linguistic escalation was gradual. In the first step silence was used as a strategy. After that came mystery and teasing. Finally, defiance, resilience and then acceptance and apology. The silence created a room in the echo chambers for public discourse. People disputed whether he deserved it or not. After enough

evidence, the outcry for his cancellation was so intense that his own gaming studio company decided to cut ties with him.

Case 2: Tasrip Khan Vs Tawhid Afridi Shifts of Power and Culture through the Medium of Language

Background

Two popular content creators from Bangladesh, were the target of cancel-culture. The first one was Tasrip Khan and the second, Tawhid Afridi. After the cancellation, both of them issued public apology posts. The difference between them however was that Tasrip's Facebook post was well received and people accepted his apology. On the other hand, Tawhid Afridi's apology video on YouTube was deemed tone deaf, false and unauthentic. He failed to generate genuineness in his words. The feud between these two internet personalities shows the shift of power and culture in a significant movement in Bangladesh. The political landscape of Bangladesh changed forever during a period of student-led activism against an autocratic government. The controversy between influencers erupted with nationwide conflicts. The two Youtubers reflected broader social divisions. However, the clash of ideologies can be broken down by the discourse of these two individuals and the surrounding backlash from general public in online media.

Recovering Public Image with Words

During the revolt, Tasrip Khan initially took a cautious approach. He only partially supported the students in their fight for political changes. Many people questioned his true loyalty because of this confusing stance. But his views changed as the political landscape did. Following the revolt, the students triumphed and the authoritarian government overthrown. Tasrip Khan immediately changed his tone. He modified his public speeches to conform to the established power. His past hesitation was enough to save him from a straightforward cancellation. By changing his tone and using emotionally charged words he regained his public support and was initially forgiven. It is important to note that people on the internet referenced his earlier interviews. Where he accused Tawhid Afridi of manipulation and even

bribing. He later confirmed these past allegations and stood true to his previous words.

Spurious Apologies Never Work

Conversely, Tawhid Afridi publicly opposed the student movement. He supported and campaigned for the government. When it put an end to the revolution, he issued an apology video which simply fell short. His words contradicted all his past actions. So, his own followers are the first to cancel him. Many in his audience were put off by his views, especially the young people who had spearheaded the revolution. Tawhid's opposition made him an easy target for cancellation. After the students won, netizens swiftly and unrelentingly denounced him, asking that he take responsibility for his alleged betrayal of the cause of the people. His exclusion was made the more certain by his refusal to modify his discourse to fit the new political and cultural context. As of now he deleted all his socials and is in hiding.

Language of Power, Slogans of Cancellation

The public's opinion of both influencers was greatly impacted by the change in power. Following the revolution, people of the internet' vocabulary reflected these ideas. The students' win symbolised a larger cultural movement towards justice, democracy, and reform. The whole dynamic of power was changed overnight. Along with it, changed the words of lots of celebrities. But as this is the age of the internet, anyone can record anyone. So, twisting words and trying to change stance to gain cultural and social favour was stopped. Social media turned into a battlefield of language. Where people who actively supported the previous administration, like Tawhid, were demonised. Others who showed flexibility, like Tasrip, were given the chance to turn their ways. The themes "justice," "freedom," and "betrayal" that characterised the revolution were crucial in determining the outcomes of these YouTubers. Tawhid's refusal to do so in time resulted in his ongoing criticism. He changed his words but it was all too late. Nobody believed him. He actively supported the autocracy because it benefited his ventures. His words lost all credibility and meaning to the general public on social media. But Tasrip's ability to change his tone to align with the new cultural standards eventually led to his forgiveness. Content creators who failed to

vocalise their support were dubbed “rajakar” 2.0. A famous derogatory term in Bangladesh that literally translates to “traitor”.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

Language As a Tool of Digital Retribution

One characteristic that distinguishes cancel culture is the emergence of "keyboard warriors". Folks who participate in online disputes from a distance. This anonymity is provided by the internet itself. Their moral assessments on the web popularises a theory that we need to boycott a celebrity. These users frequently use digital platforms to make their voices heard. Their lens focuses on people or groups that they believe have crossed moral limits. Keyboard warriors are powerful because they can quickly influence public opinion. Framing stories about justice and accountability through language on social sites multiplies exponentially. In this situation, language is a weapon of influence. It becomes an active instrument that may cause significant, long-lasting changes on the internet.

Cancellation of well-known YouTubers is a prominent illustration of this phenomenon. It doesn't take long for influencers with massive followings to be "cancelled" overnight because of contentious actions. Most recent example of this long list of YouTuber cancellations is the case of “Dr Disrespect”. A mega streamer in twitch and a popular gaming YouTuber cancelled almost instantly. With serious misconduct allegations such as lying to fans and inappropriate text messages to a minor. Rapid and frequently harsh kinds of social punishment are made possible by the internet. The coordinated public conversation that drives the internet's response can make anything go viral. A simple hashtag at the right time can generate millions of hits on search engines. Participating in this process are entire communities of watchers and content creators who use language to criticise, delegitimize, and call out the person's platform. Viral outrage puts pressure on platforms and sponsors to break their ties to the cancelled brand or individual. In plain words Sociolinguistics deals with society and language. The dynamics of cancel culture has a lot of moving parts. Sociolinguistics offers a clear and comprehensive lens to understand these parts. As a field that studies how language reflects and forms social identity, power UniversePG | www.universepg.com

dynamics, and cultural norms, it should provide insights into how cancel-culture functions both individually and on a collective level. From the tone to the vocabulary, if we look at the language of people who engage in discourses online, we find evidence of a pattern. This pattern revolves around a couple things almost always. The underlying social issues of morality, inclusivity and authority. It is hard to determine who starts a cancellation of a celebrity because it is always instantaneous and communal. When thousands of people petition online concurrently it creates a chain reaction. The rapid spread of cancellation campaigns further highlights the role of language in it. One hashtag or a short story online is all it takes to enforce exclusivity by a community. Platforms like YouTube and Twitter bear thousands of proofs, whether it's a retweet or a comment on a video.

Language as a Reflection of Cultural Change

Phillips and Milner, (2017) looked at hostility that occurs in online communities. People often use language to ridicule conventional values online. This discord is similar to cancel-culture's language, which frequently uses irony, sarcasm, and comedy as linguistic tactics. There are tensions between established power structures and evolving cultural norms. This is particularly prominent in relation to problems of privilege, race, and gender. All of which are made evident by such language usage. Digital discourses sometimes challenge and sometimes support gendered power structures. Banet-Weiser, (2018) connected this power structure to larger movements in misogyny and popular feminism. The vocabulary employed in these discussions frequently functions as a battleground. Rapidly changing cultural norms are negotiated through the words of the internet. Public personalities get "cancelled" for offences that represent the change of expectations of social justice, gender, and race. Cancelling starts by question marks. People call out questionable behaviours with their own words. It reflects the change they want to see in society.

Humour, Apology, and Echo Chambers

The internet is sarcastic. People who comment on ‘things’ usually take refuge in irony and humour. There is always a poll going on. Some folks are

against the cancellation. Some are in support of it. People use sarcastic comments or pictures known as memes to deflect or enforce cancellation. The usage of memes in cancel culture is of huge significance. Memes are usually sarcastic in nature. By ridiculing someone they hate or supporting someone they love. The satirical language of these posts or comments made in social media sites amplify the cancellation process. Vice versa, there is another dimension against this humour. It's the discourse of apology and forgiveness. The apology videos or posts of celebrities who are cancelled, usually have the same typical linguistic pattern. This typically includes phrases like "I am sorry for..." or "I take full responsibility for...". The acknowledgement of wrongdoing is the primary step of this discourse. This shows that they are aware of the limits they have crossed. Sometimes however along this dynamic of apology and forgiveness the cancelled celebrity might downplay their actions. This is also done through the magic of language. "A mistake", or "a misunderstanding" might be the most common euphemisms.

In plain words social media platforms are the online echo chambers. Websites like Facebook, X, which was previously known as Twitter, Instagram and even video sharing sites like YouTube and more have comments sections. There are thousands of comments posted in a popular thread within seconds. The idea of the echo chamber comes from this. If a person encounters an information that can be damaging to a celebrity or a brand, all he has to do is comment about it. And it goes on a chain reaction. As a result the echo chambers amplify these tweets or comments or posts. It builds a group. Like minded folks who are commenting on the same issue come together. They enforce their thoughts and cancellation efforts. Any cancellation can be polarising. Some people want to have the celebrity back, some don't. What these echo chambers do is escalate the emotion of the citizens of the internet.

Digital Mob Justice & Content Moderation

The fallout is handled in a typical way most of the time, as mentioned earlier. The linguistic pattern remains the same while the actions vary from person to person. The linguistic landscapes of the cancel-culture often include shifting the narrative. This UniversePG | www.universepg.com

enables the person in question two things. Minimise the harm and appear sensible in the future. If we want to discover how language works as a medium of mob justice we need to find signal words from the above-mentioned echo chambers. Language is a virtual form of violence here. Of Course, people cannot physically hurt each other on the internet but their words can do worse than that. For example, when three thousand folks collectively dislike your public contents or send you hate messages it creates a massive social and psychological impact. Reputational harm for a content creator is oftentimes irreversible. So, the question of content moderation comes into play. When people on the internet collectively dehumanise an individual, the platform becomes powerless to intervene. So they must act when it is not too late. Proper guidelines, terms and conditions, what can be posted, what words are banned, what you can show and what you cannot, are some of the major things a content creator in that particular website should always keep in mind.

CONCLUSION:

The difference between successful and unsuccessful apologies after cancelling was not only their words, but also their actions. The linguistic choice of these two similar posts however proved that cancel culture is not always final or unforgiving. Also, language plays the single most important part in the success or failure of the apology. Cancel culture reflects deeper cultural anxiety and reform in digital age, but it also proves that word choices mostly shape public opinion on the internet. Language and culture maintain the balance of society. The tension between individual autonomy and collective judgement is historic and ancient. Social media just mainstreams the process through the phenomenon of cancel-culture. Depending on the longevity and permanence there are also some cases of good comeback stories. The discourse of such stories can yield valuable insight. While this study explored the language of the cancelled individuals and the words of the people in digital spaces, further and future endeavours can be and should be taken to explore different aspects of cancel culture. Dimensions like legal and ethical dimensions of cancel culture. The psychological impact of the cancelled individual on popular platforms can be another example everyone should look at.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION:

Given that this study involves publicly available data from digital spaces, there were no major privacy concerns. Even after that, care was taken to make sure no real names or aliases were mentioned. To protect identities of the users, when analysing comments, their names were made anonymous. The study adhered ethical standards of online and internet research. No personal information was misused. All data referenced from Facebook, Twitter(X), Reddit and YouTube were publicly available.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST:

There is no conflict of interest in this research.

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