

The Use of English on Social Media: Deviation of Variation

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Abstract

This study examined the use of English on social media with a view to assessing the extent to which the language of social media conforms to the standard English usage. The theoretical framework adopted for this study is constructed homophony. The data for the study were drawn from selected messages and posts on Facebook, Whatsapp and SMS. Thirty (30) texts were randomly selected from the data gathered and analysed textually within the framework of constructed homophony. The study revealed that the non-conforming social media use of English appears at the grammatical level; sentences, phrases and words are condensed to series of letters, figures and signs that somehow correlate with English orthography and structural patterns. Orthographically, some words are misspelt probably to speed up the rate of communication and lexically, there is reappropriation of existing words; new words are literally created and new meaning given to existing words. The study concluded that since the rules and conventions of word and sentence patterns in English cannot be complied with by social media users, then there is deviation. Thus, since the description and codification of social media linguistic features and the provision of conducive linguistic, educational and political environments for its popularity and use have not been established, it could not be regarded as a variety of English. Hence, users of social media should always be conscious of not transferring the linguistic features of social media language to the formal use of English to preserve the standard of the language.

Keywords: English, Social Media, Deviation, Variation

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Introduction

Social media have increasingly become integral part of our everyday lives in today's globalised world. Recent developments in technology have given social media a prominent position in human intellectual developments and social cultural interactions across the globe. Social media provide a context where people across the world can communicate, exchange, messages, share knowledge, and interact with each other regardless of the distance that separates them (Sawyer 2011). In other words, social media is built on the idea of how people know and interact with each other regardless of their social cultural values and differences. It gives people the power to share, making the world more open and connected with each other (Raut and Patil 2016).

Mworia (2015) defines social media as a group of software applications facilitated by the internet on devices such as computer and phones for the purpose of socialization and communication between people globally, enabling people to send and receive messages, upload and download pictures and video among other things.

Basically, social media is hinged on how people share their feelings, ideas, thought, principles, culture etc through the internet. Most people, especially students have integrated the social media tools into their daily routine. It is also found to be helpful in every field of life such as politics, commerce, industry, health and education. The most popular social media and their various applications available for users across the world to share new forms of textual and visual information are Facebook, Twitter, You Tube, LinkedIn and WhatsApp.

The use of these social networking sites is on the increase in the field of education in both developed and developing countries. Critically examined, social media have a lot of positive impacts in the field of education because we have more information, more knowledge and better opportunities to put them into use. By spending time working on the social servicing tools, students get more familiar with computers and develop other technical skills in other electronic devices. The development of these skills could provide them with much needed confidence to take decision on the type of career they way want to pursue.

Statement of the Problem

It should be noted that one important function of social media is that it enables us to communicate with a much larger number of people on a global scale in a way than we could ordinarily through other means. The result is an ever increasing speed of communication. The popularity of social media and the speed at which information is published has created a lax attitude towards the use of English (being the language of social media) especially, at the lexical, morphological and grammatical levels. The aim of this study, therefore, is to examine the use of English on social media with a view to determining whether the language of social media is a deviation or variation from the standard English.

Concepts of Standard English, Language Variation and Deviation

Standard English

According to Wallwork (1985) the terms Standard English and Received Pronunciation are generally used to indicate a way of using English which conforms to the natural or acquired habits of educated people whose speech or writing gives no indication of their regional origins. Wallwork (1985) however posits that neither Standard English (in reference to word usage and grammatical forms), or R.P (in reference to speech sounds) can have any absolute values since every individual speaker of a language uses that language in a way unique to him/herself. Even within standard, there are enough variations to enable us to identify an individual from his/her writing or speech. There is, however, a certain body of relatively homogeneous usage which marks the speech, or word usage and grammatical forms of members of educated people alike, which is referred to as Received Pronunciation or Standard English.

Thus, Standard English is a dialect of English used by the upper classes of South-East English, or more specifically of the London area. It is a variety of English which draws a wide range of attention to itself over the widest area across the globe through the widest range of usage. Different varieties of English are used throughout the world. Kachru (1985) identifies three concentric circles: (1) the inner circle, which includes countries where English is used as a primary language, such as the U.S and Canada (2) The outer circle, which consists of countries where English is used as a second language or official language, such as India, Singapore, Nigeria, Ghana etc and (3) the expanding circle, which refers to countries where English is studied as a foreign language, such as Russia, China etc. This implies, non-native speakers of English outnumber native speakers (Crystal 2003).

Language Variation

Variation is a characteristic of language: there is always variation in the way speakers use their language. This variation is demonstrated by linguistic differences in terms of sound (Phonetics) and grammar. There might be only slight variations between forms of a language, such as difference in pronunciation of words, or a slight change in grammatical structure that do not inhibit intergroup communication. Sometimes, there are differences between the speech of men and women, different social classes, and differences between age groups. Some of these features are considered as marking the standard form of the language.

It should be noted that the differences that can impede intelligibility and intergroup communication are outrightly considered non-standard. While there is diversity of language variation there seems to be boundaries, for instance, speakers/writers/users of a language do not generally make drastic alterations in sentence pattern, word order or use novel sounds that are completely foreign to the language being spoken, written or used. Linguistic variation is not the same as language ungrammaticality because native speakers and competent speakers (users of the language are still, often unconsciously sensitive to what is and is not possible in the language.

The concept of language variation is one of the major concerns of sociolinguistics. Attempts have been made to investigate whether this linguistic variation can be attributed to differences in the social characteristics of the speakers/user of the language and also whether elements of the surrounding linguistic contexts promote or inhibit the usage of certain structures of the language.

Wallwork (1985) is of the view that different factors affect how language is spoken / used within a country. These can be regional (geographical) ethnic (national and racial), and social (class, age, gender, socioeconomic status and education). All these factors are interconnected and they feature in the pronunciation, vocabulary, grammatical constructions or syntax of any language variety. One of the common dichotomies in any language is the question of standard and non-standard varieties of the language. The latter is often called a dialect and people who speak them are considered to be inferior to the speakers of the standard variety.

Sociolinguists, however, argue that it is erroneous to believe that the standard variety is the "correct" one, that every language has dialects and no dialect is substandard to other dialects. All varieties of a language are systematic in their use, have a large number of users and thus have their right for existence. Hence, the term dialect refers to any variety of language from sociolinguistics view point, all dialects are equally correct, systematic, logical and meaningful. The questions now are: Is the language of social media a variety of English? Is it systematic in its uses? Does it have its own unique and uniform structure? Does it have a uniform word order system? Is there the spoken form of social media language? Is it contextualized in the physical world? This study aims at providing answers to these questions.

Language Deviation

Deviation refers to the special or unusual expression that deviates from norms of a language. It arises when the writer (in most cases) chooses not to abide by the rules of his/her language or a target language by transcending its norms and exceeds the limits of the linguistic protocols that characterize the language (Chun Ren and Han Yu 2013). In other words, deviation refers to the selection of linguistic items outside the range of normally allowed selections.

A writer in his/her strive for linguistic creativity may violate the rules of the normal usage of his/her language or a target language in a number of ways. He/She can infringe the rules, add to them or relate the structure of the language to meaning in ways not prescribed by the linguistic convention of that language. This motivated violation of linguistic rules, known as linguistic deviation results in the writer's making choices that are not permissible in terms of the accepted code and this effects a disruption of the normal process of communication, that is justified only when the receiver can assign some significance or communication value to the deviation. In other words, it has its significance in the reader's knowledge of it and it is unintelligible unless the reader can provide an interpretation for it.

Also important to the study of deviation is the concept of norm. Every deviant structure is understood against the norm of a language system. This norm is the background against which the features that are prominent in a given text are analyzed, interpreted and described. This study, therefore, aims at examining the following

types of linguistic deviation depending on what rules are broken and at which level of language description it occurs: lexical deviation, morphological deviation and grammatical deviation.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted for the study is constructed homophony of Ryan (2010). Constructed homophony is a subcategory of non-standard spellings which cover a massive range of spelling practices. A constructed homophone is one which shares its phonological correspondence with an existing word or phrase, but which has been given a different spelling. Its benefit is that the phonological connection allows the newly spelt forms to retain semantic links with underlying standard forms but their surface forms give them distinct visual identity from the standard forms. There have been many studies on constructed homophony such as Jacobson's (1966), and Praninskas' (1968) constructed homophony in trade names and Carney's (1994) study on surnames. It is within this framework that this study is set to examine the use of English on social media.

Methodology

The data for this study were drawn from the posts on Facebook, Whatsapp and Short Message Service (SMS) of selected students of tertiary institutions in Epe Division of Lagos State, Nigeria. The researcher fascinated by the new style of writing messages/texts on the internet social media, drew 60 messages from the data collected, out of which, 30 were carefully and purposively selected based on the fact that they were taken to be good representations of the writing conventions characteristic of the social media language.

In analyzing the data, the posts were closely examined and textually analyzed to identify deviant structural patterns at the word and sentence levels. The texts were analyzed for the occurrences of lexical deviation such as neologisms / coinages, reappropriation, acronyms; morphological deviation through affixation, i.e. prefixation, wrong spelling; and grammatical deviation in the form of ellipsis and unpunctuated texts.

A correlation was drawn between the social media language and standard English through certain questions that were raised and the criteria required to determine whether the former is a variation or deviation from the norm of the English language system were examined.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The data collected were analysed to examine the use of English on social media; the texts used were drawn from Facebook, WhatsApp and SMS. Out of the 30 texts examined, only three conform to the rules of grammar and the three were messages on SMS. The non-conforming social media language in the texts analysed appears in the following forms:

At the grammatical level, sentences, phrases and words are condensed to series of letters, figures and signs.

Excerpt (i)

Pls note: The Dept is very serious *abt dis* call 4 papers. It's mandatory, *nd u re* advised to *sd urs b4* 30th which is *b4* Thursday next week. Failure to adhere to *dis...* the Dept might take a drastic measure. *Pls* respond *ASAP*. -

SMS

The full and correct forms of the italicised sms words are: please, Department, about, you, are, send, your, before, the, as soon as possible respectively.

Excerpt (ii)

Good morning bro... how u *dey n* trust you're good...my apologies for not getting back to you on d above *d* author backed out at the last minute and I was so upset *abt it.....* pls bro, can you connect me with d producer of wake up nigeria so I can drop d books and be on d show... wld also appreciate it if you also have a contract for d book segment on NTA international - WhatsApp

It is observed in Excerpt II that apart from the use of abbreviations, the text is not punctuated at all.

Excerpt III:

2 all my *fmil, frnds, colgues*, bosses, brethren *TANKS WT LOTS* of *LOV 4* making our day yesterday. *D* Lord Jesus *SHA HONOR U DS YEAR*.

- Facebook

'2' is used in place of preposition 'to' while *fmily, frnds, colgues, tanks, wt, lov 4' sha* and *Ds* in their correct forms are *family, friends, colleagues, thanks, with, love, for, staff* and *this* respectively. In this excerpt punctuations are used indiscriminately, i.e. the use of capital letters in the expression. *-TANKS WT LOTS OF LOV-* is probably for artistic emphasis or it is foregrounded.

It is observed that some letters are deliberately ellipted in order to achieve compression of expressions. These elliptical constructions feature more prominently in grammatical words than content words.

At the lexical level, acronyms (that is, abbreviations formed from initial letters of a phrase or a group of words pronounced as a word) are prevalently used as substitutes to whole sentences.

LOL	-	laugh out loud
MHR	-	Many happy returns
LLNP	-	Long life and prosperity
CUL&r	-	Catch up later
brb	-	be right back
OMG	-	Oh my God!
(L)MIRL	-	Let's meet in real life
INSET	-	In-service Training
BAE	-	Before anyone else
Tak u	-	Thank you
AMA	-	Ask me anything

Another prevalent phenomenon is the reappropriation of existing words and words based on brand to refer primarily to their social media contexts. Reappropriation is the cultural process by which a group claims words that are being used in a way and gives them new meanings. In this way new words are literally created and new meanings are given to existing words.

For example, *friended* and *unfriendd* are new words derived from the word *friend*. *Friendd* in online usage means the process of adding someone to a circle of friends while *unfriendd* is the process of removing someone from a circle of friends. These words are commonly used on Facebook.

Another prominent example is the word *texting* in the clause - Texting while Teaching (TWT) *Texting* is derived from *text* which is a noun. In this case, the word *texting* is verbalized. Also, the morphological level, many recent neologisms have been originated through social media. e.g.

Trending	-	Something is said to be trending when it is dominating public discourse currently
Viral	-	widely spread
Selfie	-	a picture taken by oneself
unfollow	-	cease to befriend someone
friendd	-	to be in the circle of friends.
SMS	-	You can sms me - send a message through SMS
Prefixation	-	Unfollow, unfriendd

Orthographically, many words are consciously or unconsciously misspelled to speed up the rate of communication. Examples are:

nid/ned-	-	need
diliva	-	deliver
coz	-	cause
bicoz	-	because
wen	-	when
dan	-	than
teribl	-	terrible
4get	-	forget
teln	-	telling
tangbl	-	tangible

Discussion of Findings

Language is an evolving phenomenon. It is not out of place to think that the language of social media does not have effects on the way people particularly students, use English in their day-to-day communicative activities. There are numerous words originating from social media that have slipped into popular usage; these are grammatical expressions that students or users of social media have internalized. These expressions are not only limited to social media platform but have formed part of the users writing culture.

Babatunde (2002) however notes that conformity with the accepted norm of English usage has been the concern of linguists and language teachers since the beginning of proper English language teaching in Nigeria. It is however, disheartening that while providing a common way of linking people together through sharing of knowledge,

information, culture, et.c, creating a sense of belonging to a greater social network other than one's local community, social media is one of the factors contributing to poor academic performance among Nigerian students over the past few years (Umeogu and Ojiakor 2014).

This decline in education is evident in students' writing culture, particularly now that tense and spelling are considered- so long as it makes sense- in chat or SMS language. In most cases, they are not mindful of the grammaticality and acceptability of their expressions.

Thus, since the description and codification of social media language and the provision of linguistic, and educational environments for its popularity and use have not been established. Social media language cannot be regarded as a variety of styles. It mostly exists in the written form and limited to the internet social websites, it is not generally contextualized. It doesn't have uniform and unique word order / or structure.

Social media language is used to speed up the rate of communication between the communicants. The free style of writing is used for the fun of it, as a mark of identity among the social media users. It should however be noted that it is a deviation and unacceptable for academic or other formal communicative purposes.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, it is apparent that there should be a demarcation in the contexts of usage between social media language and standard English. More importantly, teachers should insist on correctness in the formal English language usage.

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