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A Graphological Appraisal of the Social Media Language of Students of Selected Higher Institutions in Kwara State, Nigeria

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Abstract

In today's world, the impact of technology on language and communication is so fundamental that hardly can a day pass without one form of influence or another. This is particularly true of the (online) media which is now available in nearly every household. This study, therefore, examined the variability of linguistic choices on a technology-based, interactive platform – the social media. Data for analysis were extracted from two Whatsapp groups – ECONOMICS CLASS OF 2017, University of Ilorin and 200LABEN, Kwara State University, Malete. The data were obtained from different groups to avoid a narrow view of the Social Media Language (SML). The theoretical model for this study was Leech and Short's (2007) stylistic pluralism which allows for analysis at three distinct levels at which stylistic choices can be made. Some linguistic and stylistic categories from Leech and Short's checklist were equally adopted in the analysis. The study showed that individuals make varying choices of linguistic usage at the levels of graphology, morphology and syntax. The divergence, of linguistic usage on the Whatsapp groups, from Standard English equally reinforces the arguments of various scholars that view style as the choice of the individual. It concluded that the distinctive linguistic features of the SML are functions of the interlocutors' linguistic background, social identity, age, as well as the compact and real-time nature of the social media.

Keywords: linguistics; stylistics; graphology technology; media; society



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1.1 Introduction

Language is a universal phenomenon; an indispensable possession of the human race. The concept of language is so intriguing that many scholars have sought to know its origin. Max Muller, Sir Richard Paget, Revesz, George Boeree and a number of other linguists are known for their intensive research on the origin of language. They came up with plausible theories about this (the origin of language) such as the “ta-ta theory” – which posits that language began as an unconscious vocal imitation of body movements, the “hey-you! theory” – which holds that language developed out of man’s need to make interpersonal contact, the “eureka theory” – which states that language was consciously invented by man.

All these theories allude to the fact that language is a human phenomenon. Several linguists reinforce this idea in their definitions of language. One of the earliest definitions is that of Edward Sapir who asserted that language is a “purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced sounds”. Quoting Hall, Alagbe & Joseph, 123) opined that language is “the institution where human beings communicate and interact with each other”. This submission implies that language is the major instrument of communication in human societies, and in fact, defines what it means to be human.

These definitions point out that language (spoken or written) is inseparable from the individual or group of people that use it. As Crystal (15) observed, “if you study language you study people [and since] people are as different as chalk from cheese...their language will be different too”. The variation in the linguistic means employed by individuals as a result of their divergent choices is known as *style*. Style, however, is determined partly according to the situation of discourse. This, according to Igboanusi (19), is because language, as “part of human social behaviour...operates within a wide framework of human activity”.

Crystal (17) opined that an individual’s choice of language use (style) may be constrained by factors such as his/her regional background, social background and technology. He observed that “the internet allows people to express their individuality in ways that were inconceivable a few



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years ago”. Indeed, the internet has revolutionised our world in untold ways as it is evident in the way we use language in both written and spoken form. There is no denying the fact that informal features of the social medial language can now be found in formal situations such as in academia. The advent of the social media, in particular, has greatly influenced the way language is used. This is because human speech is influenced by linguistic as well as social conventions including the revolutionary trend in the social media.

Language use on Social Networking Sites (SNSs) has taken a distinct form so that it is now often designated as a language in its own right. Considering Bloch and Trager’s (as cited in Alagbe & Joseph, (123) definition of language: “a system of...symbols by means of which a social group cooperates”, this notion is quite correct. Just like other specialised languages – language of journalism, language of diplomacy, language of medicine, pedagogical language – language use on SNSs is characterised by certain peculiarities that form its register. This concept, for the purpose of clarity, shall be hereafter referred to as Social Media Language (SML). This trend (that is, the use of the SML) permeates all levels of human society. Even on SNSs (such as facebook pages, Whatsapp groups, 2go chat rooms) set up by and for members of academic institutions, the SML rather than “standard” English appears to be predominantly used.

In view of the foregoing, it becomes pertinent to explore the basic features that distinguish chats on SNSs from “normal” everyday conversation. It is equally essential to find out if the SML is only an expression of individuality or if there is any form of conformity or uniformity in style among interlocutors in each group under consideration.

1.2 Towards the meaning of Stylistics

Traditionally, stylistics is known as the study of literary texts using formal linguistic tools. This, in fact, is *the* point of contention: linguists and critics have been in an age long debate as to whether style is a linguistic phenomenon or a literary peculiarity. “Literary scholars feel dismissive of the utility of linguistic methods to literary interpretation, and linguists, on the other, are sceptical and hence reluctant to attach any value to literary criticism” (Style and Stylistics, np).

As Kolawole (1) observed, this basic disagreement can be attributed to the variation in their modes of operation. While linguists centre their analyses of literary texts on the language in terms of



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sounds, lexis and syntax, the literary critic emphasizes value, purpose and aesthetics Kolawole further notes:

To the literary critic, an attempt to weigh literature on the scale of linguistics amounts to intruding on the threshold of literature. Descriptive linguists, on their part, do not see any need to apply linguistics to the appreciation of literature because linguistics need not go beyond the sentence level. (p.1)

In spite of this friction, some linguists are of the opinion that literature and linguistics should be seen as mutual complements. Jeffries and McIntyre, (3) quoting Sinclair, for example, stated that “no systematic apparatus can claim to describe language if it does not embrace the literature also” (p.3). As proposed in the 1958 Indiana Conference – as conference organised to bring this dispute to terms – stylistics is only “interdisciplinary” in a way that it draws tools and concepts from linguistic and literary theory. It therefore follows that stylistics, it would seem, rather than displace the core tenants of literary criticism seeks to unify them with linguistic ones. The application of linguistic models to the analyses of literary texts has therefore boosted the critic’s work rather than hamper it.

This trend of thought has led to an alternative criticism – that stylistics is concerned too much with language and not enough with literary concerns. In reaction to such criticism, Halliday (as cited in *Style and Stylistics*) posited that

linguistics is not and will never be the whole of literary analysis, and only the literary analyst - not the linguist - can determine the place of linguistics in literary studies. But if a text is to be described at all, then it should be described properly; and this means by the theories and methods developed in linguistics, the subject whose task is precisely to show how language works. (p. 7)

Simpson (2) equally asserted this. He noted that in stylistics, primacy of place is given to language because “the various forms, patterns and levels that constitute linguistic structure are an important index of the function of the text”. He further observed that “while linguistic features do not of themselves constitute a text’s ‘meaning’, an account of linguistic features nonetheless serves to



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ground a stylistic interpretation and to help explain why for the analyst, certain types of meaning are possible.” It is argued that stylistics has in fact made up for some of the inadequacies of literary criticism: stylistics applies linguistics to literature in the hope of arriving at analyses which are broad, rigorous and objective. Khuller (2014) put it this way: “stylistic tools help validate intuitions of literary critics to evaluate a piece of work and generate objectivity around the conclusions due to the consistent and precise nature of the linguistic arguments”. Given the obvious significance of employing linguistic theories, models or tools in literature, stylistic analysis is considered a necessary complement to what many stylisticians regard as the impressionistic and implicit nature of much work within literary criticism (Semino, 2002).

Arguments of this nature have helped to reconcile linguistics with literary studies in stylistics and, to some extent, made the discipline well defined and established. Nowadays, it has become popular to simply define stylistics as the linguistic study of style in literature without generating much contention (about the bringing together of language and literature). Wynne (1), for example, posited that “Stylistics is a field of empirical inquiry, in which the insights and techniques of linguistic theory are used to analyse literary texts”. Similarly, Khader (11) defined stylistics as “an intensive study of literary text on an advanced level....”.

However, as the above definitions show, there is a predilection, among some stylisticians, for the analysis of literary texts. This prevalent study of literature in stylistics is reflected in some of the alternative names that stylistics sometimes go by – literary linguistics, critical linguistics, literary semantics, literary pragmatics, poetics, et cetera (Jeffries & McIntyre, 2010). This preference for literature may be due to the fact that stylistics began as a method of studying the language of literature. According to Jeffries and Leech (9),

Though the origins of stylistics are in the literary field, and many stylisticians even today consider literature their field of study, it rapidly became clear that the techniques of analysis being developed in this hybrid discipline were as applicable to non-literary texts as to literary ones. There is, therefore, in principle, no restriction whatsoever on the kinds of text that may be subjected to stylistic analysis



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Stylistics has, therefore, come to apply to a range of other types of texts outside its traditional boundaries. Presently, the range of texts with which stylistics concerns itself has extended from an initial preoccupation with literary texts to include any kind, spoken or written. Khullar (2014) made the assertion that stylistics is devoted to the study of “the linguistic choices made by speakers and writers, especially, *but not exclusively*, in literary texts as well as other non-literary contexts such as advertisements, film and media, political speeches, casual conversations, etc.” Nørgaard, Busse and Montoro (2010) equally observed that the range of discourses that stylisticians study has expanded considerably. Stylistics deals with non-fictional forms – academic writing, news report, advertisements as well as non-printed forms – TV and pictorial advertising, film, multimodal publications. It is in line with this submission that the present study examines the Social Media Language (SML).

However, since the focus of this study is on the graphological features of the data under study, the following definition of graphology by Leech as quoted in Alabi (181) is adopted as the working definition. According to her,

graphology transcends orthography; it refers to “the whole writing system: punctuation and paragraphing as well as spacing”. ...It entails “the foregrounding of such Graphological features as quotation marks, ellipses, periods, hyphens, contracted forms, special structures, the full stop, colon, the semi colon, the question mark, the dash, lower case letter, gothic and bold print, capitalization, small print, spacing and italics.

1.2.1 Social media language

A common trend running through all definitions of social media is a blending of technology and social interaction for the co-creation of value (Carr & Hayes, 4). Kaplan and Haenlein (10) offered a definition that encapsulates all three features. According to them, social media are “a group of Internet-based applications that contribute to the ideological and technological foundations of web



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2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (p.61). Web 2.0 is a term that refers to “Web applications based on user-centred design that encourages interaction and information sharing between users” (Awadallah, (2). Lewis (as cited in Carr and Hayes, (5) posited that “*social media* simply serves as a label for digital technologies that allow people to connect, interact, produce and share content”.

The widespread impact of social media is felt globally. Essentially, it contributes to every aspect of human life – business, education, politics, journalism, entertainment, advertising, social interactions, etc. The global influence of social media is on the increase on a daily basis partly because of the astronomical increase in human population, the need to keep up the pace with the fast growing world, and the advancement in technology. Communication is at the centre of the human society. It is part of the fabric with which the society is woven. Evidently, no society survives without communication.

The impact of social media is notable in the area of business where it is used to market products, promote brands, connect to current customers, foster new business and achieve a number of other feats. Since the advent of social media, online marketing of products and services has been made easier. In spite of its numerous advantages, however, the social media has its downsides. Business empires have crumbled through encounters with swindlers and fraudsters on social media.

The impact of social media in the area of education is indubitable. Although here, its impact is, supposedly, more negative than positive. In Ekwue and Osamor’s (176) work – Influence of Social Media on the Academic Performance of Business Students in Colleges of Education in Delta State – for example, it is argued that an addiction with social media results in poor academic performance in students. Contrary to their argument, however, social networking facilitates learning. As Okoro (222) remarked, “electronic communication and social networking are effective and useful tools in the process of teaching and learning and have increasingly improved the quality of students’ learning outcomes in higher education in recent years”. He further (229) noted that the social media is advantageous to learning in that, “the system encourages and supports students’ active engagement, collaboration, and participation in class activities and provides a process of information dissemination in a unique method that yields measurable results”. For many students social media have provided the right platform for a good collaborative experience in an environment that is free of tension.



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1.3 Methodology of study

Data for analysis were derived from the Whatsapp groups of two selected higher institutions in Kwara State – University of Ilorin, Ilorin and Kwara State University, Malete. The corpus material were randomly selected from chats dated October to November, 2015 on the Whatsapp groups – ECONOMICS CLASS OF 2017, University of Ilorin and 200L ABEN, Kwara State University. For each of the chat items, the distinctive stylistic elements applicable were analysed.

Leech and Short's notion of stylistic pluralism was adopted as the theoretical framework for this study. The model holds that "language performs a number of different functions, and any piece of language is likely to be the result of choices made on different functional levels" (Leech & Short, (24). Leech's model of style allows for three distinct levels (semantic, syntactic, graphological) at which stylistic choices can be made. In this study, analysis is at the levels of graphology, morphology, and syntax.

Data analysis

1.4 Graphological features

Graphology is one of the most important aspects to be considered in an analysis of chats on Social Networking Sites (SNSs) generally and Whatsapp, in particular. The students in the Whatsapp groups under consideration have employed various graphological devices for diverse purposes. The graphological features identified in the chats include spelling, punctuation, and capitalisation, employment of low case letters instead of upper case letters, contracted forms and emoticons.

1.4.1 Spelling

The chats under consideration are characterised by marked spelling of words. Words are spelt in a unique way or pattern to achieve diverse purposes. In some chat items, the following are used:

'M', 'u', 'r', 'k', 'kk', 'D', 'c u', 'u c', 'E', 'n', 'B', 'Y', '9z', '10q', '4', '@'

In the above examples, words are shortened in order to minimalise space. For instance, 'M' is used instead of 'I am'; 'u' is used to represent 'you'; 'k' and 'kk' are both used in place of 'okay'; 'D' stands for 'the'. 'C u' replaces an entire phrase – 'see you'; 'u c' replaces 'you see'. 'E', 'n', 'B',



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and ‘Y’ are letters representing the prominent phonemes in ‘he’, ‘and’, ‘be’ and ‘why’, respectively. In ‘9z’ (nice), ‘4’ (for), and ‘10q’ (thanks), figures are used to replace letters. The symbols ‘@’, ‘&’ and ‘%’ stand for ‘at’, ‘and’ and ‘percent’, respectively. In some cases, words are spelt in a way that reflects how the users pronounce them. Examples include:

‘wu’	–	/hu:/ as /wu/;
‘beta’	–	/’betQ(r)/ as /be’ta:/;
‘rili’	–	/’ri:Qli/ as /ri’li:/; and
‘fyt’	–	/faIt/ as /fa:jit/

These variations are indicative of the sociolinguistic background of this particular group of users.

1.4.2 Onomatopoeic spelling

Onomatopoeic spellings in the analysed data perform various functions such as expressing dissatisfaction (Ahh) and gaining attention (Heeyy). Some are indicative of excessive laughter, e.g. hahahahaahaha, kikikikikikikikikikikikiki. ‘Hmmm’ signifies pondering. ‘Haaaaaaaaw’, which succeeds a threat, is used to express mock sympathy for the decoder.

‘Ehen’ represents the sound made by Yorùbá speakers to show satisfaction or contentment with something.

1.4.3 Inventive Spelling

Lack of uniformity in the way the Social Media Language (SML) is used throughout the data is an indication of high tendency for individualism at the expense of collectivism. The following examples are found throughout the chats:

‘PISS’, ‘pwendzz’, ‘cummin tomoa’, ‘apun’, ‘eida’, ‘du’, ‘owva’, ‘chicha’, “sae”. Note that PISS in the above extract is used as a pun on the name ‘Peace’. Hence, the meaning of ‘liquid excretory product’ (urine) instead of ‘tranquillity’ is achieved. Some of the inventive spellings are used for



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fun. E.g, 'sae' instead of 'say', 'du' instead of 'do', 'sista' for 'sister', 'eida' for 'either', 'cummin tomoa' for 'coming tomorrow', 'apun' for 'happen' and 'chicha' for 'teacher'.

Others are used to represent a way of pronunciation. For instance, 'pwendzz' represents the way the word, 'friends' is pronounced by Hausa speakers of English. The expression, 'owva' combines two words – 'how' and 'far'. Most of these forms of spellings are used to stir the interlocutors' emotions.

Punctuation

In the data under investigation, there are marked cases of punctuations such as question marks, exclamation marks, and elliptical periods. Each of these shall be examined one after the other.

1.4.4 Question marks

The use of question marks is preponderant in the data. In some instances, the question mark is used to perform its primary function of marking interrogative expressions that require answers. Illustrations can be drawn from both Whatsapp groups:

'Lol...vikky, where art thou??'

'What tym is it?'

'Has ur lec come?'

'Re u cummin tomoa?'

However, the question mark is used to perform other unusual functions such as:

❖ Reprimanding or condemning actions

'shey u dey see pple??'

'or re u putting words into her mouth?'

'Na fyt?'



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‘Says wu?’

❖ Making requests

‘Pls can you send me MTN #1, 000?’

‘Please what is ur Advice????’

‘Abeg, any info about Remedials??’

❖ Asking rhetorical questions

‘Y u just hate me nw?’

‘Wat is ur worth ayanfe?’

‘U think 1000 naira is easy?’

‘Me ke?’

‘U ar happy dat I lost my ATM card?’

❖ Humour

In the following instances, multiple question marks are used for emphasis as evident in these examples: ‘Crious??’, ‘Wia????’, ‘Rili????’, ‘Wu else?????????’

1.4.5 Exclamation mark

Exclamation marks are used to show emotion. However, in most instances in the data, exclamation marks (especially multiple one) are used to show emphasis. Illustrations are drawn from both Whatsapp groups as presented:

‘This BVN is annoying!’, ‘I dey vex!!!’, ‘Okk!!!’, ‘Thanks!!!’

The exclamation mark is also used to poke fun as in the examples below:

‘Vickiee up nepaaa!!!’, ‘Abg no look him behaviour.., plss hep!!!’



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In some instances, exclamation marks are used to draw special attention to a discourse item. Examples include:

‘Important information 4 all 200level!!!!’

1.4.6 Elliptical Periods

In the chats, the periods do not perform the typical function of showing omission. In most cases, they are used to express afterthoughts, as in the following:

‘O ga oo.... Shey na cad plenty reach dis 1’

‘Abg no look him behaviour..., pls hep!!!’

In the example below, ellipses are used to intensify the threat:

‘U beta return d card or else....’

It is also used to indicate prolonged laughter as in:

‘Lol.....kash watin apun’

1.4.7 Punctuation Minimalisation

Grammatical punctuation rules are relaxed on Social Networking Sites (SNSs). In the chat items under consideration, there are several instances where full stops, apostrophes and question marks are dropped. Illustrations can be drawn from the following:

‘I love the girl not the cylinder’

‘i want to make photocopy’

‘Just pay ur journal fee b4 Monday’

‘I tink i saw but u wia wit ur pwendzz’



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‘God bless u my sista’

Throughout the chats, avoidance of full stops, as seen in the examples above, is preponderant. In some interrogative sentences, question marks are omitted as indicated below:

‘U didn’t come to sch today abi’, ‘Can we start nw’, ‘Lol re u denying urslf ni’, Vicky, what are u doing this weekend,’ ‘If its not concoction, its now what’, ‘Hw many z my own body’, ‘By who’

In some contracted forms, apostrophes are omitted as in the following examples:

‘cnt’, ‘its’, and ‘itz’, ‘Shes’, ‘didn’t’

The avoidance of full stops, question marks and apostrophes, as illustrated above, show a sense of urgency with no time for pausing. It is equally indicative of lack of concentration.

1.4 Discussion of Findings

This study has focused on a graphological appraisal of language use of interlocutors on two Whatsapp groups – ECONOMICS CLASS OF 2017, University of Ilorin and 200L ABEN, Kwara State University. In the course of the study, certain discoveries, that shed light on the nature of the SML, were made. The SML was discovered to be characterised by deviant linguistic forms. Interlocutors on the Whatsapp groups examined are given to making unique choices at various levels of linguistic usage (graphology, morphology and syntax), though only graphology is analysed in this study.

The analysis reveals that there are several instances of deviant spelling. In some cases, numbers and letters are combined to make meaning. Examples include 10q and 9z which stand for ‘thanks’ and ‘nice’ respectively. There are equally instances of onomatopoeic spellings where words are spelt to imitate natural sounds and noises. Users of the interactive platform examined equally exhibit their creativity through inventive spelling of words. Instances of deviant punctuation are found throughout the data. The users employ punctuation marks for purposes that are different from the norms. Question marks, for instance, are used to reprimand, to make requests and to create a sense of humour. Rather than play their standard role of showing emotions, exclamation



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marks are used to show emphasis, poke fun, draw special attention to discourse items, etc. In some cases, punctuation rules are completely ignored.

Furthermore, features – such as capitalisation and employment of lower case letters instead of upper case letters –are used to achieve *de-automatization*. Given the informal setting of the discourse examined, there is the preponderance of contracted forms. Another instance of *de-automatization* found throughout the data is the use of emoticons. Emoticons are used to convey emotions which would otherwise need several words to express or sometimes, actions which words cannot express. The use of emoticons creates an illusion of live, face-to-face conversation. This is impossible in other forms of non-internet discourse.

The communicative platform itself, as a context of language use, places certain constraints on the users. Language use on Whatsapp is tailored to the compactness and real-time nature of the platform. In several instances, words and phrases are truncated in order to save space and time. The Whatsapp is also programmed to provide spelling suggestions of abbreviations, acronyms and initialisms (e.g. LOL, sch, tym, lec, etc.). a set of emoticons, which make the expression of emotions possible, are equally programmed into the application. Also, it automatically changes a particular combination of punctuation marks to emoticons.

In the data, there are few instances of uniformity in linguistic choices. In several instances, users spell the same words differently (e.g., Vickiee, Vicky and Vikky are used as diminutives of the female given name, Victoria). Divergent choices are also made in aspects such as punctuation and capitalisation. Some users choose to obey punctuation rules while others completely ignore them. In similar vein, the first person singular pronoun, 'I' which is capitalised (as required) by some users is written in lower case by others. The avoidance of punctuation and capitalisation rules shows a sense of urgency with no time for pausing. It equally indicates lack of concentration. Since this diversity of choices may be observed both within and across the two Whatsapp groups, it may be argued that the SML is only an expression of individuality (as against conformity). The selected higher institutions of learning – represented by the two Whatsapp groups – are not in conformity with the same rule in their use of the SML. The multiplicity of language functions found in the data reinforces Leech and Short's (2007) idea of *stylistic pluralism*.

1.5 Conclusion



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Language is human-specific. Hence, the human race continues to revolutionise it. There are not only divergent languages; according to culture, nationality or geography, technology has lately become a factor that creates distinctiveness in language use. This technologically influenced language cannot be denied as it is fast becoming the norms on a daily basis. This is particularly true of the youths who are often very experimental in all aspects, including language use. Using the social media, Whatsapp in particular, as a representative of such technological inventions and stylistics as analytical tool, this study has succeeded in defining, in clear terms, the exact construct of such distinctiveness. The end of such revolution is yet to be seen in language use. Arguments as to whether the SML will become an officially recognised variety of English language have, very recently, become prevalent. It is suggested that future research should look into this phenomenon with a view to providing appropriate guide concerning the future of English in particular, and language in general.

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