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## An Investigation into effects of social media language on Standard English usage: A case study of WhatsApp

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### Abstract

This paper titled An Investigation into Effect of Social Media Language on Standard English Usage, a Case Study of WhatsApp attempts to investigate the impact of Social Media language on Standard English language usage that WhatsApp users (learners) faced. Many Social Media users concluded that it is a complex task especially considering the effect on language use in whatsapping. The researchers investigate the lexical effects between Standard English language usage and the fabricated abbreviations or non-standard English abbreviations by users. The researchers encountered certain difficulties in their investigation which include articles, prepositions, plurality and capitalization on the wordings in

Whatsapp messages. The researchers applied qualitative and linguistic approaches and then critically evaluate the issues relating to Standard English using Linguistic theory. The investigation finds out that the impact of Social Media language caused fabricated abbreviations on Standard English language usage by the WhatsApp users in maintaining the standard through whatsapping are inescapable but can be adjusted. It also discourages students from reading and concentrating on their studies and the effect is on language usage that includes orthography and writing skills.

**Keywords:** Language usage, Network Social Media, WhatsApp, impact

### Introduction

Internet is an acronym for International Network. A global village, it is the “specific internet consisting of a global network of computers, devices that communicate using Internet Protocol (IP) and that use Border Gateway Protocol (BGP) to identify the best paths to route those communications”<sup>[1]</sup>. As Baker, (2018:215)<sup>[1]</sup> cited Callow, (1974:30) that “each language has its patterns to convey the interrelationships of persons and events; in no language may these patterns be ignored”. Therefore, language and technology work hand in hand in the society, as technology extends human capabilities. Borgmann, (2006)<sup>[2]</sup> further explained that “it is the collection of techniques, skills, methods [...] or the accomplishment of objectives, such as scientific investigation”. As societies become globalized nowadays, Raj, (2017:1)<sup>[12]</sup> explains that: [...] Internet will comprise not only millions of computing machines and software services but also billions of personal and professional devices, diminutive sensors and actuators, robots, and so on, and trillions of sentient, smart, and digitized objects. The software services that reach devices using a platform at users’ fingertips are connected to interact socially for personal advancement. And the network is multiple computers and other devices connected together to share information<sup>[2]</sup>. According Merriam-Webster Dictionary network is “a system of computers and peripherals that can communicate with each other”. This communication helps users to reach friends and family globally through a platform like Whatsapp. Raj, (2017:8)<sup>[12]</sup> adds that: Owing to digitization, distribution, and decentralization, there is a renewed focus on realizing a legion of digitized objects, which are termed and touted as sentient materials or smart objects that are being derived out of ordinary and everyday objects. That is, common and casual things are being empowered or modernized to possess some of the IT capabilities such as computing, networking, communication, sensing, actuation, and display.

As a result of widespread sharing of “texts, display of images and sound became a structured sequence of binary digits by a company advertising for users using their smartphones for social relations and interactions”<sup>[3]</sup>. On the one side, Catford, (1965:8)

<sup>1</sup> Wikitionary, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Wikitionary, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Wikitionary, 2020.

explains in his theory that “language is a type of human patterned behaviour”. It is the most important medium in which the author states that “human beings interact in social situations”. Internet network helps the use of social platforms to interact with other users in a very fast situation and less cost compared to text messages. Therefore, “language is best seen as a complex and fuzzy social construct, that is not evenly distributed socially, and which is associated by speakers with disparate goals, values and intentions, in the course of social practice”, Jourdan, (2006:18) <sup>[6]</sup>. A language has skills that include writing and reading, which requires human and physical resources. Standard English is the “form of the English language widely accepted as the usual correct form” <sup>[4]</sup>. With the advent of Social Media platforms in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Standard English becomes negatively impacted by the deviant use of the English orthography by the users of WhatsApp platform through the fabrication of non-standard abbreviations while whatsapping. Social Media can be the materials or empty space through which signals, waves, or forces pass. It is a format for communicating or presenting information via the Internet. In our case study, WhatsApp is a medium used to publish information using a mass finishing process. It is an instant messaging service provider founded in 2009 and later acquired by Facebook in 2014. With more than 1.3 billion active users, Facebook is the most popular and widely used Social Media. Understanding how Social Media works is of paramount importance because a lot of students have been negatively impacted by this medium.

### Social Media

This medium helps users to interact individually or in groups about education, politics, religion and society. According to Kennedy, (2015:11) <sup>[7]</sup> “social media refers to various platforms that are available on the Internet, which provide users the chance to create their profiles, share and promote content”. he further states that it is an “interactive form of media that allows users to interact with and publish through the internet”. These social media platforms include WhatsApp, Facebook, Google+, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, Instant messenger, Telegram, Snap chat, Tiktok, Likee, Vskit that have specifications to aid individuals, entrepreneurs and companies set up a social presence for others to recognize the availability of their products and services. Each one of the platforms has its unique features that will make a user to use it. Looy, (2016:14) <sup>[8]</sup> contends that “social purpose or strength of social media is that they are able to unite people based on common ground” like students’ WhatsApp group. Therefore, Social Media is seen as “web-based services that allow individuals to: i) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, ii) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and iii) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system”, Ellison, (2007:211) as cited in Wariara, (2017:26) <sup>[13]</sup>.

Social Media has some advantages such as speed, analytics, interactivity and scalability. It can be used to share content fast and the surveillance on social media usage, the way of analyzing it cost less, and the interactivity between more than one individuals’ communication. As scalability is explained by Looy (2016:7) <sup>[8]</sup> that “organizations can potentially reach out to more people with a lower budget”. Looy also posits that “Social Media is explained by social actions and business

actions”. In fact, Harvey, (2014:12) <sup>[5]</sup> is of the view that “good use of social media can turn the average person into a worldwide opinion leader”. In our investigation, we are interested in a social aspect which includes, ‘retweet’, ‘like’, ‘post’, ‘follow’, ‘blogpost’, ‘make a comment’, ‘rate this’ and ‘bookmark’ where users express themselves through writing. These are easier in operations than learning and reading which takes most of the time of user (learners) and even their leisure time. Wariara, (2017:28) <sup>[13]</sup> observes that “scholars over time have pursued to understand how the audiences use the media to satisfy their psychological and social needs”. In that, the language used is not standard as that allows each user to write or post using different fabricated abbreviations and jargon that are not acceptable in Standard English.

Other researches conducted by experts in Social Media like Oche *et al.* (2019) <sup>[11]</sup>, Wariara, (2017) <sup>[13]</sup> and Mwakapina, (2016) made practical contributions on WhatsApp. Oche *et al* observed that WhatsApp is part of everyday life and the most popular leisure activities among youth. For them, bright light from computers and mobile phones’ screens caused delay for the brain and body to initiate sleep thereby resulted in fatigue and sleep disorder especially during the day. Wariara used communication and technology in Social Media as a means of communication in organizations which can be formal or informal. Mwakapina insist that WhatsApp does more good than harm in learning and development. For him, it can be blended in the interactive language learning despite its challenges in second language learning.our perspective is an investigation of Social Media language on Standard English language usage, a case study of WhatsApp. To the best of our knowledge, this research is among the pioneers of its kind on the interference between technology and language. Our interest is on language use among Nigerian users of WhatsApp.

### WhatsApp, its Usage and Users

WhatsApp is a “mobile phone messaging service that operates through the use of smartphones. The service which began in 2009 by Brian Acton and Jan Koum enables users to send text messages, photos, videos and documents”, (WhatsApp, 2016). And Social Media platforms progressively have been taken over by choice presently to many users who finds it as an attractive form of socialization. One of these platforms is WhatsApp which started in 2009 with extreme progression in over 180 countries and currently with over 2 billion users worldwide. In Nigeria, WhatsApp is one of the most used social media and has 85% of 24 million social media users out of 122 million internet users, (Nigeria Communication Commission, June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020) <sup>[5]</sup>. The usage has penetrated higher institutions where the majority are the youth. Therefore, with the present spread, there is a need to comprehend the usage and effects on users especially with regards to their resort to peculiar abbreviations that cannot be overlooked.

The application is WhatsApp Messenger version 2.20.197.17 © 2010-2020 WhatsApp Inc. from Facebook is the latest in use on Google store. This software contains some licenses and copyright as follows: Copyright © 2006 Google Inc., Copyright © 1999-2004 The Apache Software Foundation, Jakarta Commons Loggings Copyright © 2005, 2006, Android Code Copyright © 2005-2008, 2007, 2014, The Android Open Source Project, Audio Effects Copyright ©

<sup>4</sup> Wikitionary, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.Allafrica.com> accessed on 29<sup>th</sup> November, 2020.

2010 Apache2 License, Copyright © 2011 Google Inc., Copyright © 2001-2011 Xiph.Org, Skype Limited, The MIT License © 2012 Jan Muller, The MIT License © 2013 Haunted soft, Copyright © 2014 Soichiro Kashima, Copyright © 2001-2017 Cisco Systems Inc., Copyright © 2014 Twitter, Inc. and other contributors. It has its terms and conditions for use reproduction and distribution. WhatsApp account has privacy, security and other features that make it reliable in operations.

In other words, a standard is a set of rules or requirements which are widely agreed upon or imposed by experts or scholars in English language <sup>[6]</sup>. It can be a standardized language. The use of articles, prepositions, plurality and capitalization are the key areas we focused on – lexis and phrases. These are short written abbreviations set by English language experts, scholars and Dictionaries. This is to conclude that abbreviation is “the shortened or contracted form of a word or phrase, used to represent the whole, utilizing omission of letters and sometimes substitution of letters or duplication of initial letters to signify plurality” <sup>[7]</sup>. WhatsApp is part of social activities, learning processes and discussions platform. It has impacted negatively on some of the users but impacted positively on a few that achieved to improve their writing skills. In some cases, lecturers “try to adopt different strategies such as using social networking sites to blend their English teaching for their classes to be much more interactive” Mwakapina, (2017:8). Our research is aimed at:

- Examining the level at which WhatsApp affects Standard English through fabricated abbreviations by users (learners).
- Investigating the impact of WhatsApp on users (language learners) and how to find possible solutions.
- Finding out the challenges in the use of English faced by users (learners) of WhatsApp in higher institutions of Nigeria.

### Catford's Theory of Linguistics

Catford's theory as explained in *A Linguistic Theory of Translation* is a “consideration of how language is related to the human social situations in which it operates”, (1965:9).

The theory includes the operation of language in social situations. It is a language-based theory where “word” is an important element. According to the theory, the second type is a “manifestation of language in a written medium – the performer is a writer and his addresses are readers”, (1965:2). The language activity here is writing; which is a graphism of symbols such as letters that express some meanings. And language is a patterned human behaviour, it is the pattern which is the language itself. As Dershowitz (2014:12) added that “language is man's most effective method of communication with his fellows [...]”. Communication is the state of exchanging information between individuals. The medium here is an open space in a network, surfing on the internet. It is a social network sharing messages mostly in a written form. The study is an approach using language to analyze human social situations, in our study WhatsApp – Social Media platforms.

### Fabricated Abbreviations

The abbreviations used in whatsapping are not standard and are unacceptable in Standard English. These abbreviations are unlike jargon, where they are fixed and standard. As Nordquist, (2019:1) defines jargon as “the specialized language of a professional or occupational group. While this language is often useful or necessary for those within the group, it is usually meaningless to outsiders”. This study, therefore, explores the impact of social media, specifically WhatsApp as in our case study. We discussed with a victim who confessed that it affected him through orthography even during his examination in the University. He mistakenly used such abbreviations and later realized that he was writing an examination in which such wages were not accepted. Some users are addicted to such abbreviations that they shortened words wherever they compose something, they cannot differentiate their situation due to the addiction whether they are chatting or even writing examinations. Instances like “okay” abbreviated as “ohk” or “ohky”, “weekend” as “wk” or “wknd”.

Other examples of the fabricated abbreviations are tabulated as follows:

Table 1

Word, phrase	Fabricated abbr.	Word, phrase	Fabricated abbr.
About	Abt	Late	L8
At the moment	ATM	Later	L8r
Before	B4	Let me	Lemme
Birthday	Buflay	Let me know	LMK
But	Buh	Letter	Ltr
Bye bye	BB	Laughing out loud	#Lots of love, lol
Direct message	DM	Love	Lv, luv
Falling on the floor laughing	FOFL	Never mind	Nvm, Nmind
Friend	Frnd	Normal	Nml
Good	Gud	Okay	K
Good morning	GM	Okay cool	Kk
Good night	GN, gud nyt, 9t	Parent at home	PAH
Heart	Hrt	Parent over my shoulder	POMS
Have a nice day	Hand	Please	Pls
How far	Hw far	School	Skul, skull
I don't know	Idunno	Sorry	Sowie
In my opinion	IMO	Sweet	Cwt
Instant message	IM	Then	Den
Just	Jst	This	Dis

<sup>6</sup> Wikitionary, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Wikitionary, 2020.



Just kidding	JK	Those	Dose
Keep me posted	KMP	Want	Wnt
Keep parents clueless	KPC	With	Wip
Know	Knw, no	Your	Ur

Source: Users plus <sup>[8]</sup>

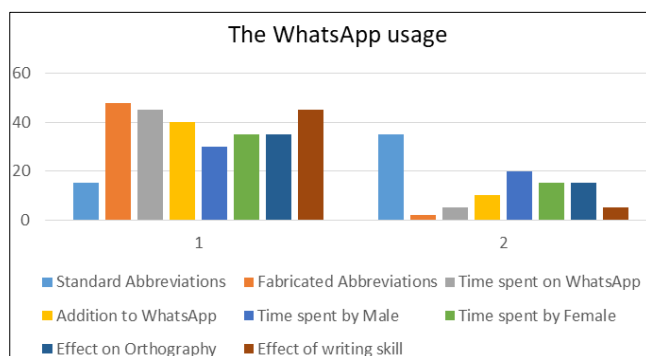
### Scope of the study, Source of data and method of data collection

The study is conducted within Sokoto metropolis in Sokoto State, Nigeria. We selected some higher institutions' students that use WhatsApp to have good results. The questionnaire is designed with both open-ended and closed questions which were distributed and collected to the students for a week to analyze the data. The instrument applied is the Microsoft Excel 2013 version that will be used to process the coded and analyze data to have the result in a percentage with bar chart and pie chart.

The questionnaire was designed for respondents in order to get a sample of data from the field which we will use to analyse the results. We selected some respondents ranging from 18 – 41 years of age that include male and female. We administered fifty (50) questionnaires to respondents, twenty-five (25) for males and the same for females which sums up to one hundred in our analysis.

### Data Analysis and Results

Ninety-five percent (95%) of our respondents claimed to have access to the internet through buying data from mobile companies depending on their usage. 80% of the respondents are of the age range of between 18 – 25 years of age, who are the most affected by the use of fabricated abbreviations in WhatsApp and they believed that they can only adjust the attitude. These are the same range of respondents that are whatsapping always through the up till the late morning hours. While 20% of the respondents are of the age range of between 26 – 45 years believed that they can overcome the attitude of fabricated abbreviations by using either a standard abbreviation or whatsapping with full text. The data collected from the field was used to analyse the results using Microsoft Excel. The data is then processed using a bar chart and a pie chart to analyse the result as which fit best in the following Fig., 1:



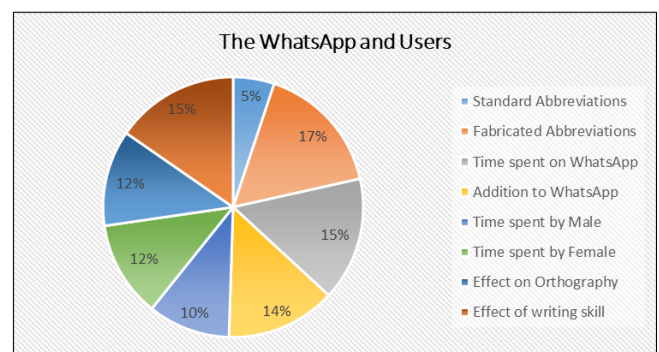
Source: Questionnaire

Fig 1

The above bar chart shows the effect of WhatsApp in two-directional comparisons. The results of horizontal and vertical categories on the first side are more or less greater than those on the second side. The first is a standard

abbreviation which is not used mostly by users as indicated in the chart but the second, fabricated abbreviation is often used in WhatsApp because it is easier to chat. The third is the time spent on WhatsApp which is mostly by the youth than the adults that resulted in the fourth, addiction on WhatsApp. It is a situation whereby a user cannot be without WhatsApp as our result shows, this category can only adjust the usage of WhatsApp and the use of nonstandard abbreviation in language. The next is the time spent on WhatsApp by females is greater than that of males with nearly 15% interval. This shows that females especially the youth spent much more time whatsapping than their male counterparts. The effect is mostly on language usage that includes the last two: the effect on orthography and writing skill. This is where the research focused on the ability of a learner to spell words correctly and using the required mechanics, as in Standard English.

We further analyse the result as follows in Fig., 2:



Source: Questionnaire

Fig 2

The above pie chart shows that the time spent on WhatsApp and the effect of writing skill are parallel of 15% each making 30% out of hundred, and fabricated abbreviations made by users occupied 17% of the respondents. There is no standard abbreviation or set rules in whatsapping as explained, the use of fabricated abbreviations in whatsapping and any other can be added as we found out in the table below. Besides, WhatsApp occupied 14% of users that are addicted to its use. Our investigation reveals that most users cannot do without WhatsApp, even if it is lack of data or flat battery; they can go to any length to return online to chat. Then the effect on orthography is 12% and the result reveals that most users cannot spell words correctly either due to lack of knowledge or writing skill. This resulted in the rampant use of fabricated abbreviations that affect them academically especially students in academic pursuit. The time spent on WhatsApp by females is higher than that of males with 12% and 10% respectively. The result shows that users waste a lot of time on WhatsApp. Lastly, only 5% used standard abbreviations or write in full while whatsapping. These are few individuals who take time to compose text without considering the easy way but the best way.

<sup>8</sup> <https://preply.com/en/blog/2020/05/07/te-most-used-internet-abbreviations-for-texting-and-tweeting/#scroll-to-heading-10>

## Research Findings

We found out that users of social media, like WhatsApp in our study have impacted in some ways on educational and social behaviours regarding language. These among others include the use of fabricated abbreviations or phrases that would be difficult to understand in whatsapping except among themselves. They are unlike standard abbreviations that are acceptable and easy to understand in the English language. Some findings according to our investigation reveal that there are reasons behind such acts. These reasons are: the abbreviations are formed for easy chatting, response or composing text and to save time or efforts on the one hand; they can be as a result of lack of knowledge and in fact, as the saying goes “any wrong show is a new style” any short form of words is added.

On the other hand, it discourages students from reading and concentrating on their studies. This is because most of the time, if one is not online, one will feel s/he is not comfortable and the moment one is online, it takes more than one expects. It distracts one from his or her social relations especially among family and friends, one can be laughing or talking to himself in presence of another without knowing. Also, it consumes much of a person's time and attention, especially among youths. It even affects the state of well-being, mental and social – health. Our investigation reveals that some users stay awake till the late hours of the morning. As Wariara, (2017:41) cited Yeboah and Ewur (2014) that “WhatsApp impacted the performance of tertiary institutions' students negatively”. The investigation concludes that “WhatsApp usage leads to lack of concentration in lectures, time wastage, causes the students not to complete their assignments and spoils their spellings and grammatical sentence construction”.

Our investigation on WhatsApp is a tasking one because it is part of learners' daily activities and it is difficult to separate users from this application. Therefore, we recommend that learners should:

1. Readjust their way of life in or reschedule their daily activities,
2. Save time by making it possible to do other activities rather than being on WhatsApp only,
3. Use the app positively to educate and to develop their writing skills
4. not abbreviating almost everything through whatsapping,
5. Concentrate on groups that will develop their educational activities especially those that involved writing.
6. Try to overcome the fabricated abbreviation by sticking to standard or write the text in full.

Besides, there is also the use of voice messages in WhatsApp that facilitates the use of spoken Hausa. This voice message helps those who find it difficult to write or read like the illiterate (uneducated) individuals or speakers of a language without written form to a message using a voice recorder. In some cases, some individuals can speak a language but cannot read nor write it but understand it in a spoken form. This is achieved by holding the mic button to record your utterances and send the message by releasing your hand in the compose text chat environment. This requires another research of its own.

## Conclusion

Globalisation is part of everyday activity including socialization. The social media platform is a medium of exchanging views, files, documents, photos, chatting and messaging with friends across the globe. With the advancement in Social Media platforms - WhatsApp has been obtained by many users who find it attractive with over 24 million users in Nigeria and over 2 billion users worldwide. WhatsApp uses a unique identity using a mobile number creating a room for discussion electronically not physically. The users (learners) due to privacy, write anything considering it is informal therefore, lose focus by tampering with the English orthography or writing skills. This results in fabricated abbreviations because anything is welcomed as there are no set rules for texting in whatsapping. Some Instances of these fabrications were illustrated above in our research findings. Also, the effect of WhatsApp cannot be over-emphasized in the mind-boggling distraction of users from their daily activities which include learning. It makes some of them addictive in the sense that they cannot do without it. It affects their orthography and writing skills even in the examinations. The users become obsessed and curious to read the messages they have while they were offline. Besides, they waste a lot of time on WhatsApp, lack concentration in lectures, which causes the students not to complete their assignments and ruins their spellings and grammatical sentence structure and construction. These are some of the factors that contribute to their poor academic performances and lead them to a high rate of failure educationally.

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