APPLYING THE USES AND GRATIFICATIONS THEORY TO DECODE NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' ELECTRONIC DISCOURSE

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Abstract

This paper applies the Blumler and Katz's Uses and Gratifications Theory to decode Nigerian university students' electronic discourse, which comprises peculiar spelling forms generated by the students in their various social media chats. Suffice it to say that the Shorthand form of typing or writing had been in existence in the past, but the advent of social media further escalated it to an unimaginable creative degree this time. Unlike the old form of shorthand where symbols have generally agreed usage, social media gives its users the freedom to express orthographic idiolect and idiosyncrasies. It is this freedom that results in the different spelling variants of the same word that social media subscribers have introduced to the platforms: a phenomenon that has caught the interest of linguists and researchers. All forms of writing in social media are termed Electronic Discourse (Electronic Language or e-Language). Crystal in his book Language and the Internet gave other words used in place of e-language as Netspeak, Netlish, Weblish, Internet Language, Cyberspeak, Electronic Discourse, Interactive Written Discourse, and so on (28). The researcher, over a period of three months, and using a corpus-based approach encapsulated in the simple random sampling technique, collated data from 100 students (ages 18 – 30) registered in two public universities located in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Abuja. The researcher generated two chats from any of the social media platforms that the respondents voluntarily presented to him. The data collated was analyzed using simple percentage and frequency analyses that presented information using relevant tables to guide the analysis. The researcher further used qualitative analysis grounded in uses and gratifications theory to determine the motivations underlying students' use of peculiar spelling forms in their electronic discourse. Five categories consistent with Uses and Gratifications Theory emerged from this analysis, indicating that

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the students regularly used peculiar spelling forms for 1) entertainment, 2) convenience, 3) increasing social interaction, 4) seeking and sharing coded information, and 5) deliberately trying to restrict other people from comprehending the peculiarity of the language being selected. The study further found that English words and expressions used by many Nigerian university students in their e-language (social media chats) differed graphologically and morphologically from conventional ones. Interestingly, the omission of letters, unpopular academic abbreviations and acronyms, and the various spellings used by the students on their respective social media platforms did not constitute language or communication problems to them. Consequently, it would be of great benefit for language scholars to devise a way to accommodate these special language usages, which have become inevitable in the present dispensation due to the rapid nature of technological advancement in the world.

Introduction

Today, people live in a continual digital revolution. They regularly use information. Technology is a fact of life as a medium of daily communication that has gone a long way to introduce various spelling habits, especially among Nigerian university students. The platform on which these spelling variants and innovations emanate is social media. Some of the most popular social media platforms are Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, WeChat, and Imo, among others. The aforementioned social media platforms and others that serve similar purpose like the Short Message Service (SMS) and e-mail, have developed over the years. The development has brought many changes and has formed certain linguistic features characteristic of the proposed platform. This characteristic feature is common among users of this communication medium and is often referred to as social media discourse (SMD).

Shorthand form of typing or writing had been in existence in the past, but the advent of social media has increased it to an unimaginable creative degree. Unlike the old form of shorthand, in which symbols have generally agreed usage, social media gives its users the freedom to express orthographic idiolect. It is this freedom that results in the different spelling variants of the same word that social media subscribers have introduced to the platforms: a phenomenon that has caught the interest of linguists and researchers. All forms of writing in social media are referred to as electronic language or *e-Language*.

Statement of the Problem

Young people are the largest users of short message services; they primarily use SMS features to coordinate their social lives (Crystal, 2001). Crystal (2008) acknowledged that text messages have spread like wildfire, especially among young people who appear to spend most of their time "texting" and are unwilling to write much else.

According to Katamba (2005), texting poses a problem that should be addressed urgently. Students must know the difference between what is appropriate and what is not in the written form of the language. He further added that "text messaging" is characterized by the informal use of language and has its own place not in the official works. In the past, abbreviations and spelling variants have been used. However, the current trend of using irregular abbreviations and spelling patterns has made common since the introduction of the Internet and has

generated scholarly debates. There is a dearth of studies on these abbreviations and spelling patterns used by Nigerian university students in their social media platforms. This study aims to fill this gap.

Objectives of the Study

This study investigates, using the Uses and Gratifications theory, the irregular spelling and abbreviation forms found in the electronic language (social media chats) of Nigeria university students. This work therefore, aims: to describe the various English spelling forms used in the students' social media platforms, describe various abbreviations Nigerian university students adopt in their electronic language / social media chats, and examine the patterns in which these spellings and abbreviations occur in the students' chats.

Scope of the Study

The study was restricted to studying spelling variations found in Nigerian university students' electronic language as used on Facebook, Twitter, and Short Message Service (SMS) from October 2024 to December 2024. This study is limited to students registered at two public universities in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja.

Review of Related Literature.

Long before it became the commercialized mass information and entertainment juggernaut it is today, long before it was accessible to the general public, and certainly many years before Al Gore claimed he "took the initiative in creating" it, the Internet—and its predecessors—were a focal point for social interactivity (Salkintzis 20). According to Calhoun, computer networking was initially envisioned in the heyday of The Beatles as a military-centric command and control scheme; but as it expanded beyond just a privileged few hubs and nodes, so too did the idea that connected computers might also make a great forum for discussing mutual topics of interest, and perhaps even meeting or renewing acquaintances with other humans (Salkintzis 23). This process began in earnest in the 1970s. However, there were also other avenues for social interaction long before the Internet exploded into mainstream consciousness. One such option was CompuServe, a service that began life in the 1970s as a business-oriented mainframe computer communication solution, but expanded into the public domain in the late 1980s (Hogan 43). CompuServe allowed members to share files and access news and events. It also offered something few had ever experienced: true interaction. Not only could one send a message to one's friends via a new technology called "e-mail", one could join any of CompuServe's thousands of discussion forums to chat with thousands of other members on virtually any important subject of the day. These forums, as Hogan notes, proved tremendously popular and paved the way for the modern iterations that are now in use (45).

The Electronic Language of Social Media

Social media were invented for the major purpose of communication, and for the purpose to be achieved, social media users must not be ignorant of language skills. Therefore, language remains a medium of communication in all social media. If the tenets of language, including spelling, are not adhered to, the purpose for which social media evolved is defeated. Social media use requires some unique adaptations that have provided us with a whole new way to communicate, thereby influencing how we spell words. For instance, social media site like Twitter that impose character limits or force users to condense their thoughts. For many, this result in the excessive use of newspeak. This type of shorthand involves a whole new language with abbreviations and spelling variants. Some popular terms like LOL (for "laugh out loud") have evolved into unique words with meanings greater than their original abbreviations. LOL is now used to add a joking or lighthearted inflection to messages, almost like a type of punctuation.

Internet linguistics is a domain advocated by English linguist David Crystal. It studies new language styles and forms that have arisen under the influence of the Internet and other New Media, such as Short Message Service (SMS) text messaging (Crystal 21). Since the beginning of Human-computer interaction (HCI), leading to

computer-mediated communication (CMC) and Internet-mediated communication (IMC), experts have acknowledged that linguistics has a contributing role in it, in terms of web interface and usability (Martin delPozo, 33).

Methodology

The researcher, over a period of three months, and using a corpus-based approach encapsulated in the simple random sampling technique, collated data from 100 students (ages 18 – 30) registered in two public universities located in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Abuja. The researcher generated two chats from any of the social media platforms that the respondents voluntarily presented to him. The data collated was analyzed using simple percentage and frequency analyses that presented information using relevant tables to guide the analysis. The researcher further used qualitative analysis grounded in uses and gratifications theory to determine the motivations underlying students' use of peculiar spelling forms in their electronic discourse.

Table 1: Population Sampled at the two universities

Level	Number Sampled/Frequency	Percentage
100	40	40%
200	30	30%
300	20	20%
400	10	10%

Source: Fieldwork, 2024.

The above table shows that 40% of the respondents sampled were 100-level students, 30% were in the 200-level, 20% were 300-level students, and 10% of the remaining respondents were in their 400-level. This indicates that the highest number of respondents was in the 100-level streams.

Data Analysis

The data collated was analyzed using simple percentage and frequency analyses that presented information using relevant tables to guide the analysis. The tables show the spellings and abbreviations that are predominantly used by Nigerian university students who are avid users of Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Short Message Service (SMS). At the end of each word analysis, the standard spelling forms of what the media user intended to write were given.

These spelling forms are grouped as follows:

Initialism: Acronym and Abbreviation

Deletion or Coinage of Existing English Words

Malapropism

Use of Initialism by Undergraduate Students: Acronyms and Abbreviations

Acronyms are initialisms consisting of the first letters of several words. They replace longer terms with simpler ones. In English, the widespread use of acronyms is a relatively new linguistic phenomenon. As literacy rose and as advances in science and technology brought with them more complicated terms and concepts, the practice of abbreviating terms became increasingly convenient. Certain abbreviations can mean different things to different people. The comprehensible acronyms collated from the respondents' chats are as follows:

Convenient spelling in students' electronic discourse	Standard Usage
OMG	Oh my God,
UWC	You are welcome
HBD	Happy birthday
LOL	Laughing out loud
BAE	Before anyone else,
GTG	Got to go
ITK	I too know.
BRB	Be right back
SOB	Stressed out bad
IDC	I don't care
IDK	I don't know.
TBF	Throwback Friday
MCM	Man crush on Monday
WCW	Woman crush on Wednesday
BFF	Best friends forever
ILY	I love you.
AMA	Ask me anything.
BTW	By the way,
LALL	Live and Let's Live
	What a
TGIF	Thank you, it's Friday.
YOLO	You only live once
TTYL	Talk to you later.
EOD	End of discussion
OYO	On your own

Source: Fieldwork 2024.

Table 2: Percentage of Acronyms Collated from Respondents' chats

Number of respondents	Number of collated acronyms	Percentage
100	25	25%
Total 100	25	25%

Table 2 shows that the percentage of acronyms collected from the respondents' chats was 25%

Use of Coinage from Existing English Words and Deletion by Sampled   Respondents

Coinage is a popular way to form words. It is similar to word borrowing. Like truncation and blending, coinage involves the loss of letters. Orthography is considered that orthography plays a central importance. Coinage is used for a variety of reasons: to avoid repetition, to save space, or to conform to conventional usage. The leading authorities cannot agree on the capitalization or punctuation of many coined words. Therefore, there are no set rules. Some common words used by social media users are as follows:

Convenient spells/coinages used by respondents in electronic chats	Standard Spellings
Tinz	Things
Lyf	Life
4got	Forgot
Broda	Brother
Gr8	Great

Tnk	Thank
Luv	Love
Thru	Through
Bday	Birthday
4	For
Gud	Good
Dat, dt, and d@	That
your	Your
Msg	Message
Wt	With
Ppl	People
Ve	Have
Wrk	Work
Dere	There
U	You
Congrts	Congrats
b/4	Before
Nid	Need
Bck	Back
Oda	Other or Order
Odaz	Others or Orders
Laffs	Laughs
Wen	When
U	You
Issorait	It's alright

Source; Field work, 2024.

Table 3: Coinages Used by Respondents in their Electronic Chats.

Number of respondents	Number of Coinages Collated	Percentage
100	30	30%
Total 100	30	30%

Table 3 shows that out of the corpus collected by the researcher, the coinages found in the chats of the students comprised 30% of the data collated.

A 300-level political science student who was happy that she was about to round off her second semester posted: following sentence on Facebook: *Finshen my exams soon… Final yeh loading…………………………..* She chose to spell *finishing* as *finshen* and year as *yeh*. Perhaps the reason why she wrote symbols was that she had no such time.

It is true that many social media users love to coin, but sometimes, even the new words formed seem to have stranger orthography. This is the case in the sentence: *"Itz a defense makenisim.* The *s* in *it was* substituted with *z*, while an additional *f* was added to the word *defense* (which also has the letter *e* substituted with *i*). The last word *mechanism* is spelled as *tokenism* (written as the person pronounced the word).

You are among the word users reduce or imposed new spelling forms upon. In many instances, the word is written as **U**.

One common spelling form found among students who regularly use social media is the insertion of many numbers in the letter *O* as a means of emphasis. The words *every* and *minutes* were also spelt as *evry* and *mini* for orthographic convenience.

On one of the respondent's Facebook updates, she wrote, *"I like men wt long bierd,"* she has succeeded in introducing deletion to the word *by* deleting, intentionally the letters 'i' and 'h'. The hair growing on the lower part of a man's face is a spelt beard, but the student chose to write it as *bierd*.

In the expression *happy wikend pals*, the spelling of the word *weekend* as *wikend* was obvious. In fact, this spelling is the form many Nigerians also use on social media platforms. I have also come across many posts in which this spelling is used. Traditionally, *pals* are close friends who often act as companions. However, in the language of social media, this is rarely the intended meaning. Anyone that is a friend to one on social media is automatically called a *pal*.

This list is hardly exhaustive. This new linguistic style does not consider the accuracy of language use; neither do the users pretend to conform to the standard usage of the English language.

These are additional examples:

(1)   *Luv* takes in *every tin*! Hate segregates! Lust hides *unda luv*! *Luv pruvs* no *rite* or wrong! *Luv* shapes *tot nd* attitude *bt nt* behavior.

(2)   *Dis re d* reasons *y* we *v dis* political office holders, *why r* our counselors, local *government* chairmen, *why are we dy rily doi*, *r dy nt* supposed *2 adres dis* issues?

In the above sentences, note the spelling of the italicized words. The second sentence, which may hardly be understood by people who have not been exposed to this style of writing, reads thus in standard English: "These are the reasons why we have these political office holders, where are our counselors, local government chairmen, what are they really doing or are they not supposed to address these issue?"

Instead of any preoccupation with accuracy, users rely on the sounds or pronunciations of words to convey meaning, as seen in the use of *oda*, in place of *others* or *orders*. Oftentimes, the basic consonant in the standard spelling of a word is used to form words.

Apart from space maximization, respondents claimed to prefer this emergent style for typing speed, whether on cell phones or other devices. Can this stem from this generation's usual inclination for easy and less demanding ways of doing things? Many respondents asserted that they enjoy the freedom of not being tied to any form of standardization in language use. For some, it is fun to create something new and different from the orthodox writing style.

Use of Malapropism by Respondents' Electronic Chats

Malapropism is an incorrect word used in place of the correct one. The use of this word can be intentional or unintentional.

Occasionally, many respondents confused a word with another. When one writes ….. *Fail asleep on line*, one knows that the person intends to say *fall asleep online*. The words "failure" and "online" were not used properly here. *Fail* and *asleep* do not co-occur in English; also, *online* means that something or someone is standing or is on a line: for example, *the soldiers stood on line for hours before the president arrived*.

In the sentence, *"All these politicians are ass whole,"* the writer intends to say *asshole* (a term used to address persons who are stupid or irritating). Apart from the spelling, the word *ass whole* would have been pluralized too because of the introduction of the word *all*. The writer's choice for *whole* (in *asswhole*) is to re-emphasize that no politician is excluded.

In the sentence, my BFF and I have known each other since childhood, and we're practically inseparable. This respondent used the abbreviated word "BFF". In the respondent's update, two good friends were tagged in a picture. It was in an attempt to show how closely knit the respondent was. The respondent would have said *the best friend forever*, instead of abbreviating as *BFF*.

If one does not have a pictorial view of this comment, one may not know what the poster meant. Here, the user shared a message displaying two twins, both winning academic awards at their respective universities in Nigeria. It was to this end that the picture was captioned *"Jeans don't lie*. It is, of course, obvious that the writer was referring to genes, not *jeans*.

When one of the respondents wrote on her Facebook page that she was "*So thankful for life" and did not take people for granate*, I wondered why she chose to use the word *"granate" instead of "granate-based"* (both of which are made up of seven letters). I also came across at least six other posts in which the same word (*granate*) was substituted for *granted*.

This post *(raping my new song now)* triggered many comments on one of the male respondents' Twitter accounts. This is because one does not *rap* songs; instead,, one *raps* songs. So instead of saying *rapping* my new song now, this respondent should have said, *rapping* my new song now.

In all the paragraphs where this post (uni *or no uni I will grab employment*) was culled from, university (an institution of higher learning) was spelled as uni (which is a paste-up made by sticking together pieces of paper or photographs to form an artistic image). Another interesting aspect of this post is the use of the verb *grab* in relation to *employment*. *Employment is not given and is not grabbed*.

Another respondent posted, as a reply to an earlier comment in a group chat: *Hahahhah… that's a anonymous agreement."* Apart from the stress placed on the word, agreement, the word *"unanonymous" is "un*-English. The respondent wished to indicate that they were *unanimous* (i.e., in complete agreement).

Other posts identified by the researcher and their intended content are presented in the table below:

Original Post by respondents in their Electronic Chats	Intended Meaning
Have we meat B4?	Have we met before?
The soldiers severed us and protected us.	We are saved and protected by the troops.
It's not always in your sugar code.	It is not everything that you should do with a sugar coat.
Come le play scrable	Let's play scrabble.
Am board	I am bored.
What a tragedy	What a tragedy
That woticnorrance can do	That is what ignorance can do.
Abandon projections here and there	There are abandoned projects all over the world
Completely kip the ckrit.	Keep the secret completely
Wow!…nice gessing	Wow!…nice guessing

Spelling on social media is purely idiosyncratic. While many spellings represent how the words are pronounced, others seem even more difficult and orthographically more complex than the original ones.

Although some linguistic scholars may classify these spellings and usages as errors, others like David Crystal had a different view and considers it a great development that will further determine the fate of the orthography of the English language.

Conclusion

The results demonstrate that the English words and expressions used by many Nigerian university students in their electronic chats differ morphologically and graphologically from conventional ones. These differences are obvious, especially in the omission of letters, special generalized abbreviations and acronyms, and nonstandard spellings. Interestingly, the researcher is of the opinion that the omission of letters, unpopular academic abbreviations, and acronyms, as well as the deviant spellings used by undergraduate students in their electronic chats, do not constitute language and communication problems for them. These phenomena, instead of being sidelined and considered nonstandard, or at the extreme, errors should be integrated and standardized since they have begun to gain global popularity. It would therefore be of great benefit if language scholars devised a way to accommodate this special language usage, which has become inevitable in the 21st century because of rapid technological advancements.

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