

Effects of the language of social media on English language users: A case study of Caritas University

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Abstract

This study aims at reconfirming whether the problems some writers had associated with the language of social media and their effects on regular standard English really exist, as well as their causes. The population for the study is 100 level students of Caritas University numbering 509 and lecturers numbering 153. Random sampling method is used to draw a sample of 100 students and 20 lecturers from the four existing faculties in the University. The administrations of a test in the form of essay writing, questionnaires and a list of acronyms for interpretation are used for data collection. Tables are used as raw scores and percentages in the presentation and analysis of data. Findings from the analysis indicate that although the majority of students (youths) and lecturers (elderly people) use social media language when writing in WhatsApp, Twitter and SMS, the language does not usually reflect in their formal writings. The findings confirmed the already existence of the problems in interpreting the language of social media, as well as the cause of the problems. The study therefore, concluded that since the social media language is popular with the majority of the population for the study but does not reflect much in their formal writing: it then means that two types of English now exist side by side-social media English and the regular standard English. Consequently, the researcher recommends as follows: that there should be a compilation of standardized dictionary of social media English

containing acronyms and their meanings which all users of social media must adhere to just as the Oxford or Webster dictionary of English language. This new dictionary should be used in schools together with the regular dictionaries of English. Any deviation from these standardized acronyms and meanings should be considered an error in social media language and this will subject writers to standardized convention.

Introduction

Language is a major tool of communication unique to humans. It is essential in the day to day activities of human being considering that man is a social being. Communication is the art of conveying thoughts, feelings, ideas and even the culture of people and it cannot be achieved without language. Language, according to Chomsky (1957:25) is “a set (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of element. Language can also be seen as a system of communication that enables human beings to exchange verbal or symbolic utterances. This shows that language is a social activity man uses in expressing himself and his environment. It can either be written or spoken.

With the rapid growth in technology, there is an increase in the rate of communication that goes beyond interpersonal communication. Different social media have been invented as means of communication among people without verbal exchange of words but through writing. The evolution of social media can be traced back to the 1970s, when ARPANET (Advance Research Project Agency Network), the first social media forum came up. Although it came online in 1969, but by late 1970s it has fully grown and expanded into a rich cultural exchange for both business and non-governmental matters and communication.

The Advanced Research Project Agency Network (ARPANET) which was an early packet switching network became the technical foundation of the internet.

ARPANET according to Onuigbo (2015) was designed by Larry Robert a program manager in Advanced Research Project Agency in 1969. It existed for years and its medium of communication was English. Initially, ARPANET could not easily be considered as a social media because it was funded by the government and was used by the Ministry of Defense of the United States to share ideas on non-governmental issues, but it gave rise to the fast growth of the internet and encouraged people into creating channels of communication that resulted in more people sharing ideas simultaneously. From the inception in 1969 till date, social media sites have been increasing rapidly. There are various social media site worldwide but the most popular ones among them according to an oral interview with the students and lecturers of Caritas University, Enugu who make up the population for this study are: WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagrams, Pinterest, Google, Youtube, Snapchat, Twitter, Tumblr, and BBM.

Social media are computer-mediated technologies that help in creating and sharing of information, ideas, career and interests. Social media have changed the way individuals and large organizations communicate. In conveying information through social media, language is used. Considering the wide spread nature of technology today, it can be seen that social media platforms use different languages depending on the location in which it is being used and the language spoken in those areas. However, because the English language has become almost the world's lingua franca, it can be seen as the language of technology because every recent development in technology is transmitted through the use of English language before being

interpreted into other languages. Often, despite the language it is first conveyed in, it must be translated into English so as to reach a large audience.

Consequently, it has been observed that the English language is generally used by all social media users because this is a language that can be used to reach a wider audience in conveying ideas, information and knowledge. The result is that the younger generations popularly known as the “SMS generation” usually rely on the social media in their day to day activities, especially in their communication, both interpersonal and group communications. Social media use both the written and spoken media in passing information among its users. Some aspects of the written media are seen in charts, tweets and so on which are medium for passing across written messages amongst users. The spoken media permit voice calls and video calls.

English language performs many different functions globally. It is the language of economics, commerce, politics, international relations and so on worldwide. This is because of the ease with which it accommodates other languages spoken around the world today and widely used by users of these social media platforms.

Unfortunately, different challenges have been encountered in the use of English in social media. Prominent among these are distortions and arbitrary deviations in lexical and syntactic conventions (Onuigbo 2015). It is therefore important to find out the causes and effects of these distortions and deviations in lexical and syntactic conventions in the language of social media on English language.

Language of social media

The three selected social media, WhatsApp, Twitter and SMS which are the focus of this study fall mainly under written

communication and to some extent under spoken communication. In international communication, a lingua franca (that is a language which is understood almost worldwide) is used to serve as a bridge for understanding between individuals with diverse cultural and language background. This lingua franca today, is English. According to Onuigbo (2015:4)

Everyone knows that we live in a world without boundaries, a world where everyone seem to “Speak the same language”: And, thus, it is a world held together by the tender net of technologies that can snap any time. But there is something, a strong phenomena that tends to grow stronger with every passing day and that is the language of the age: That language is English.

According to Jo’ahnn (2017) the difficulties created by the difference in cultures, languages and location have made global communication problematic when interacting with members of different cultures for the aim of pleasure, tourism or education. Generally, English fits into the language column that could serve as a lingua franca, uniting the people without creating any barriers. This could be because of the strong and large economic presence English speaking countries have created. English has the leading status of world lingua franca and the language of social media is a language which connects diverse people of diverse cultures and languages together as one within its platform. In fact, the spread of English as a medium of science and technical education makes it the preferred channel into the world wide web and of course, the only common currency for effective

communication exchange in cyber journalism (Onuigbo 2015:8). This means that the language of social media becomes that language which inter links people to a common communication background.

English as a language of social media has now grown that users of the language now exploit the language through cyber in order to create a special communication medium. English can be said to have gained prominence in being the language of social media because of the communicative prominence it has gained in being a language that helps to transmit information. Social media widespread across the globe are undoubtedly connected to the massive use of English language; it is the most used language of social media. With such global use, basic social media becomes a melting pot of languages used in different manner and for different purposes. This has resulted in the creating of an alternate dialect that has an immediate effect which favours real time communication such as the acronym “LOL” which means laugh out loud. It is used when a user finds a message very funny and it originated because those individuals thought that writing out the sentences as they should be was time consuming and stressful. The majority of online interaction takes place in written format. Due to either time, word or character, limitation, acronyms and other various referencing methods are increasing in their numbers and usage in online communication (Laia 2006).

Another social media language is ‘Hash tagging! Hash tagging use the hash tag symbol “#” to draw attention to an action or subject that people feel should be paid attention to on social media. There is also the use of emojis or emiticons which are facial representation of the users’ feeling at the moment. It ranges from different facial expression to other symbols which are all used as a language medium.

Social media

Origin of social media

According to Cann, Dimitriou and Hooley (2011:25), “social media are computer-mediated technologies that facilitate the creation and sharing of information, ideas, career interest and other forms of expression via visual communication and networks.” Kaplan and Haenlein (2010:61) define social media as a group of internet based applications, that build on the ideology and technological foundation of web 2.0 and allow creation and exchange of user generated content.

Social media facilitate interaction based on certain interest. Social media are generally defined as forms of electronic communication as website for social networking and micro blogging which allow its user create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages and other content such as images, videos and so on. Social media facilitates the development of online social networks by connecting a user’s profile with those of other individual or groups. Social media are usually via web-based technologies like desktop computer, laptop, mobile devices and so on.

The services allow users to create highly interactive platform through which individuals, communities and organizations can share, co-create, discuss and modify user-generated content. Social media changes the way individual and large organization communicate. These changes are the focus of emerging field of techno self studies. They differ from proper based media like magazine, newspaper or traditional electronic media such as TV broadcasting and so on. Social media outlets operate in a dialogic transmission system (many sources to many receivers). This is in contrast to traditional media which operate under a monologic

transmission mode (one source to many receivers) like newspaper which is delivered to many sources or a radio station which broadcast the same program to an entire city. Social media functions as an umbrella term that include internet based sites and service, that function for or promote social interaction between individuals that use them as important for their interpersonal communication (Page et al 2014).

Although social media began in the 1970s, its current form began its development in the 1980s under the form of Bulletin Board System (BBS), Usenet and Internet relay chat. These services, while not referred to as social media are considered as the modern form precursors. The term specifically referred to as social media began in the 1990s. One of the first sites that came out in 1995 was eBay. In 1997 the term weblog, which was coined by Jorn Barger was later shortened to “blog” by Pater Merholz. However, these services that would use these names appeared in 1999 with the arrival of Live Journal and Blogger.com.

The following years saw the rise of multiple services that are commonly used presently such as Wikipedia and Trip Advisor in 2001, then in 2003 Skype and word press emerged. After that, in 2004 Face Book which is arguably the most widespread and used service in social media was launched. In 2005, Youtube came into existence followed by Twitter (Boyd and Ellison 2007). Since the arrival of eBay, social media gained many different forms and function which aim to fulfill the types of services that the users seek, such as forums, blogs, Wikis, content sharing and visual world. It is the inherent versatility that social media possesses that makes it so appealing to users. It is also the basic reason behind the daily increase of its users.

Types of social media and their characteristics

Dimitriou and Hooley (2011) classified three major categories of social media. They are:

- Communication: Here we have blogs, social networks.
- Collaboration: Wikis, Social news
- Multimedia: Streaming, Videos. Visual worlds.-

Characteristics of the different social media

Communication category: These include categories that are used by people to maintain connection and relations. It is a medium people use when they feel the need to express themselves. It allows them to air their mind publicly sometimes with or without the intention of getting public opinion. They include Blogs and social network site like face book, Twitter, whatsapp and so on

Collaboration category: Here the service are diverse as they can serve multiple purposes. They include Wikis which is a site for any user to collect, add or edit content using a web browser. As part of this category, we also have social news such as Redvine, Reddit and so on that allow anyone to sign off for their services to spread news that they feel are noteworthy. It interacts by voting for articles and commenting on them. If article hits a lot of likes and positive comment and feedback, then it is regarded as good. It is dedicated to people to voice out their reaction on certain issue. It can also serve as an educative platform for students and lecturers to acquire knowledge on some basic informational articles.

Multimedia category: They are often concerned with the entertainment medium in social media. They are often connected to entertainment services such as video sharing sites like Youtube, Snapchat, Vimeo, Streaming sites like Twitch which has user's broadcast like content from their computer and also included in

this category are online video game playing also known as massive multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG) Cann et al (2011), Laia (2016).

Language of WhatsApp, Twitter and SMS

Every social media has a form of language usually distinctive to it. This is because each social media form has a way of dispersing messages; it also has its words limitation per message at a time. Twitter and Whatsapp are among the major social media networking sites and each language has its own distinctive language peculiarities or features.

Twitter

It is an online and social networking services on which users post and interact messages known as “Tweet”. Tweets were originally restricted to 140 characters but on November 7, 2017, this limit was doubled for all languages except Japanese, Korean and Chinese. Registered users can post tweets but those unregistered can only read them. Users access twitter through its website interface, through short message service (SMS) or mobile service application software. The twitter social networking site was founded by Jack Dorsey, Noah Glass, Biz Stone and Evan Williams on March 21, 2006. Users of Twitter may subscribe to other users’ tweet. This is known as “following” and subscribers are known as “followers” or “Tweeps” a blend of Twitter and peeps.

Whatsapp

This is a free ware and cross platform messaging and voice over internet protocol (IP) Services owned by Face book. It was founded in 2009 by Brian Actor and Jan Koum. The application

allows the sending of text messages and voice calls as well as video calls, images and other media documents and user location. The application was from a mobile device, though it is also accessible from desktop computers. The services require consumer users to provide a standard cellular mobile number

SMS

SMS concept was developed in the Franco-Herman GSM cooperation in 1984 by Friedhelm Hillebrand and Benard Ghillebaert. The key idea for SMS was to use this telephone optimized system during period when no signaling traffic existed to transport messages on the signaling path needed to control the telephone Traffic. SMS provided machine to machine communication. SMS is a text messaging service component of most telephone internet and mobile device systems. It uses standardized communication protocols to enable mobile devices to exchange short text messages. An intermediary service can facilitate a text to voice conversion to be sent to land lines.

Onuigbo (2015:13) noted that as a modern way of communicating through the cell phone, the short message services allows for text messages that violate established grammatical and orthographic conventions. He further observed that the variety of English used by the youth's online chats and text messaging is a new form of English that needs to be painstakingly described to show the peculiar structural and morphological shapes. The language users in these social media platforms create social and grammatical platform with minor or no inhibition in self expression. This most times creates a hindrance in the comprehensive of the message sent.

In social media platform, each writer's writing is based on a personal initiative and creativity. The platform allows social

media users to create words on their own without going according to the norm. This accounts for the reasons why we see acronyms and words created in such a way that one tries comprehending if this is an actual English word or a blend of English or even pidgin. An attempt at linguistic analysis of text messages reveals an irregular and indiscriminate shortening of words. They might initially seem like a misspelling but it actually has become a norm in reality. The language of Twitter, Whatsapp and SMS as seen in most social media, permits users or writers to write as they find convenient without reference to the fact that they deviate from morphological or graphic convention (Onuigbo 2015).

The irregularity in conforming to a particular deviant form of orthography tends to be affecting English. This permitted deviation has some side effects on the purity of the language. This is because according to Jo'ahnn (2017) Twitter is mostly used for a quicker reading and writing of messages allowing the users the use of a limited character space. As a result of these, the users tend to be initiative to create words smaller than the usual word in order to accumulate his intended message.

Whatsapp on the other hand allows unlimited space of writing to its users. But instead of the better use of it, the influence of other social media use of limited characters make users tend to stick to the former way of writing which involves economy of words.

Some people have debated that the use of language in these social media (Twitter, Whatsapp and SMS) can be seen as a Jargon (a way of speaking or writing peculiar to a particular profession). Yet one cannot regard this as true since social media is not a profession but has created its own language which is only familiar to its users.

Table 1A: showing list of acronyms found in the 100 essays and their standard/regular meaning

Data presentation and analysis

In presenting the data, tables were used for clarity and easy analysis.

Acronyms	Standard/ regular meaning	Acronyms	Standard/regular meaning
Av	Have	Ar	Are
Bcame	Became	Bcos	Because
Btwn	Between	B4	Before
Cn	Can	Dat	That
Dn	Then	Den	Then
Der	There	Lyf	Life
Ur	Your	U	You
Jst	Just	Hrt	Heart
Pls	Please	Tink	Think

Table 1b: showing respondents grouped according to range of words used in their essays

Number of respondents	Range of words
40	1-100
36	101-200
24	201-220

The table above shows the respondents grouped according to the range of words used in their essays. 40 respondents used words ranged between 1-100, 36 respondents used words ranged between 101-200 while 24 respondents used words ranged 201-220.

Table 1(c): showing number of acronyms used by each group

Respondents	Range of words	Number of acronyms
40	1-100	9
36	101-200	15
24	201-220	3

The table above shows that the number of acronyms used by respondents within each range is very few.

**Table 2A: Acronyms administered and their regular Interpretation
Twitter**

Acronyms	Regular interpretation	Acronyms	Regular interpretation
Asl	Age sex location	Atm	At the moment
Bsmh	Bussy shaking my head	B4yki	Before you know it
Ctn	Can't talk now	Cyt	Sight
E123	Easy as 123	Em	Excuse me
F2f	Face to face	Fc	Fingers crossed
Impt	Important	Imu	I miss you
Imho	In my humble opinion	Irl	In real life
Nswf	Not safe for work	Jtlyk	Just to let you know
Qotd	Quote of the day	Cwot	Complete waste of time
Ttyn	Talk to you never	Idk	I don't know
Ttyl	Talk to you later	Idc	I don't care
@	At	Rofl	Rolling on the

			floor laughing
Wdymbt	What do you mean by that	Tgif	Thank God it is Friday
Ootrd	Order of the day	Kyc	Know your customer
Nvm	Never mind	Wdym	What do you mean

Whatsapp

Acronyms	Regular interpretation	Acronyms	Regular interpretation
Api	Happy	D	The
Brb	Be right back	Hu	Who
Bff	Best friends for ever	Lol	Laughing out loud
Brt	Be right there	Ctn	Can't talk now
Llu	I love you	No p	no problem
Nw	Now	Op	Off point
Poc	point of correction	R	Are
Sup	what's up	Plse	Please

SMS

Acronyms	Regular interpretation	Acronyms	Regular interpretation
Frm	From	Wat	Whay

Hrt	Heart	2day	Today
Swthrt	Sweet heart	2wer	To where
Tank u	Thank you	2 nite	To night
Tym	Time	4rm	From
Urs	Yours	5n	Fine
U'ar	You are	9ja	Nigeria
4get	Forget	Pple	People
Wia	Where	Gud9t	Good night
Abt	About	Nyt	Night

Table 2a above shows the acronyms administered and their regular meaning.

Table 2b: showing the interpretation of acronyms administered to students (young respondents) and lecturers (older respondents).

Younger respondents (students)

No. of Acronyms	No. Interpreted correctly	No. Wrongly interpreted	No. not Attempted
100	63	13	24

Older respondents (lecturers)

No. of acronyms	No interpreted Correctly	No. wrongly Interpreted	No. not Attempted
100	31	19	50

The two tables above show the number of acronyms administered as well as the numbers correctly interpreted as well as the numbers wrongly interpreted and the number not attempted at all by the group of respondents. It shows that the younger respondents (students) could not interpret 13 out of the 100

acronyms given while 63 respondents gave the same interpretation for the respective acronyms. 24 were not attempted at all.

The older respondents (Lecturers), 31 respondents gave the same interpretations for the respective acronym while 19 gave different interpretations which were also wrong. 50 were not attempted at all.

Discussion of Findings

Research question 1: Do people encounter problems interpreting Whatsapp, Twitter and SMS language?

Findings from the analysis of data on the above question showed that a higher percentage of both young (93%) and older respondents (83%) encountered difficulties in interpreting messages on these three social media. This is because when these new words are combined in what seem to be a sentence, it is usually difficult to interpret their meanings beyond their sounds. This supports what Onuigbo (2015:14) stated that “what is seen in the text message is neither in line with the evolving Nigerian English nor in agreement with any standard English usage. One cannot even describe the language as pidgin”. Social media acronyms are easily identified by their similarities in sound with the regular word but other than these sound similarities, the acronyms are usually difficult to decode. When these acronyms are formed, it is usually difficult to identify as well as decode if they are pidgin or a new form of English, thereby making the interpretation of these messages difficult.

Research Question 2:

What are the problems people encounter when interpreting message on Whatsapp, Twitter and SMS?

From the analysis of data on the above research question, respondents listed two problems and they are: lack of uniformity in formation of acronyms for the same word and lack of uniformity in decoding the acronyms. From the first, the responses from some respondents indicated that random formations and lack of uniformity in formation of acronyms of the same word pose a great problem in interpreting the messages of these three social media. This is because social media create platform for individual creativity of acronyms of the same word. According to Onuigbo (2015:14), “each writer of a text message writes as his initiative and creativity could allow.” This lack of uniformity creates a problem in the interpretation of message on these social media. Below are some examples of one word with different acronyms.

Regular form of social media acronyms

Night	9t	Nit	Nite	9nt	9ite
Fine	Fyn	5n	5yn	Fn	Fne
Nothing	Ntn	Notin	Nting	Ntng	Notn
Happy	Api	Hapi	Hapy	Appi	Happi
Late	L8t	L8	Lat	L8e	Lte
Good Night	Gdnit	Gudnit	G9t	Gudnit	Gdat

The second which is lack of uniformity in decoding the acronyms. Since the acronyms have no standard/ regular meaning, it is usually interpreted differently to suit both the receiver and sender. This further creates a problem in interpretations since meanings are given based on individual choice and creativity. It was also observed that apart from the problems in the orthographic convention, the phonological convention of the word is another

problem. Social media acronyms are usually created through similarity in sound, but not all the acronyms that seem to have this similarity in pronunciation are accurately pronounced based on the phonetic rules of English. For instance, certain acronyms are written nearest to the standard form of writing, thereby altering its pronunciation. Below are few examples:

Coming / kʌmiŋ/written as cumin/kʌmin/

Got/ got/ writer as gat/gæt/

Nothing/nʌθiŋ/written as notn/ nʌtn/

The / ðe/ written as D/d/

Then / ðen/ written as den /den/

This shows that acronyms not only affect the morphological, orthographic and syntactic convention as stated by Onuigbo but also the phonological aspect of English language because social media acronyms break the rule of English phonetics. Some words written in acronyms are pronounced wrongly, since they are pronounced based on the way they are written.

Research question 3: what do you consider to be the cause of these problems?

From the analysis, it can be seen that the respondents considered three factors to be the causes of these problems. They are: saving of time, saving cost and space restriction of 280 words only by twitter for all language except Korea, Chinese and Japanese.

Saving of time: According to Laia (2006) “Due to either time, word or character limitation, acronyms and other various referencing methods are increasing in their number and usage in online communication. Most respondents usually create acronyms randomly in order to save time. The regular use of the language of social media has made standard and regular form of words so

long and in order to save time, people usually stick to these social media acronyms.

Saving of cost: Since the longer the text message, the more megabyte or time consumed by network providers. Users of social media stick to this random and distorted acronyms for easier transfer of information as well as to save cost.

Space restriction and limitation: Some social media platform such as twitter have a limitation of space per message. Users tend to stick to acronyms to convey their messages without leaving out any idea or information.

Research question 4: Do the acronyms used in the above three social media whatsapp, Twitter and SMS appear in formal writings of such student's class work, reports or letters etc?

The analysis on the above question shows that a higher percentage of both the younger and older respondents agreed that these three social media do not usually reflect in their formal writing.

The analysis further showed that the number of acronyms that appeared in student essays are few. Out of the one hundred (100) students the essay was administered to, only 27 students used acronyms in their work.

This was further supported with the survey of the written work of 100 students by Freudenberg (2017) where the actual amount of use of the social media language was at its minimal. Rosen, Chang, Joan, Lynne, Mark and Nancy (2010) research examination also showed a limited use of social media acronyms in student's formal writings are limited.

Conclusion

From the above discussion of findings, the study therefore concluded that the problem created by social media English language still persist as there seems to be in existence today two types of English: the social media English and the regular standard English as can be inferred from Onuigbo (2015:13). According to him, “computer mediated communication has opened a new and threatening channel of communication for free learning and uninhibited writing processes that have no procedural control.”

Furthermore, social media have both positive and negative effects on how people write and speak English. The demands for faster and convenient communication have increased the propensity to make speaking mistakes, use of abbreviations and improper use of informal language. New vocabulary coined in social media has also trickled down to daily verbal conversations. Some words that were slangs have been integrated into mainstream English making it simpler to understand. Most importantly, social media have also increased awareness to proper language use.

Recommendation

Since two forms of English seem to be in existence now, the social media English without and standard conventions and the regular Standard English with its already standard and accepted conventions, this work therefore makes the following recommendations.

1. There should be a compilation of dictionary of standard social media acronyms which all users of social medial must adhere to. This is to avoid the repetition of what happened in the sixteenth century English where words had no standard spelling until the production of the first English dictionary by

- Samuel Johnson. The recommended dictionary will help create and enforce the standard of correctness among the users of social media acronyms.
2. When this dictionary is devised, it should be given a place in English language teaching and learning period in schools in order to encourage better enforcement of the standardized form.
 3. The teachers of English language and these social media acronyms should ensure that students adhere to the standards form as well as use it without deviating when this standard form has been taught. Any deviation from this standard form should be considered an error.
 4. This new Dictionary should be used in schools together with the regular Dictionary of English.

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