Netwrite or Netspeak?: Towards a Typology of Discourse
Features of Ghanaian University Student's Social Media Discourse

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Abstract: The study explored and categorized Ghanaian University student's social media linguistic choices into coherent threads. This typology was made possible by collating some 4,656 text threads and 45,913 words and symbols from 188 students from the University of Ghana and Valley View University within a period of 6 months. The study which was purely qualitative adopted a netnographic approach in studying the subject's online language choices. Findings revealed that three text modes-written, spoken (audio) and visual characterize social media discourse and by and large computer mediated communication. Of these three, written mode dominates the current data. In addition, the typology of Ghanaian University student's online interaction spans four linguistic levels-syntax, lexis, spelling and mechanics with several sub-categories. A detailed analysis of the constituent elements of the sub-units revealed a colourful blend of generic discourse features identified in the literature dotted with structural ingenuity of indigenous and GhAPE expressions to portray a unique Ghanaian identity. Finally, replication of this study in other domains and ESL contexts is recommended to get a holistic description of the phenomenon.

Key words: Social media discourse, typology, Netwrite, Netspeak, university students, online language

INTRODUCTION

Social media discourse as a form of communication has introduced a new line of interaction which seems to blur the boundaries between computer mediated communication and the ever vibrant traditional face to face communication (Katz and Aakhus, 2002). Just as new linguistic practices are often 'adaptive and additive rather than necessarily substractive' with some level of intentionality, young texters, especially, manipulate conventional discursive practices with linguistic creativity and communicative competence in their quest of attaining 'intimacy and social intercourse' (Thurlow and Brown, 2003).

Seemingly so, the Zeitgeist of the 21 C communication is characterized by brevity, simplicity (Eco, 2002) and urgency, resulting in a high level of informality and mutual interactivity.

Since, the inception of social media discourse, there have been attempts to aptly describe language on social media and social networking platforms. For instance, earlier studies by Crystal (2001), Thurlow (2003), Kasesniemi and Rautiainen (2002), Herring (2011) and Baron (2010) have attempted a general description of linguistic features of computer mediated communication and texting. Crystal on his part, identified the language of texting to be characterised by deviant spellings, truncated sentences, logograms and pictograms, among other features. Similarly, Thurlow (2003) have identified some generic linguistic features as evident in computer mediated communication.

It is generally assumed that these features could work across cultures as well as across different technological platforms including social media and other instant messaging platforms. However, to a large extent, both linguistic and paralinguistic choices and conventions on social media is a reflection of both our 'internal motives' as well as our 'immediate social roles' (Newman, 2003). Thus, due to factors such as level of exposure to technology, constraints on medium of communication and other sociolinguistics tendencies, not to totally rule out the notion of universality of social media linguistic conventions there is likely to be unique sociocultural and sociolinguistic peculiarities colouring the linguistic conventions employed on social media, across the different geographical and socio-communicative boundaries.

This study situates the ongoing discussion within an ESL context with the aim of exploring and describing the nature of Ghanaian University student's unique linguistic choices on social media. The study aims at answering the following questions:

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- Which social media text mode appeals most to Ghanaian University students?
- What is the nature of Ghanaian University student's linguistic choices on social media?
- Do Ghanaian University students have unique linguistic forms of expressing their thoughts/ communicating on social media?

Characteristics of language online: Over the years several terminologies aimed at vividly describing the linguistic practices on social media have emerged. These terminologies which are largely descriptive in nature and formed through the process of blending relate mostly to language proficiency, for example: chatspeak, Netspeak (Crystal, 2008), Textspeak, interactive written discourse (Ferrara *et al.*, 1991), Netwrite (Thurlow *et al.*, 2004) or Webspeak. Some are based solely on specific technologies textisms, emailism while others showcase a blend of technological terms and specific languages like the English language weblish.

Each of these terminologies reflects an adept attempt to rightly classify online or social media linguistic activities. Generally, social media discourse in similar instance as the broader computer mediated discourse, involves a mechanized form of writing on a key board or a mobile phone or tablet which is accessible for reading on screen through an internet enabler system (Baron, 2010). This mechanized form of writing portrays an exhibition of the features of spontaneous speech gestures, prosody and informality, among others resulting into a blend of both speech and writing (Murray, 1990; Ferrara *et al.*, 1991; Maynor, 1994; Herring, 2007). It must be emphasized that strictly speaking, social media discourse makes use of all four language proficiency skills due to its receptive and productive nature.

Accordingly, language online is largely reported in the literature to be friendly and immediate (Collot and Belmore, 1996), a hybrid form of speech and writing (Crystal, 2008) and it deviates from traditional grammar rules (Thurlow *et al.*, 2004). Some common discourse features that characterise language online as reported in the literature are presented: word compounds and blends (e.g., weblish, shareware, netiquette, e-and cyberanything); abbreviations and acronyms (e.g., THX 'thanks', IRL 'in real life', F2F 'face-to-face', somel 'someone'); minimal use of capitalization, punctuation and hyphenation or none at all (e.g., cooperate and of course, email and internet); generally less regard for accurate spelling and/or typing errors; less or no use of traditional openings and closures (e.g., use Hi or Hello instead of Dear). Sometimes people will use nothing at all especially in online chat and instant messaging where your user ID is given automatically; letter homophones (e.g., RU 'are you', OIC 'oh, I see'),

acronyms (e.g., LOL 'laugh out loud', WG 'wicked grin') and a mixture of both (e.g., CYL8R 'see you all later'); creative use of punctuation (e.g., multiple periods... exclamation marks !!!!); capitalization or other symbols for EMPHASIS and *stress*; onomatopoeic and/or stylized spelling (e.g., coooool, hahahaha, vewy intewestin 'very interesting'), keyboard-generated emotions or smileys (e.g., :-) 'smiling face' ,-) 'winking face' ,@>—;— 'a rose'); direct requests (e.g., A/S/L 'age, sex, location?' and GOS 'gay or straight?'); interactional indicators (e.g., BBL 'be back later', IGGP 'I gotta go pee', WDYT 'what do you think?'); with more elaborate programming, colored text, emotes (e.g., *{Sender} eyes you up and down*, *{Sender} cries on your shoulder*) and other graphic symbols (e.g., images of gifts and accessories in virtual worlds) (Thurlow *et al.*, 2004).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data generation for the current study: The study was purely qualitative. Within this paradigm, the researchers adopted a 'netnographic' (Kozinet, 2010) approach to understand the 'complexities' of research participant's online cultural practices. Using a purposeful sampling technique, a sample size of 188 participants was drawn from two universities in Ghana: the University of Ghana (Public) and Valley View University (Private).

In order to effectively manage the scores of messages generated by all 188 participants, the participants were then put into four groups. The duration of data collection was within a period of 6 months in two successive phases; each phase lasted 3 months.

The main source of data was social media chats authored by respondents. Participant observation was the primary investigative tool. This was complemented by field notes.

Sampling and data collection procedure: Due ethical procedure was followed first of all with approval from offices of the dean of students from the two universities granting ethical clearance to conduct the study in both institutions. Following favourable responses from both institutions, a group of first year students were identified and selected through purposeful sampling. These first year students belong to the same academic writing course run by each of the two institutions earmarked for the study.

A structured questionnaire with an attached consent form was used to recruit participants for the study. The purpose of the research and the need to form a group on a social media platform was explained to the respondents. The participants were then informed on the requirements of being part of the research group. These requirements were outlined as follows:

- Must be a full member of the sample class
- Must have a mobile device that supports social media applications
- Must be willing to participate in the study but if otherwise should inform the researchers before exiting the group page

By popular acclamation, WhatsApp application was agreed upon by each of the research group as the social network of choice for the groups; accordingly, the a representative for each group was made to open an account on WhatsApp for the group using the telephone numbers provided willingly by members of the group. The students were made to understand that participation or non-participation in the online study will not in any way affect, adversely, their traditional classroom experience. In addition, participation in the study was based solely on one's own conviction, trust and willingness. The participants were also assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses.

As stated earlier, the procedure for the collection of data from the social media chats was done in two phases. The first phase started from October to December, 2014 (representing the first semester of the 2014/2015 academic year; the second phase commenced in October and ended in December, 2015 (also representing the first semester of the 2015/2016 academic year for both universities). The choice of these phases is deliberate to make room for any new affordances that may occur in-between the first and second years of data collection. Dornyei (2007) chose to label this 'iteration', a phenomenon which aims at filling gaps in the initial description or expanding and/or challenging existing scopes of data.

Using a netnographic approach and participant observation as an investigative tool, an observation of the participant's negotiations of meaning and language was done daily through their social media chats for a consistent period of 3 months (for the first phase) and another 3 months (for the second phase), resulting in a cumulative total of 6 months of data collection. This is to provide ample time to observe the frequency of occurrences of the linguistic phenomena used in social media and in effect allow for the establishment of 'coherent threads' (Spilioti, 2006).

With the aid of participant observation, participant's text language and behaviour was keenly monitored daily and classified. As new patterns emerged, they were sub-classified or accorded new codes. Broadly, four linguistic features with several sub-categorisations have been established from the coherent threads analysed (Fig. 1).
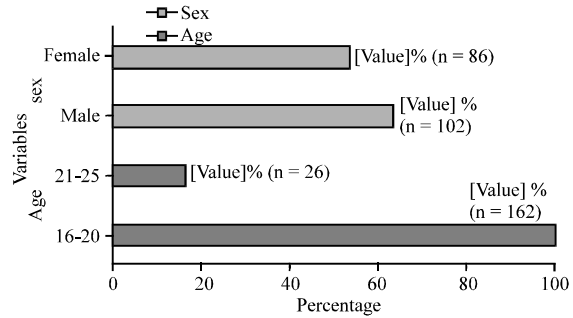

Fig. 1: Demographic information on participants

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic information on the participants: All participants were 1st year undergraduate students and they all had access to social media and internet, mostly through their 'smart' (mobile) phones and also through their tablets and laptops. There were more male participants, representing 54.3% of the total sample size, than females who represented 45.7%. Majority of the study participants fell between the ages 16-20, representing 86.2% of the sample size.

Text corpus: By a simple frequency count, a total of 4,656 text threads or chats were recorded as well as some 45,913 words and symbols. This number falls below Tagg (2009) corpus (of 11,067 individual chats, termed here as text threads and 190,516 words) so far considered as the highest corpus generated in the field of social media and academic discourse; nevertheless, it remains significant per the qualitative nature of the current study which diverts its focus from a predictive and aggregate generalizations driven approach to a descriptive driven perspective (VanderStoep and Johnston, 2009).

Even so, despite its qualitative nature, data for the current study outnumber figures justified by some quantitative studies, for example, Segerstag (2002) used 1152 text messages while Thurlow's (2006) study was based on only 554 text messages an indication of commitment to due diligence on the part of the current researchers.

A simple manual test of semantic content analysis was employed to arrive at the frequency count of text threads while a similar but a more systematic means using Microsoft Word count was employed in counting lexical items and symbols. By default, conventional contracted word forms (e.g., can't, don't) on the one hand are treated as single words by Microsoft Word Software thus they are equally treated here, so on the other hand, unconventional contracted word forms or clusterings
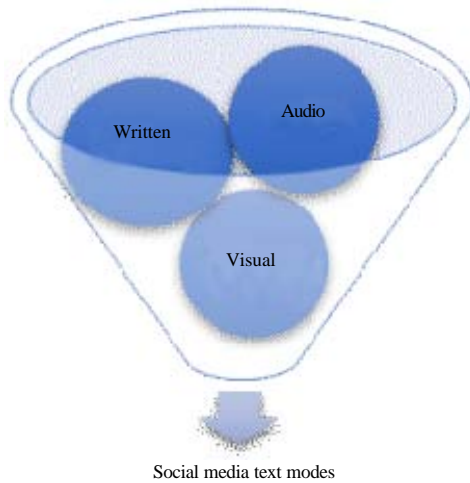
Social media text modes

Fig. 2: Netnographic study of Ghanaian University student's social media text modes

(e.g., uw/uwlcm = you're welcome; okk = oh okay) that have distinct semantic contents were considered as separate words. It is difficult for the Microsoft Word Software to decipher such clusters as separate words, thus, the writers had to carefully analyse and separate them for accurate reading by the Microsoft Software. Similar analysis was extended to emoticons and other symbols.

Identification of text modes: The observation and analysis indicate that, generally, all social media platforms make use of three existing modes of communication, labelled here as 'text modes'. They are the written, spoken (audio) and visual modes.

The written mode covers the inbuilt linguistic enabler system that helps in the communication of user's thoughts and emotions or feelings. They cover characters which include alphabets and action descriptors (for instance emoticons, pictographs/grams, logograms). The audio and visual modes are both external inputs imported as recorded messages to enhance the communication process. They are usually recorded messages and are often used as attachments. The diagram illustrates the various text modes evident in social media platforms.

It turns out that, the particular social media platform engaged on will necessitate the prioritisation of a given text mode. It was also observed that any two of these text modes could be fused into one text message which conveys a central idea. Likewise, all three text modes could be used to construct a single message bearing a central theme. All three text modes written, spoken (audio) and visual were evident in the current study. However, as far as this study is concerned, written mode dominates the

Table 1: Ghanaian University student's linguistic choices on social media

Linguistic levels	Sub-levels
Syntax	Sentence types
	Truncated/fragmented sentences; Structural omissions/ellipsis; Run-ons; Comma splices
Lexis	A combination of letters and numerals; Logographs and pictographs
	Emoticons/smileys; Action descriptors
	Indigenous words to show emotions; A combination of codes
	Mixed codes and switched codes
Spelling	Shortening of words
	Abbreviations
	Clipping; Blending
	Acronyms/Initialisms; Omission of letters/sounds
	Vowel reduction; Omission of consonant sounds
	Omission of silent sounds; Contracted forms
	Non-standard spellings
	Deviant spellings; Homophones/graphs; 'Ghinglish' spellings (e.g., 'ai' for "yes."; 'dasall' for "that is all"; 'issorai' for "it is all right")
Mechanics	Punctuation
	Omission of end marks; Omission of apostrophe marks which show possession; Omission of commas
	Overuse of exclamation marks, ellipsis; Misplaced punctuation marks
	Capitalisation
	Non-recognition of proper nouns; Non-capitalisation of sentence initial words; Initialisms not capitalised

Netnographic data (2015) classification of Ghanaian University student's linguistic choices on social media

data. Accordingly, the typological analysis of Ghanaian University student's social media linguistic choices is based mainly on the written text mode.

Social media and the Ghanaian University student's linguistic choices: To a large extent, the Ghanaian university students when interacting online also, exhibit the general linguistic choices identified by earlier studies (Crystal, 2008; Thurlow and Brown, 2003), albeit with their unique linguistic situated practices owing to the affordances the over 80 indigenous languages (VanderStoep and Johnston, 2009) avail to the practitioners. Such linguistic choices are evident at 4 distinct levels: syntax (structure), lexis, spelling and mechanics as well as their associated sub-units. The result is presented in Table 1.

Considering the transiency of social media discourse, the classification presented in Table 1 above is not intended to be exhaustive in any sense; however, an adept attempt has been made to include salient exemplars of the features which reflect current practices. What makes the above classification unique is that the mode of classification differs from existing ones such as Crystal (2008) and Thurlow *et al.* (2004).

Crystal, for instance provided 6 classifications but most of the items were mutually inclusive rather than being mutually exclusive. The items presented by Crystal are pictograms, logograms, initialisms, omitted letters,

non-standard spellings and shortenings. Despite the examples Crystal cited under each of these categories, there still exist some overlaps; for example, initialism can be a form of shortening and vice versa. Again, omission of letters can be a form of non-standard spelling, so can initialism and shortening be placed under non-standard spelling. While Crystal and others can be commended for the earlier classification of social media linguistic features, other existing attempts (Thurlow *et al.*, 2004) did not approach these choices in such recognisable tiered or layered format but presented the examples as isolated units.

Some emerging issues: Evidently, the four broad categorizations of Ghanaian University student's linguistic choices on social media introduce a new line of debate in the ongoing discussion on this topic. A look at the level of syntax, for instance, portrays a breakdown of sentence structure. What is more, structural errors on social media are not monolithic: the complexity of the sentence structure determines the kind of structural error likely to occur. For instance, structurally simple sentences are usually truncated by omitting the main subject or verb as shown:

- 'Still don't hv her number yet' (I still do not have her number (yet))
- 'Lukin gud dear' (You are looking good, (my) dear!)

However, run-on sentences and comma splices will mostly occur with compound or complex sentences, clouded with structural omissions or ellipsis in order to reduce the complexity. This is typified in the sample chats:

- 'Eii, sowi, fink am in 2 rada? (Eii, I am sorry! I think I am in two rather?)
- 'It goes wid money as well, ..., hpe u know dat' (It goes with money as well; I hope you know that)

Further, at the level of lexis, aside the universal instances of combining letters and numerals or using logographs and pictographs in place of lexical items, there is also notable usage of indigenous expressions to show emotions. This may be realised as particles from a dominant or preferred indigenous language, especially, Akan:

- 'Ai' (to mean 'yes')
- 'Bam' (to show support or agreement)
- 'Saa?' (asking for confirmation)
- 'Saa' (to show support or agreement)
- 'Eeiii pressure oooo' (to mean 'there is soo much pressure')

Also, prevalent is code switching/mixing; two forms were realised. The first is code switching/mixing involving indigenous languages. Some examples are listed:

- 'Ahiiiaaa pressure' (What sort of pressure?)
- 'Rumors nkwaaaa' (Just rumours)
- 'Saaa ayooo; (Is that so? Alright)
- 'Rep ankasa forgot?' (The rep himself/herself has forgotten?/Even the rep has forgotten?)

The second is code switching/mixing involving Student Pidgin (SP). Pidgins are simplified or reduced languages that develop as a means of communication between two or more groups that do not have a common language. Student Pidgin, a variant of both West African Pidgin (WAP) and Ghanaian Pidgin English (GhaPE) is usually dominant among male secondary and tertiary students, even though current studies indicate that some female students are also involved in this trend (Dako, 2002a, b; Huber, 1999). Pidgin is usually a spoken variant, though studies have shown that it could creep into written communication (Amakiri and Igani, 2015; Omari, 2010). Some examples realised in the data include:

- 'Claudia dear wey shs skul u plete' (Claudia dear, which senior high school did you graduate from? Note: 'plete' for complete)
- 'Ashoq/ashoq sef' (I am also/even shocked)
- 'Yh Emma adeyoo by grace'? (Yes, Emma, I am fine by grace)
- 'Abi ebi simple'? (But it is simple)
- 'Abi boi?' (I am a boy/I am male)

The last example of indigenous expressions which defies the odds of universality is found under the level of spelling. These expressions are labelled as 'Ghinglish'. Ghinglish is coined from a blend of Ghanaian English. The first 'i' which occurs between 'Gh' and 'n' is deliberately introduced to mimic the phonetic realisation of the letter 'e' as it is usually portrayed in social media spellings. Ghinglish spellings are therefore non-standard spelling variants that are based on how some English words/expressions are pronounced mostly in offline communicative domains in Ghana. Some examples of 'Ghinglish' spellings are:

- 'Dasall' (That is all)
- 'Issorai' (It is all right)

Factors accounting for the uniqueness of social media language: Generally, in addition, to the functional communicative factors of informality, urgency, among

others, less explored are the features of technology which invariably contribute to the changes that occur in online language.

Herring (2001) outlined some technological variables that are likely to affect the form of language use on social media. They are synchronicity, granularity and multimodality. Synchronicity is whether the mode of communication is synchronous or asynchronous. For example, instant messaging is synchronous while emailing is asynchronous. Thus, it is almost reasonable to identify more of shortening, omissions and truncated sentences with instant messages than with emails. At the same time social media exchanges are more synchronous and therefore, transient than asynchronous.

Another technological variable which constrains the linguistic features associated with social media discourse is granularity (Cherry, 1999); that is to say, how long or short a text may be on the limit on size of the message. Also, multimodality (i.e., whether or not graphics, audio and video are included) as a technological variable may affect language and language usage on social media. Thus, these technological variables also account for the changes that are associated with social media discourse.

Also, Thurlow *et al.* (2004) indicate that the 'physical constraints of 'technology' account largely to differing linguistic forms associated with online communication. For instance, the fact that it involves typing on a keyboard with its accompanied emphasis on speed which ought to be almost at the same rate as speaking, the attempted and utter display of eloquence in computer jargon by specialists and the high level of informality associated with the medium. Thus, the quest to explore the affordances the keyboard presents and also in a more efficient and economical way, results in most of the writing conventions associated with online and social media discourse.

In addition, to the above and on a more general communication note, contextual variables such as the type of channels in use (e-Mail, instant messages, etc.,) the participants (youth, adult) as well as the topic and purpose (friendly chats among contemporaries, business enquiries) account for the choice of such linguistic features (Thurlow *et al.*, 2004).

CONCLUSION

This study fills an important research gap by compiling a typology of Ghanaian University student's unique linguistic choices on social media. It introduces a fundamental angle to the discussion on the dynamism as well as contextual demands of both online and offline modes of communication.

Most of these examples corroborate findings from other literature from other continents or part of Africa.

However, there is a growing tendency of personalised and even localised variants. We believe the indigenous languages have a part to play such that the prevailing indigenous language's or the language the texter is much exposed to may influence the novelty of spelling for instance.

Another factor that determines the sophistication or otherwise of the text considered is the texter's exposure to and personal experience with technology. Jones and Shao (2011) also concur that certain 'demographic factors interact with age to pattern student's responses to new technology'. This goes to say that the background of the texter: whether the person had access to technology at a tender age, his/her circle of friends, time spent on social media, among others, counts a lot.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Going forward, the study of the typology of Ghanaian University student's social media language conventions should be periodically repeated and also replicated in different demographics, other ESL and EFL communities to accommodate emerging conventions and to chart the dynamics of our collective representation of virtual self (Agger, 2003).

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