An Analysis of the Linguistic Features Used in Selected Social Interactions on Facebook

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Abstract

Facebook (FB) is one of the social networks that allow its users to interact freely by posting short messages, pictures and videos. FB has a forum where people write and post their opinions, pictures and videos to see their friends' reactions. FB also allows anonymity thus giving users the freedom to use a language of their choice without restrictions. Given the fact that FB is an informal context, users employ certain patterns of language in their interactions.

This paper endeavors to examine the manner in which these patterns of language are used on FB with special focus on Kiswahili language. Kiswahili is now an official language in Kenya and there is a paradigm shift concerning patterns of texts that are sent on FB interaction. The objective of the study was to analyze the linguistic features used in selected social interactions on FB (SSIFB). The units of analysis in this study were texts that were sent as reactions to the news and pictures that were posted on the FB forums such as those collected from pages like Citizen TV Kenya, KTN Kenya and Mpasho News. The data of this study was analyzed qualitatively by coding every text based on its content. The study employed the use of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) as proposed by Hiltz and Turoff (1978) to interpret and give inferences about the texts that were sent. The study revealed that FB users used the language of their choice creatively to communicate. Various linguistic features were used to communicate intended messages.

Keywords: Interactions, Users, Texts, Linguistic features, Facebook

1. Introduction

Language usage in computers especially in internet is a new phenomenon compared to its usage in other areas. This is because communication technology is new among people from developing nations. Facebook, as one of these new social media platforms, allows its users to interact using a language of their choice in any way given that it is not an official context. In the Kenyan scenario, such language may include either English or Kiswahili.

Kiswahili language is now an official language according to the Kenyan constitution and its usage in different contexts including FB has started changing. There is a paradigm shift in the use of language in FB interactions since Kiswahili acquired this new status. Users have started using certain patterns of words and sentences in communicating their opinions contrary to the patterns used before Kiswahili acquired this new status. People now have the freedom to choose between Kiswahili and English languages in different contexts unlike before where Kiswahili was seen to be inferior. The present study analyzed the use of linguistic features in the selected social interactions on FB (SSIFB) so as to describe the patterns of this language. The study focused on the interactions that were written with 50% or more of Kiswahili language so as to describe the linguistic features found in these patterns.

When people interact on FB, there is a likelihood of people employing certain patterns of the language of their choice as Darvell, Walsh and White (2011) state that, people interact in various ways while on the internet. However, the three scholars do not go further to describe the patterns of this interaction event. In the present study, the interactions being referred to by Darvell, Walsh and White (2011) were analyzed in the SSIFB to examine the linguistic features employed by FB interlocutors.

In FB, users are free to use a language of their choice due to the fact that it is an unofficial context. Users are free to write and send texts, pictures and videos without the fear of being followed (Crystal, 2001). This study analyzed the texts that were sent on FB by looking at the way this freedom enabled the users to use the language of their choice with special focus on Kiswahili language.

Ong'onda (2013) analyzed the language used in FB to affirm how its usage made FB a speech community. In our case, we analyzed the interactions that occurred in FB and their features and

not just the illustrations like Ong'onda (2013) with special focus on the use of Kiswahili language. This is because Kiswahili is widely used in Kenya owing to the fact that Kenya is a multilingual society with Kiswahili and English being the most widely used languages. Kiswahili has also acquired a new status of an official language according to the Kenyan constitution (2010) and its usage in FB has started changing unlike before. There is a paradigm shift in its usage in FB as interlocutors have started inventing different patterns of words and sentences in their interactions. This study analyzed these interactions to examine these patterns so as to describe the linguistic features employed by interlocutors.

The study was guided by computer mediated communication theory (CMC) as proposed by Hiltz and Turoff (1978) because it is the one that deals with texts, pictures, videos, emails and chats that are sent through internet. Hiltz and Turoff argues that CMC has better patterns than face to face communication and experienced users invent methods of explaining non-verbal cues in writing. They further argue that in CMC, people feel free to others when talking about a topic or exchanging information about themselves and their feelings. Lastly, they argue that CMC allows users to be more intimate even with people whom they have never met face to face and whom they know that they will never meet. In this study, CMC was used to analyze texts that were sent as reactions to pictures and opinions so as to examine the linguistic features employed by interlocutors. The study employed Hiltz and Turoff's three arguments. The writings were examined as they appeared in the texts that were sent in the SSIFB so as to explain how users invented methods of showing their non- verbal cues and thus the linguistic features they employed. The study also examined how the users used the freedom offered by CMC to employ various linguistic features in their interactions. Finally, the study examined how interlocutors were intimate to each other through the linguistic features that they used in their interactions.

2. Literature Review

A number of scholars have researched on language usage in various electronic media. It is generally agreed that Facebook users invent their own ways of communicating. For instance, Crystal (2001) states that electronic communication provides a platform that allows human interactions through ways that are distinct. In his explanation, he talks of social media interactions in general without showing that electronic communication can be different depending on the social media like is the case with FB. Crystal does not state whether the ways he is referring to are used in all languages that are used in such interactions or are restricted to English language only. The present study examines the use of Kiswahili language in SSIFB to illustrate whether what is discussed by Crystal also applies in FB. He further states that the use of language in social media has certain patterns that are evident in the chats. This study analyzed the use of language in the SSIFB to examine how these patterns are manifested in the selected chats that had 50% or more expressed in Kiswahili language.

While illustrating a type of language that has distinct features on the internet, Crystal (2001) called social media interactions "Netspeak."According to him, this language contains non-standard abbreviations and acronyms, rebus writing, unacceptable capital letters and unconventional spellings. His arguments are affirmed by Hudson (2000) who argues that there's no evidence showing that language has restrictions in mind or in new possibilities of

meaning. He states that the only way to get new words within the context of the internet is through creativity. He adds that FB users depict creativity of language by changing it to illustrate new meaning. The present study examined these inventions by studying Kiswahili language and its linguistic features.

Muniandy (2002) conducted a research to illustrate how electronic communication has continued to be a new medium of communication. The results showed that there are distinct features that make this medium appear inventive. These features are linguistic in nature. The present study affirmed Muniandy's arguments by examining the linguistic features employed by FB users in their interactions. Texts that were analyzed showed that users manipulated electronic devices to create ways of communicating with friends.

Some of the linguistic features are illustrated by Abusa'aleek (2015) who conducted a linguistic study on the internet to analyze electronic chats as a new system of language. 340 texts that contained 4760 words were analyzed. The results showed that 25% of the users communicated electronically by abbreviating their language. Results also showed that users used electronic chats which could not be understood because they abbreviated their language. The users used chats that abbreviated their words, word elongation, unconventional spellings and letter changing in words. The present study focused on analyzing the use of Kiswahili language in the SSIFB to examine if Abusa'aleek's results would be true.

The above findings are supported by Werry (1996) who explains why FB users employ such a language. For instance, he states that there are no restrictions governing word elongation and structure of communication; the size of the device that is being used, the time limit of writing the text, limited time of replying texts, competition for recognition, and congestion of users and speed of communication in the selected platform leads to creation of new means of communication. Hård af Segerstad (2002) also affirms this by adding that it is anticipated that language usage appears creative depending on the selected platform. He also states three things that are considered about language usage: speed, means of communication and the state of communication. This study showed how users depicted this lack of restriction and how the reasons mentioned by Werry (1996) led to the use of different linguistic features with reference to Kiswahili language.

Jagero, Mohochi and Indede (2013) conducted a study to examine Kiswahili usage in blog discourse and the effects on its development. Their results showed that bloggers used non-conventional abbreviations together with code mixing and code switching. Their study resembled the current study in that, they analyzed Kiswahili texts but differed on objectives, theory and the area of study. The current study was conducted on FB with a focus on Kiswahili usage as one of the languages used for various objectives. While they used critical discourse analysis, the present study employed CMC theory to examine the linguistic features used by interlocutors in the SSIFB.

3. Methodology

The study adopted the analytical research design. It is used to describe the content of what is written or talked about and illustrate the purpose of the patterns employed. In this study, analytical design was used to examine the content of the SSIFB so as to describe the patterns of the language that was used.

Texts that contained 50% or more of Kiswahili language were selected and analyzed as a representation of the use of Kiswahili in FB. The aim was to examine the way this language was manipulated by interlocutors through the linguistic features that they employed.

The study was conducted in FB where members are free to create their own profiles and send photos, videos and short messages. FB has a wall where users write and send opinions, pictures and videos. These opinions, pictures and videos can attract different reactions from users who choose to comment about them. FB was identified as a study area because the researcher is a participant in FB and thus selecting and analyzing reactions from other participants was easy. Since it is not clear how many people use Kiswahili language on FB, stratified sampling was employed to group the study population in line with the objective of the study. Purposive sampling was then employed to acquire 100 texts with 50% or more of Kiswahili usage as Glinter and Eldrige (2001) state that the least number of texts to be analyzed in internet studies is 100. Therefore, 100 texts were would be a reliable representative of FB interactions for this analysis.

The data was collected through checklist method. Checklist method is used to collect data through observation and it includes set questions and answers. Content analysis was then employed to analyze the collected data qualitatively by giving inferences and in-depth descriptions about the linguistic features used in the SSIFB.

4. Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to analyze the linguistic features used in the SSIFB. Section 4.1 explains the findings of the linguistic features that were employed by interlocutors in their interactions.

4.1 Linguistic Features Used in the SSIFB

The results of this study illustrated that FB users used various Kiswahili linguistic features in the selected social interactions. They employed linguistic features like phoneticons and lexical items in their interactions. According to Knas (2006), phoneticons are graphemic representations of voice qualities and sound imitations in writings. They include the use of multiple vowels, non-standard punctuation marks and capitalization. On the other hand, lexical items can be described as repetition of terminologies used in the previous postings subsequent posts (Ong'onda, 2013).

4.1.1 Phoneticons Used in the SSIFB

The findings of this study illustrated that interlocutors employed phoneticons in the SSIFB through the use of non-standard punctuations and capitalization as shown in the following sections:

4.1.2 Use of Punctuation Marks

Punctuation marks are grammatical devices that are used to bring out different grammatical meanings. In the current study, the analyzed punctuation marks were not used correctly grammatically because some were repeated by users to achieve various emotions. Crystal (2001) says that in CMC, there is a likelihood of non-standard punctuations appearing. This might happen in the usage of full stops, hyphens, repetition of commas or use of more than one exclamation mark. Crystal also states that this is caused by stress or attitude. In the present study, users made use of full stops, exclamation marks, and question marks in their texts as

shown below:

4.1.3 Full Stops

A full stop is a punctuation mark that is used grammatically to signify the end of a sentence (TUKI, 1981). In the analyzed texts, full stops were not used to signify end of a sentence. Interlocutors employed more than one full stop to signify silence and stress as shown in the example below:

MZ 25: saa 10:29 usiku

Zingine zinabidi ziwe ignored, *kama zile hutumwa na wasee wa* kamiti saying *umeshinda pesa kwa* promotion u did not even participate in and further they ask for chunk of that cash…hehe

In the above example, MZ 25 used 3 full stops in his text that was a reaction to remarks that one should not ignore strange SMS from strangers because the topic starter had accidentally sent a text to a stranger and they got married. MZ 25 reacted by saying that some were supposed to be ignored because they were sent from prisoners from Kamiti Maximum prison who wanted to con people. There were common cases of people receiving calls and texts messages from unknown people. After thorough investigations, it was unearthed that most of those calls were coming from prisoners. Because of this, some people started ignoring some of these texts and calls. MZ 25 used 3 full stops after the word *cash* to imply a possibility that he wanted to influence the readers of his text with his emotions.

The following example illustrates how MZ 39 and MZ 43 used full stops in their texts that were reactions to news that a picture of Virgin Mary and baby Jesus had appeared in Makueni County in Kenya. The picture had attracted thousands of people who went to confirm. In their reactions, MZ 39 and MZ 43 used full stops twice in their reactions as shown below:

MZ 39: 6:41 jioni

Xalamu Maria umejawa na nehema.. bwana u nawe umebarikiwa kuliko wanawake wote….

MZ 43: 07:00 usiku

Non sense watu wa imani haba….dio wataamini hili someni BIBLIA na macho yenu yatafunguliwa ……..

MZ 39 was taking a catholic prayer; Hail Mary in Kiswahili asking Virgin Mary to intercede for him/her. Crystal (2001) states that CMC allows interlocutors to use full stops to signify stress. This is because the interlocutors do not see each other in CMC like is the case in face to face communication. There is likelihood that these full stops were used to signify stress on the prayer. MZ 43 also used full stops twice in his/her text that implied a denominational conflict between Catholics and Protestants. This conflict was depicted in his text that seemed to oppose the news of pictures of Virgin Mary and baby Jesus appearing in Makueni County. From the text, the interlocutor seemed to be rebuking those who believed the news. Because in CMC one cannot see the non-verbal cues, the interlocutor might have resorted to using full stops to stress his opinion.

4.1.4 Exclamation Marks (EMs)

In reference to traditional grammar, EMs are used to imply emotions like happiness, grief, amazement, shock, an order, anger, stressing an opinion or a harsh sentence (TUKI, 1981). EMs can also be used to signify humor or satire in a sentence. In FB, users employ more than

one EM for different reasons depending on the user and the topic being discussed.

According to Crystal (2001), CMC allows people to use more than one EM to imply stress. This is due to what Walther and Burgoon (1992) state that in CMC there is no intonation like is the case in face to face communication. There is likelihood that EMs are used to imply stress in a statement like is the case in the following example:

MZ 7: saa 11:42 usiku

Nyani haoni kundule!!!

MZ 7 was referring to a topic where Keter, who was a Kenyan Member of Parliament, had threatened to call for demonstrations to oust Waiguru; the then cabinet secretary for Devolution over corruption allegations. The text by MZ 7 meant that Keter had also been involved in a corruption case before. The 3 EMs were therefore used to imply stress that Keter had no moral authority to lead such a demonstration.

Hiltz and Turoff (1978) state that CMC allows intimate interactions between people who have never met face to face before or people that will never meet. In the current study interlocutors applied EMs in their interactions as is the case in MZ 84 who applied EMs 7 times in his text to illustrate that he was angered with the topic in discussion as shown below:

MZ 84: 09:00 usiku

Mureithi let me tell you *ukimwi haikukujia mawe ilikujia watu kama we!! Chunga utakuwa* next *na naona* ur the next there!! Don't judge ur not God !! *na hapa ni*place of mourning so ur nonsense *haifai kuwa hapa!! Kama ulikuwa unajua ako nayo mbona hukum*treat just ask for forgiveness *ndo* ur life *iwe* better!!! No one is perfect *na kifo ni njia ya kila mtu kesho yako hujui!!!* Nkt!!! Rip bokello.

The conversation is about Davis Mwabili eulogizing Bon Agrey Okello in the requiem mass. Bon Agrey Okello was Mwabili's co-actor at Citizen TV's *Inspekta Mwala* show. Ethnic hostility was manifested between two tribes through some interlocutors from one community alleging that Bokello had died of HIV. These remarks must have angered MZ 84 and caused him to write a text that seemed to be an attack against those who made such remarks. There is likelihood that the EMs were used by MZ 84 to stress the interlocutor's anger towards those remarks.

4.1.5 Question Marks (QMs)

A question mark is grammatically used to imply that a sentence is a question (TUKI, 1981). In the current study, the analyzed texts indicated that question marks were not used for this grammatical meaning. FB interlocutors employed more than one QMs depending on the interlocutor and the topic in discussion as shown below:

MZ 19: saa 10:14 usiku

Ukiona ukiumwa u must be a boy from a single mother. I mean *Malaya mamako. Umezaliwa pamoja na* sister only *Malaya. Ukowenuniwa Malaya* a ma I true??

In the above text, the topic is about prostitutes flocking Kericho town to benefit from tea bonus. The interactions took a different dimension as some interlocutors chose to show their tribal differences in their texts. Some attacked people of the Agikuyu tribe by linking them with prostitution and claiming that it was them that were flocking Kericho town. Such reactions

angered interlocutors who were Kikuyus. This led to serious attacks on each other through the texts that were sent. For example, MZ 19 seemed to have been angered by remarks from an earlier interlocutor that he chose to attack his family members and ended his text with 2 QMs while saying, "*ukowenuniwa Malaya* am I true??" which meant that his clan was comprised of prostitutes. This sentence would have been understood to be a question if MZ 19 would have used one QM, but by using 2 QMs it implied stress on the interlocutor's anger.

4.1.6 Capitalization

According to Crystal (2001) use of capital letters in CMC implies shouting or anger. Walther and Burgoon (1992) says that CMC can cause anger because people don't associate themselves with the emotions they bring out. Nishumura (2007) says that capitalization within a sentence is meant to imply stress on words. The following examples illustrate how interlocutors used capitalization in their texts.

MZ 58: saa 10:00 usiku

Ukidhani umesimama, jishikilie na uchunge mdomo, kwan sku ya kuteremka walio chini utawahitaji. Masaibu ya MOURINHO *ni funzo kwa wale hudharau walalahoi.* 'Specialist in failure' *tamko hili tu analinusa kama ugoro.*

In the above text, MZ 58 applied capitalization in the word "MOURINHO" while talking about the coach of Chelsea who had made reference to his sacking after a 3-1 defeat by Liverpool. After winning the English premier league title in the 2014/2015 season, Mourinho became proud. He started attacking fellow coaches openly including Arsene Wenger; the coach of Arsenal. This angered the supporters of the affected teams like the case of MZ 58 who seems to be celebrating the defeat. He goes ahead and capitalizes his name in his text to emphasize that people needed to learn a lesson from Mourinho's defeat. MZ 58 would still have communicated if he had written the name in small letters, but he chose to capitalize it to imply that he wanted to make it visible to everyone reading his text.

4.2 Syllabogram or Rebus Writing

According to Bush (2006), syllabogram is the usage of numbers in place of sounds in words. He calls it; "number usage in place of homophones." He says that in English language, CMC users employ 4 numbers in place of sounds. These numbers are: 8 instead of /et/, 4 instead of /f™r/, 2 instead of /tōō/ and 1 instead of /wun/. In this study, the Kiswahili texts that were analyzed illustrated that interlocutors employed the number "2" instead of syllable "-*tu*-" as shown below:

MZ 62: 09:37 asubuhi

Hatespeech ki2 gani, *he only said* muthama akitusi rais tena atamkutampaka kwao nyumbani, ioni *lovespeech to our supper president.*

MZ 77: 11:31 asubuhi

Sa m2 akijigamba juu ya kukatwa ngozi2, sa wale wa nyeri *wenye walikatwa yote watasemann?*

MZ 62 applied "2" instead of syllable "-*tu*-" in the word *"ki2"* instead of *"kitu"* which would have meant "something" and in his text that seemed to ignore calls for Kabogo's arrest over hate speech remarks. Kabogo; a Kenyan and the then governor of Kiambu County had talked ill of the culture of a certain tribe that was not practising circumcision. These remarks attracted a

political conflict between the two tribes that held different views concerning the practice. MZ 62 seemed to be defending Kabogo by saying that there was no hate speech in his remarks. Cyrystal (2001) states that CMC allows it users to decorate their texts so as to identify themselves with other users. There is a likelihood therefore that MZ 62 wanted to identify himself with other FB users.

In his reaction MZ 77 used "m2" instead of *"mtu"* which would have meant "a person" *"ngozi2"* instead of *"ngozi tu"* which would have meant "only a foreskin". The interlocutor would have communicated if he wrote the words in their normal way, but by choosing to use the number "2," there is a likelihood that he wanted to identify himself with other FB users.

According to Anas (2007), syllabograms can also include the use of sounds in place of a certain phonetic pattern. In this study, interlocutors used sound /x/ instead of /s/. Crystal (2001) states that this is because of the speed of CMC or the fact that interlocutors want to decorate their texts. In the following example, MZ 39 used /x/ in the word *"xalamu"* instead of *"salamu"* which would have meant "hail." He changed letter /s/ to /x/ to decorate his text.

MZ 39: 06:41 jioni

Xalamu Maria umejawa na nehema.. bwana u nawe umebarikiwa kuliko wanawake wote….

MZ 39 was reacting to the news that a picture of Virgin Mary and baby Jesus had appeared in Makueni County. This news attracted reactions from Protestants who brushed off the news while Catholics defended the news as seen in the example above where MZ 39 says a Catholic prayer in praise of Mary. The word might have been written so intentionally because the speaker wanted to identify himself with other FB users.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to analyse the linguistic features used in the SSIFB. The findings illustrated that interlocutors employed various linguistic features in their interactions to communicate the intended message. For instance, they used phoneticons such as non-standard punctuation marks where more than one full stop was used to imply silence and stress. They also employed more than one EM to imply stress. Due to lack of intonation in CMC, users would resort to EMs to imply stress in their statements. Interlocutors also used more than one QM to depict stress on their opinions. Capital letters were also employed by interlocutors who wanted to depict stress on some words that they wanted to make visible to the readers of their texts. Finally, Syllabograms were also employed by interlocutors who wanted to decorate their texts by replacing the Kiswahili syllable *"-tu-"* with the number "2." They also employed sounds in place of certain phonetic sounds like "x" in place of sound "s" in order to identify themselves with other FB interlocutors. Researchers of CMC would find this study useful as the study has helped expand its scope to FB interactions and delved Kiswahili language. Linguistic researchers around the world would also find this paper useful because there is little literature on Kiswahili linguistic features used in FB.

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