

A SMOL PERSPECTIVE: INTERNET SOCIOLINGUISTICS AND THE BORDER BETWEEN WRITTEN AND SPOKEN WORD

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Written language and spoken language have often been thought of as two separate entities that exist on either end of a continuum. In Western society in particular, the written word has often been given the most weight out of the two oppositions, with its creation being the place where we demarcate the end of the prehistoric era. The written word is lauded as a more perfect and idealized version of the spoken word. One is not able to stumble over their own words when they can simply rewrite a sentence. However, since what is written is but a physical reincarnation of what is uttered aloud, it is not hard to imagine that one would influence the other. This assumption makes the idea of a separation between written and spoken language not as clear cut as originally suggested. The internet, in its relatively recent creation, and its users complicate this idea even further, and demonstrate how the line between these two means of communication are more muddled than previously understood. I will be using the term “*smol*,” a memetic word that was created on solely the internet, as a lens to further explore this concept.

I will also be discussing *smol* in terms of a framework similarly used by Dürscheid and Frehner to analyze aspects of computer mediated communication in emails.¹ This framework is broken down into a two dimensional mode, the first of these being the medial dimension. This dimension is the literal way in which language exists, broken down into a dichotomy of language that is graphic (written) and phonic (spoken). The other aspect of this framework is the conceptual dimension that is independent of the medial dimension. This second dimension lies on a continuum of whether a text is conceptually oral or conceptually written. Conceptually oral text is that which is more unplanned and is associated with a degree of privacy and high emotional familiarity between the writer and their audience. An example of this being an active text string someone may have with their friend. Conceptually written text, on the other hand, is quite the opposite. This kind of text is planned, public, and has a low degree of emotional familiarity between the writer and their audience. An example being a work email that is sent out to every employee in a company.

As stated previously, the conceptual dimension is more of a continuum than a strict divide between two characteristics, which implies the possibility of a text having characteristics of being both conceptually oral and conceptually written. Research that highlights this concept was conducted by Wikström in regards to Twitter users and how people often describe themselves as tweeting in similar ways to their regular speech. In his research, Wikström analyzed how orthographic and typographic conventions were used to convey how Twitter users ‘talked’ online, and how they employed

¹ Christa Dürscheid & Carmen Frehner, “2. Email communication.” *Pragmatics of Computer-Mediated Communication* (2013): 47, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110214468.35>.

particular orthographic patterns to imply a specific way of pronunciation.²

Similar research has been done that focused on WhatsApp messages of university students in Kenya by Miriti. Like Wikström, Miriti found that the students would spell words how they would pronounce them, regardless of whether that was the correct pronunciation or not. This was often done to the point of exaggeration if they wished to show emphasis.³ Miriti noted that these text-based interactions also reflected several observable phonological speech processes.

While these different analyses of conceptually oral written interactions are very illuminating on the various practices and processes found within this form of communication, they do not encounter a situation wherein a conceptually oral word is created in text before it has the possibility to be spoken. This is what sets the stage for the focal word of my own research and what that means in relation to the proposed framework.

In conjunction with this, I will talk in depth about the particular environment that created *smol*, the microblogging website Tumblr (<https://www.tumblr.com>), since I posit it as essential to its creation and as a way of answering the call for more diverse and qualitative research done in relation to this website.

History of Smol

Smol itself lies on the conceptually oral dimension of the previously introduced framework. This fact of the matter is part of what has allowed for it to be so easily used beyond

² Peter Wikström “I tweet like I talk: Aspects of speech and writing on Twitter.” (PhD diss., Karlstads universitet, 2017), 87.

³ Gervasio Miriti, “Social Media Discourse of Chuka University Students on Whatsapp Platforms,” (PhD diss., Chuka University, 2019), 70.

the original context in which it was created and even enter some vernacular speech. Throughout this research, I curated a definition of *smol* as follows:

/smɒl/

1. Adj. small and cute, used to refer to a living being/representation of a living being in a cutesy, almost babying, kind of way, particularly if they are comparatively smaller than others or have some kind of endearing quality to them.
 - a. “That puppy is so *smol!*”
 - b. “He’s such a *smol* boi”
2. N. a *smol* - someone or something that has the characteristics of being *smol* or referring to someone or something when it was rather young.
 - a. “Is this a *smol?*”
 - b. “When I was a *smol*”

The origins of *smol* reside in a Tumblr post from January of 2015 that describes the main character of BBC’s *Sherlock* series, Sherlock Holmes himself, as “very smoll”.⁴ The short line of text that comprises the entirety of the text-post, a post type on Tumblr that is primarily written text, includes what is the patient zero of this word. This small typo soon reached far beyond the original context of referring to this specific character into a much wider frame of referents and becoming its own meme. While this is not the first instance that a meme has been created from a typo (Vásquez, 2019), nor will it be the last, few have had as large of a ripple effect as *smol*.

⁴ Frougpepe. Tumblr, “*looks at sherlock* it’s very smoll,” January 5, 2015 (6:01 PM), <https://frougpepe.tumblr.com/post/107254602188/looks-at-sherlock-its-very-smoll>.

With the height of its use being between the years of 2016 and 2017, it is speculated in part to have been kick-started by a *Buzzfeed* article titled “20 Baby Animals Who Are Too Smol.”⁵ *Smol* also garnered a large following with those who used it adhering to the pattern set by the original context, using the term to refer to specific characters and also celebrities. These people, primarily those who were male or male presenting, were very popular among specific fanbases and the fans would use *smol* like a term of endearment. It was a way of calling them/their character well-loved or adorable in a rather ‘cutesy’ manner. That specific characteristic was concentrated in the word itself, so that some people would adopt the use of *smol* instead of ‘small’ as part of their curated internet presence. It was a user’s way of making themselves look cute and somewhat desirable, although this use was not as common as what was previously mentioned.

In its observed use, there are several different collocates commonly associated with *smol*. The most popular preceding collocates were various kinds of intensifiers meant to exaggerate how *smol* something was, such as ‘very,’ ‘too,’ and ‘so.’ A preceding collocate that does not follow this pattern is actually demonstrative of how characteristics of the word *smol* are easily disseminated and applied to other words. This word is *tol*, which can be found both before and after *smol* in the group phrase ‘*tol* and *smol*.’ *Tol* is a deliberate misspelling of the word ‘tall’ made to mimic *smol*, and has similar connotations to *smol* where the one given this label is seen as cute and tall instead of cute and small. It is essentially an alternative phrasing to calling someone a ‘gentle giant.’ The group phrase ‘*tol* and *smol*’ relates to a popular character dynamic, wherein two characters have a noticeable height difference that makes the pairing more appealing to fans.

⁵ Tanner Greenring, “20 Baby Animals Who Are Too Smol,” *Buzzfeed*. May 8, 2015, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/awe-somer/send-them-back>.

The most popular collocates that follow after *smol* were also the most popular collocates for the word overall, ‘boi’ and ‘bean.’ ‘Boi’ is an alternative spelling to the word ‘boy’ and is used similarly to the overall use of *smol*, but is very specific to male people and characters. While ‘bean’ has similar connotations, it has a more extensive history as the most popular and well recognized collocate of *smol*. It grew popular a few months after *smol*’s inception and was cemented when a popular music artist of the time, Tyler Joseph, posted on his Twitter “i am a bean.”⁶ This acted as a public acceptance of the nickname that his fanbase had given him, and many comments of the Tweet attested to the fact that he was, in fact, a *smol* bean.

The use of *smol* bean followed this pattern of being a term that was given to others, as a way of saying that the speaker found them cute or endearing in some way. It was still used predominantly towards male/male leaning people and characters. This collocate pairing had more of an implied sense of infantilization than the others previously discussed. In that same vein, there were more instances of this collocate pair being used in a self-referential way than the other collocates. Those who used this term for themselves wanted to appear more cute and infantilized themselves to do so. Interestingly enough, some of the people who used this term for themselves appeared to be more feminine leaning sex workers who leaned into that ‘cuter’ presentation to be more appealing to a wider range of clientele.

Part of the way in which I collected these definitions and various collocates was through an anonymous survey that I sent with the intent for the responders to be people who had or currently have Tumblr blogs. This was so that those who took the survey would be people who were able to ob-

⁶ Tyler Joseph (@tylerrjoseph), “i am a bean,” Twitter Post, June 26, 2015, 1:25 PM, <https://twitter.com/tylerrjoseph/status/614484662241624064?lang=en>.

serve *smol* in its original environment, since it is such an essential part as to how *smol* was created. This would also give a sense as to how the definition might have changed over its current seven years of existence.

I received a total of 109 responses, the majority of which responded between September 27th through 29th of 2021. The major demographics of the survey were cis-women between the ages of 18-25 (each comprising around 45% of the total responses). All but two of the responders still actively use Tumblr, and around 41% of them have had their account for seven or more years. This would mean that a large percentage of the responders would have seen *smol* being used in its beginning, peak, and modern usage.

The definitions that they all gave could be summarized into two distinct categories, those having to do with the physical characteristics of the referent and those that describe behavioral characteristics. The most common of the physical characteristics was that whatever was being described as *smol* was “small but in a cute way” (all quotations in the remainder of this section were taken directly from the survey). Similarly, many of the responders noted a sense of roundness when *smol* was used, one in particular described the word itself as being “rounder than small.” A sense of youthfulness in the subject was also something commonly found. These characteristics are not entirely limited to the actual physical nature of the subject, but can relate to the more behavioral definitions in that they can give off a certain ‘energy.’ One of my favorite responses described the energy as being “that of a tiny woodland creature.”

The other behavioral traits described in the responses saw the subject as cute, vulnerable, or innocent, demonstrating how endeared the speaker was to the subject. In relation to these traits, many responders also cited how there was often an innate desire to protect the thing that was given this description and saw it similar to affectionate diminutives, like the Spanish suffix ‘-ita/ito.’ In this sense, there is often a

degree of decontextualization in order to make the subject fit the idea of *smol* in the speaker's mind, so that the use of the word "refers more to the speaker's view of the subject rather than the subject's actual size or temperament." Showing an example of this decontextualization, one of the responders even used the actor who plays BBC's Sherlock, Benedict Cumberbatch, as he is not physically small and, according to the respondent, "not a great person." While many of the responders saw *smol* as this positive diminutive, they also noted its use in a more sarcastic light that instead pokes fun at the addressee and mocks the aura of naïvete they have about them.

One of the questions that I included in the survey asked the responders when and where they first saw *smol* being used. Since this word has been in circulation for a good number of years, it is understandable that not everyone who answered was able to accurately recall when they first encountered this word. Those who did, however, placed it into a time range between the years of 2015 and 2017, which reflects the research I did previously on the initial appearance of *smol* and its peak usage. While some could not recall *when* they first encountered *smol*, they could recall *where* and *how*. A majority of the responders noted that *smol* was often used to describe young and/or small animals, particularly birds, dogs, and cats. As speculated before, it was also used in reference to characters from various forms of media (anime, *Star Wars*, cartoons, comics, and characters from a trifecta fandom known as SuperWhoLock). Celebrities also comprised a large portion of *smol*'s encountered use, some responses noting the particular use of 'smol bean' relating to Tyler Joseph and the band Twenty One Pilots.

The responders were also asked to select the most popular collocates of *smol* that I had gathered from my previous research on the matter, with the option to put in other collocates that they had seen that I was unaware of. Their responses to this question was how I truly concluded what the

most popular collocates of *smol* were and gave me an idea of which ones I should still look into.

Methodology

Before getting a collective definition from the survey, my first method of research surrounding *smol* was laying the grounds for the timeframe in which it was made. I did this through a specialized Google search that allowed me to get results from specific sites and within a specific timeframe. This allowed me to observe that *smol* first appeared on the internet between December of 2014 and December of 2015. I also used this method when researching specific collocates and group phrases related to *smol*. I was primarily focused on its appearance in relation to Tumblr, as that is where the word originated and the site I would use as most of my focus for this research. I did, however, look into *smol*'s use on different sites, such as Twitter and Pinterest. This method did not prove to be useful in relation to these sites, with unreliably dated material or material with no dates at all. I thus elected to not to include the Pinterest or Twitter results of this particular method.

The second method I used was looking at Tumblr itself and using its own tagging system to see how *smol* and its collocates are used in the present day, showing the full extent of how it has grown beyond its original use through the interplay of various voices using and readapting *smol*.

Tagging itself is “the practice of creating and adding usergenerated labels for the purposes of annotating an online resource.”⁷ The search system on Tumblr utilizes this by first showing results of the specific keyword tagged in the post. As one further scrolls through the search tag, one may find

⁷ Elli E. Bourlai, “‘Comments in Tags, Please!’: Tagging Practices on Tumblr,” *Discourse, Context & Media* 22 (April 2018): 46, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2017.08.003>.

more examples of only the text in a post containing the keyword, rather than any of the tags. When I put *smol* in the search bar, the usual rotation of animals and primarily male characters showed up. Looking further down, this is where I encountered the use of *smol* in relation to female leaning sex-workers.

A primary issue with this method is that it is very difficult to look back through years of posts in this search feature, especially if it is a regularly used tag. The closest one can get with this method is looking at a tag on a specific user's blog and seeing how that individual has used it over time. I did something similar with the blog that made the first *smol* post by looking at what is called a blog archive, which shows every post that a blog has made and dates when they were posted. I did this in order to check that the original post was legitimate and in character for what the user was posting around the time of its creation, as it is possible for Tumblr users to edit their previously made posts.

I also heavily utilized the IWeb digital corpus once I had a firmer understanding of *smol* and the various collocates that accompany it. Most of the results that showed up in this research were between the years of 2016 and 2017, and showed users from various different sites using this word. They were primarily from forum sites where the users used the word to describe themselves or as part of their writing style and as a descriptive adjective for original characters they had made for collaborative roleplaying purposes. This shows how *smol* managed to grow beyond its original environment (Tumblr) until it became commonplace on other websites through the users mimicking and adopting the word into their own vernacular, much like in spoken English.

I later used the IWeb corpus to look at the context of specific collocates based on their popularity from the survey I had created. One main issue with this method was that I was unsure as to how to regulate my results so I only received them from a specific website. Another was that I could not hide results where 'Smol' was listed as someone's

last name, as I received many results that included a Dr. Smol and mentions of their own research.

One of the bigger contributions to my research was the anonymous survey that I created through the use of Google Forms. The survey itself was eight questions long, taking less than two minutes to fill out, and included 5 demographic based questions and 3 questions pertaining to the responder's view and understanding of *smol*. The demographic based questions asked the responder's age (put into specific ranges of years), gender, if they have a Tumblr, and how long they have had it. The *smol* related questions asked them how they defined the word, when and how they first observed it, and a multiple selection question that asked them to pick which collocates they most often saw with it.

Since I wanted my responders to primarily be people who have had a Tumblr account within the last seven years or so, one of the ways that I attempted to 'spread the word' about it was posting the link to the survey on my own Tumblr account. I soon realized that this method would not benefit me well in the long run, as the following I did have on the website was very small and not very active. In an attempt to better market my survey, I decided to send it in an ask to several blogs that I knew were more popular than my own. Only one gave me the most success, which was an anthropology themed blog that I had only started following recently before starting my research. Since linguistics itself is a subfield of anthropology, I suspected that there may be those who followed the blog or other blogs that the user was in contact with who might be interested in my research.

The second way in which I distributed my survey was posting the link in a server on Discord, "a voice, video and text communication service."⁸ The specific server I am a part of, associated with a primarily educational YouTube

⁸ "Our Story," Discord, Accessed August 8, 2022, <https://discord.com/company>.

channel, had a discussion channel dedicated to language and linguistics. I received permission from one of the server moderators to post my survey and then waited for people to respond. I sent the survey to both the Discord server and the anthropology Tumblr blog on Monday September 27, 2021. I certainly was not expecting to get as many responses as I did, but I am extremely grateful to all who took my survey.

Now, keeping in mind the specifics of where I sent my survey, I do see the possibility of how this affected my results. The two places that I sent it to had people who were familiar with linguistic terminology, and that was reflected in several of the responses I received. Some used the term ‘diminutive’ specifically in how they defined *smol*, while others structured their response in a similar format to a dictionary definition, giving one way to define it and then listing another. But, even in those with less formal responses, the definitions that all of my respondents gave were fairly similar across the board.

Formation and Tumblr

As I mentioned in my methodology, I myself have had a Tumblr account for a considerable amount of time. Because of this, the stance of my research is something that can be described along the lines of emic as opposed to etic. The nature and culture of Tumblr is something that I am familiar with and that has in part been a boon to my research, as it is a culture that I understand more so than the other academics who have conducted the previous, albeit limited, research on this website.

Tumblr itself is known as a micro-blogging platform, wherein each user has their own blog and personalized feed or ‘dashboard.’ It is primarily driven as a website based on user generated content, as the dashboard only has content in it when a user decides to follow another blog or a tag. In this sense, the user sees the content that they in particular want to see. Content that one regularly encounters, or a ‘post,’ can

come in a variety of different formats. One that I mentioned earlier is a textpost, another potential style of formatting is a photo or photoset, as well as videos, and sections of audio. All of these formats are able to be ‘reblogged’ so that a user can share it with the other accounts who follow them and include it as a part of their own blog. One is able to add onto or comment on another post, but users more often forgo this method of interaction by instead putting such comments in the tags of their reblog.

I previously mentioned tags in terms of their technological function as a way to associate certain keywords with a post. However, there is also a more discourse related function of tags that was created by the users. To avoid making posts seem ‘cluttered,’ users instead put their comments in the tags of a post since there are no tag limits and this action does not change the appearance of the original post.⁹ This created two distinct categories of tags; keywords and comments, comments being further subdivided into opinions, reactions, and asides.¹⁰

With the nature of commentary based tags, I sought to use this to my advantage when I was first conducting my research in regards to the first *smol* textpost. To my disappointment, there had been no additional tags on the first post including *smol* that might have given additional context or expressed more of the author’s opinion at the time. I also noticed that the early days of *smol* showed it as being more of a reactionary-comment tag. People were expressing their excitement or disbelief over how *smol* something was. It has since shifted to function more as a keyword tag, but there are those who still use it in a reactionary manner.

Part of the appeal of Tumblr that works in conjunction with the way its user interface is constructed is how it al-

⁹ Bourlai, “Tags,” 47.

¹⁰ Ibid., 47.

lows users to have pseudonymity. Pseudonymity, as described by Vásquez in *Language, Creativity and Humour Online*, is when someone is only known by a pseudonym or, in this instance, a username.¹¹ Part of how Tumblr functions is that, unless you choose to release information about yourself, no other users on the website will know who you are outside of the space you have constructed for yourself, seemingly counterproductive for what is technically a social media site. This selected anonymity is inviting to people,¹² as it can allow someone to indulge in interests or activities that one may not normally feel comfortable sharing with others. It is the unique freedom to make any kind of post you like before sending it out into the aether in the hopes that someone sharing a similar mindset will respond to it. Naomi Baron further described this kind of communication in *Alphabet to email* as a “broadcast dialogue,” since it is a way of communication that implies multiple recipients and can allow others to freely respond. It is “broadcasting that invites conversation.”¹³

This conversation is often initiated through the creation of memes, which is an integral characteristic of the micro-blogging platform. Properly defined by Richard Dawkins as a unit of cultural transmission through recreation and mimicry,¹⁴ two traits also common in the spread of new linguistic patterns,¹⁵ modern memes are somewhat understood

¹¹ Camilla Vásquez, *Language, Creativity and Humour Online* (1st ed.), (Routledge, 2019), 88, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315159027>.

¹² Naomi S. Baron, *Alphabet to email: How written English evolved and where it's heading*, (Routledge, 2002), 233-234.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 230.

¹⁴ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, (Oxford University Press, 1989).

¹⁵ Laura J. Batterink & Ken Paller, “Picking up patterns in language: Implicit learning helps guide the acquisition of linguistic rules and regularities,” *Psychological Science Agenda* (2016).

as a widespread inside joke that exists on the internet. Many memes in past years can be traced back to originating on Tumblr, *smol* being one of them, which has led to Tumblr being described as a “meme hub.”¹⁶ Memes can quickly become popular throughout the site itself before they spread onto different platforms, creating intertextuality between different websites.

A second facet of Tumblr content is that which comes from the unique subculture of various fanbases or ‘fandoms’ that have flocked to the site, which can be attributed to the alluring pseudonymity associated with it. A user is able to indulge in a broadcast that is raving about a favorite character or actor of theirs and receive affirmations from others who share similar opinions. It creates a positive feedback loop, as the user’s own excitement about something can be amplified by another who shares the same sentiments.

This fact in turn relates to the context in which the original *smol* post was made and its association with a unique fandom, briefly mentioned with the environment in which people associated the word. The era of 2015 Tumblr was at the peak of a fanbase involving three separate shows called SuperWhoLock. This was comprised of the CW show *Supernatural* and the BBC shows *Doctor Who* and *Sherlock*. The subculture surrounding this fanbase is something that could become its own point of research, but the most important aspect of this fanbase for my own research is how people viewed the characters. Those who were fans of any or all of these shows adored the main characters and their respective actors. The fans hoped for their continued wellbeing in their respective stories, especially when emotionally trying situations happened to them. The fan response to this was often with a point of sympathy or pity towards the characters that ultimately culminated in wanting to protect them and *ensure* that emotional wellbeing. This emotional investment is what

¹⁶ Vásquez, *Language, Creativity and Humour Online*, 89.

leads to the iconic decontextualization of a subject described as *smol*.

One cannot deny the large influence that this has had on the well known or perceived definitions of *smol*, which have stuck with it far beyond a discussion of BBC's Sherlock Holmes. People far beyond this original audience adopted *smol* into their regular vernacular, both on and offline. This cultural phenomenon of the decontextualization of characters alongside Tumblr's position on the framework is a key part of how *smol* was created in the first place.

In terms of the framework, Tumblr rests on the graphic, conceptually oral end of the spectrum. This is due to the fact that the users of the site, and bloggers in general as stated by Puschmann, commonly use a personal voice for their posts.¹⁷ The way that they write can be assumed to reflect the way that they speak, so that text can thus be emulated in spoken vernacular. This characteristic, as well as the understood culture of Tumblr itself, was not only able to create a unique environment in which *smol could* be created, but one where it *thrived*. It became such a widespread term that *smol* is somewhat of a trademark of Tumblr vernacular. Part of why *smol* was able to spread so virally was due to the nature of it being considered a 'meme word.' *Smol* and its collocates were mimicked and reimagined as it spread throughout the internet, as is the usual pattern for memes. As well as the word itself, a specific characteristic of *smol* was reproduced in other words in a similar manner. This characteristic being the central vowel changing to an 'o.'

The Ablaut

This vowel change, known as an ablaut, from an 'a' to an 'o' is the attribute that demarcated *smol* as a special

¹⁷ Cornelius Puschmann, "4. Blogging," *Pragmatics of Computer Mediated Communication* (2013), 86, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110214468.83>.

form of small. The various definitions and associations of the word that were discussed previously, primarily the roundness of it, became attached to that specific vowel change as it began to spread beyond *smol*. The association with roundness is also reflected in the vowel itself. The letter ‘o’ is graphically represented as being rounded in the form of a small circle. ‘O’ is also described as phonetically round due to the shape that one’s lips make when forming the sound. The coinciding of these specifically rounded aspects helps to carry the inherently round aspect of *smol* to other words that adopt this ablaut.

One of the first examples of another word adopting this aspect of *smol* was its subsequent antithesis, *tol*. Other imitations are similarly in an adjectival manner, such as ‘chonk’ (chunk) and ‘lorge’ (large), to show an exaggerated roundness of the subject existing in tandem with the original meaning of the adjective. The o-ablaut has also been used for nouns to employ this sense, such as ‘shork’ (shark) and ‘borb’ (‘birb,’ a memetic diminutive of bird).

This association of meaning through the o-ablaut is due to known characteristics of English orthography, namely the way in which people learn to associate sound with particular letters.¹⁸ In the instance of *smol*, the sentiment of the original meaning of the word is also attached to this letter. The uncommonness of the o-ablaut was one of the reasons why those who first saw it were able to make the implicit connection with *smol*, especially after *tol* was created in complement to it. This fed into the ease at which this ablaut has spread across the internet until it became an “unspoken rule of internet dialect that rounding a word intensifies the

¹⁸ Richard L. Venezky, “English Orthography: Its Graphical Structure and Its Relation to Sound.” *Reading Research Quarterly* 2, no. 3 (1967): 75–105. <https://doi.org/10.2307/747031>.

implicit fatness of a subject.”¹⁹ The phonetic association of the letter was still present in the words that were created with it. In the instance of *smol*, since it was first created in text, this allowed it to be transferred to spoken vernacular on the basis of the previously existing ‘o’ sound. As the ablaut spread with the associated meaning remaining unchanged, it grew into what could be called a new English diminutive.

The memetic style of its diffusion is reflective of how spoken English linguistic trends and words spread. Primarily they are demonstrative of how these new patterns are encountered in specific contexts and the speaker makes informed observations on how and when they occur until it is adopted into their own vernacular through adoption and readaptation.²⁰ Their own mastery of the pattern leads to further spread and dissemination, until more and more people adopt it into their own vernacular in a similar manner.

In an internet context, this process was accomplished through the creation of text and photo based memes that utilized *smol* before it was adopted as part of regular internet vernacular and users’ personal typing styles. Memes were the perfect medium for the first step of mimicry as memes and meme phrases are easily transferred to other memes.²¹ The internet was the perfect sandbox for users to experiment and play with *smol* before it led to the creation of the o-ablaut. This experimental play-style of language dissemination then created a specific in-group comprised of those who knew this pattern and found it humorous.

The evolution of *smol* being used in individuals’ regular, text-based speech patterns was reflective of this same process happening in spoken English. It is essentially a text

¹⁹ Asher Elbein, “What’s the Difference Between a ‘Borb’ and a ‘Floof?’” *Audubon*, March 10, 2020, <https://www.audubon.org/news/whats-difference-between-borb-and-floof>.

²⁰ Batterink & Paller, “Picking up patterns in language.”

²¹ Vásquez, *Language, Creativity and Humour Online*, 28.

focused variation of something spreading by word of mouth, or in this case word of post. Through this process, *smol* eventually bled over into these same individuals' spoken vernaculars as well. *Smol* had the ability to spread across both kinds of communication, where it would go through the same process of observation and mimicry in phonetic speech.

The way that *smol* was able to spread in a similar pattern on both fronts further highlights how thin the boundary between written and spoken word actually is, as it rests on the conceptually oral end of the graphic dimension within the proposed framework. The spoken based process of how linguistic patterns spread translated well into the realm of written word. *Smol* and the o-ablaut are representative of that process reflecting back on itself as written becomes spoken.

Conclusion

The nature of *smol* is that it was created in an environment that emphasizes conceptually oral writing. As opposed to being two separate entities, spoken and written concepts worked in tandem to create this word and further still to cause the phenomenon of the o-ablaut spreading, an internet linguistic characteristic that is still in use today. The phonetic and typographic roundness of the letter culminates together into the associated meaning of the original word that was subsequently able to escape far beyond its original environment. The spread was through a process of adoption and readaptation of the o-ablaut into different words, something that is quintessential to memes and new spoken linguistic pattern formation. *Smol*, and the words that came after it, were not restricted to an *only* written existence in this sense. It was essentially able to spread on two fronts, first through the written and then in spoken by those who had encountered it in the written. The aspects of the spoken and written dichotomy are not diametrically opposed to each other, but are instead able to build and feed off of each other. This feedback loop is

what leads to conceptually written aspects applying to spoken word, and conceptually spoken aspects applying to written word.

The creation of *smol* was further encouraged by the polyvocality that was involved in its creation. The author of the original Tumblr post had a specific audience in mind during its creation and employed socially acceptable behaviors in terms of discussing well loved actors and characters. Those who were part of that original audience and the specific in-group that was intended to receive meaning from the post were the initial launch point that caused for *smol* to spread and imitate those spoken linguistic patterns. The interplay between the multiple voices of the original post and its audience laid the initial basis for written and spoken aspects to have their own dialogue through *smol* and the o-ablaut.

This is a truly unique example of a more recently researched phenomenon that demonstrates how spoken language is a constant influence on how language is written. It is a fundamental part of its formation and shows how these are not two inherently separate aspects of language. Future avenues of research that I would propose based on this, firstly, would be further looking into the early form of *smol* and seeing when/where the second 'l' initially dropped out and what spurred this change.

Secondly, based off of how *smol* bled over from written to spoken word, I also believe that it would be beneficial to this field if research was undertaken to look into how people pronounce words that have been created purely in text, and what previously known patterns they are basing their pronunciations off of. It would be rather interesting to follow how people may pronounce these words differently and what conclusions can be drawn to explain why the word in question is pronounced in various ways.

And lastly, the incorporation of the bimodal, continuum based framework used in this research is something that I believe should be included in further research that covers similar topics of computer mediated communication. This

framework, also, should be used with the sentiment that the written and spoken word are not separate entities. This is essential to any future research endeavor that uses computer mediated communication as its main focus, as I believe this proposed thought process can lead to more insightful understandings of this and similar topics, as I have demonstrated here.

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