

A PRAGMATIC STUDY OF SELECTED PROFILE STATUS ON WHATSAPP VIRTUAL BOARD

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Abstract

The study examines the thematic foci of selected Nigerian profile status on the WhatsApp virtual board. It identifies and analyses the mood structure and speech act features of the selected profile status. The study relates the identified mood structure and speech act features to the context of the situation. This is done to understand the sociopolitical and economic challenges of WhatsApp users and how such challenges have affected their feelings, ideas and perceptions of the Nigerian nation. The data for the study are drawn from the profile status of selected Nigerian WhatsApp users. The profile status of 20 Nigerians from the Southwest is purposively selected for analysis. The choice of Southwest is justified by the researcher's accessibility of WhatsApp users. The threads of discussion were selected between January 2023 and April 2023. This period was chosen not only because it captured the most recent updates on profile status, but also because it was a tough period in the country when Naira and petroleum were scarce. Pet names are deployed as profile names under analysis so as not to reveal the identities of the users. Data are analysed using Osibanwo's principles of Mood System (1999) and Searle's classificatory model of Speech Acts (1979). Findings reveal that mood structure and speech act analysis account for attitudinal, affective and interpersonal meanings in the data. The study posits that WhatsApp profile statuses are characterised by attitudinal, affective and interpersonal meanings. The study concludes that not only does the selected profile status exemplify the socio-political and economic woes of the masses/users in a postcolonial Nigerian nation, the profile status help to realise the significance of the theories adopted for the study.

Keywords: Pragmatics, Nigeria, WhatsApp and profile status, Mood System, virtual board.

1 Introduction

Social media is fast becoming an online environment where serious issues of personal, interpersonal, national and international concerns are engaged. The

world has indeed come to social media, such that if anyone would claim to be informed without this virtual platform, such might be living in the past. We must now understand the implicit and explicit, connotative and

denotative, affective and interpersonal language of social media if we must have a light insight into whatever anyone may be doing or saying around us since our personal lives are now daily lived on social media. The WhatsApp virtual platform is one of the Internet fora where Internet users romance pragmatic issues of day-to-day realities for communication and other purposes and where one can easily put two and two together to decode or demystify people's challenges, moods, and experiences among others, particularly through their profile status.

Profile status is explored for a number of things. For instance, written messages with colourful designs are usually uploaded to users' profile statuses. Pictures of different kinds are also found on the profile status. Emojis, emoticons, videos, music and verbal messages all find expressions on Whatsapp profile status. This forum is used to express seasons of joy such as birthdays, naming ceremonies, housewarming, academic exploits, job appointments, admission, and marriage engagements, among others. It is also used to express seasons of sorrow such as bereavement, rude news, divorce, and deprivation. Since the profile status is a practical channel where someone can encode the mood, feelings, and experiences of users, it, therefore, becomes imperative to examine the language attitude of the profile status on the WhatsApp virtual platform. It is against this backdrop that the present study attempts a pragmatic study of selected Nigerian profile status on WhatsApp to identify the sociopolitical, economic, and cultural realities of the people and how such realities have affected their feelings, ideas and perceptions of the world around them.

2 The Phenomenon of WhatsApp Virtual Board

WhatsApp Messenger is a cross-platform instant messaging application that allows iPhone, BlackBerry, Android, windows phone and Nokia Smartphone users to exchange information through texts, images, video and audio messages (Power 2012). WhatsApp provides individual chat, group chat and location-sharing options. Founded in 2009 by Brian Acton and Jan Koum (Nentwich & Konig, 2014), WhatsApp has since become a popular networking forum, globally. Some of the prominent features of Whatsapp are profile pictures and profile status. While a profile picture presents the pictorial image of users, a profile status provides a short information/message about a user's state of affairs. For instance, short common expressions such as "I'm busy", "sleeping", "Hey there! I am using WhatsApp", "available", "urgent calls only" and "can't talk, WhatsApp only" are usually posted by users as profile status, perhaps when they are bored of constructing more engaging expressions as profile status.

Meanwhile, WhatsApp profile users have explored this social networking forum in recent times to express more fundamental personal travails. In other words, profile status has become a channel for explicating users' sociopolitical and economic realities. Little wonder Joinson (2008) posits that WhatsApp status is a terrific way to share just what is running in one's mind. Joinson (2008) asserts further that each WhatsApp status is the best way to describe users' moods in social life. Interestingly, the profile status is probably updated at intervals depending on the current socioeconomic plights of the user. Some are comical, lovely and inspirational, while some are mere lamentations of sorrows and sufferings.

Meanwhile, most studies on social networking websites have focused on a general assessment of those websites, to the neglect of evidence-based critical linguistic appraisals such as mood structure and speech act analysis. Studying the WhatsApp profile status of selected Nigerians through these linguistic tools (i.e., mood structure and speech act) will enhance an understanding of the sociopolitical and economic challenges of WhatsApp users and how such have affected their feelings, ideas and perceptions of the Nigerian nation. The present study would therefore examine the thematic foci of the selected profile status, identify and analyse the mood structure as well as the speech act features of the selected profile status, and relate the identified mood structure and speech act features to the context of the situation. The study is expected to contribute to the understanding of the linguistic characteristics of online discourse and add to the knowledge of the relevance and application of pragmatic theory to the analysis of online discourse.

3 Review of Related Literature

Most studies on social media have focused on a general assessment of social networking websites, largely to the neglect of evidence-based critical linguistic appraisals. Nevertheless, those studies provide a sound theoretical premise and perceptiveness for our present study.

Nentwich & Konig (2014) present the state of knowledge regarding academic usage practices, both in general purpose Social Network Sites and in science-specific Social Network Sites. The paper assesses potential impacts by addressing identified key issues such as privacy, the role of pseudonymity, and the specific form of informal communication in question. In particular, the paper focuses on the issue of network effects and the challenge of multiple channels, which presents itself as a

major hurdle for the effective implementation of Social Network Sites in academia. Despite these difficulties, the paper concludes that Social Network Sites are in principle, functional for scholarly communication and that they have serious potential within academia.

In a related manner, Ralph & Alessandro (2005) explore patterns of information revelation in online social networks and their privacy implications. The paper analyses the online behaviours of 4,000 Carnegie Mellon University students who have joined a popular social networking site. The paper evaluates the amount of information the students disclose and studies their usage of the site's privacy settings. It highlights potential attacks on various aspects of their privacy and shows that only a minimal percentage of users change their highly permeable privacy preferences.

Similarly, June (2011) highlights the theoretical frameworks used by researchers to understand adolescents and Social Network Sites. The paper brings together works from disparate fields that examine the relationship between Social Network Sites and social capital, privacy, youth safety, psychological well-being and educational achievement. The paper addresses high-profile concerns and controversies that surround youth participation in online communities and offers ripe areas for future research. It posits that Social Network Sites are an intriguing new environment to study because technology is such an integral part of teenage life. The paper concludes that research on social media effects is vital to informing the societal debates and concerns about new technology and youth, regardless of the theoretical frameworks Social Network Sites' scholars decide to utilize.

Equally, Mazman & Usluel (2011) explore and determine individuals' usage purposes of social networks with a focus on the possible differences between females

and males, using Facebook as a case study. The data consists of 870 Facebook users who responded to the online survey, designed by the researchers. The study posits that usage purposes can be categorised under four categories, namely, maintaining existing relationships, making new relationships, academic purposes and specific agenda. Significant differences were found between genders for all of the purposes mentioned. While the difference in making new contacts was in favour of males, the differences in the other three user purposes were in favour of females. On the whole, it is clear from the above brief survey that the present study seems to represent one of the first major linguistic works on Whatsapp profile status in particular and social networking sites in general, within the context of Nigerian socio-political and economic realities.

4 Methodology

The data for the study are drawn from the profile status of selected Nigerian WhatsApp users. The profile status of 20 Nigerians from the Southwest is purposively selected for analysis. The choice of Southwest is justified by the researcher's accessibility of WhatsApp users. The threads of discussion were selected between January 2023 and April 2023. This period was chosen not only because it captured the most recent updates on profile status, but also because it was a tough period in the country when Naira and petroleum were scarce. Pet names are deployed as profile names under analysis so as not to reveal the identities of the users. Data are analysed using Osisanwo's principles of Mood System (1999) and Searle's classificatory model of Speech Acts (1979). The theories are adopted in view of their amalgamation of two theoretical parameters which are fundamental to the study of the communicative functions of

language constructs in specific socio-cultural or historical contexts.

5 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted for the study is pragmatics. Under pragmatics, mood structure and speech act models are explored. Osisanwo (1999) posits that the mood system is basically concerned with the situation of the subject in the clause structure. That is, whether the speaker has chosen a subject or not; where a subject is present, whether it is positioned before or within the predicator; where the subject is even absent, whether or not the speaker is one of the participants in the action mentioned in the utterance. He creates the first distinction in the mood system with indicative and imperative moods. The former has a subject while the latter has no subject. The indicative mood is used to make factual statements, ask questions or express opinions as if they are facts, while the imperative mood expresses command, request or order.

The indicative mood is further divided into an indicative declarative and indicative interrogative. The subject of a sentence occupies the normal initial position in the former while the subject of a sentence is positioned in between verbal elements in the latter. The interrogative mood is further divided into Wh interrogatives and Non-Wh interrogatives. The former has Wh-item for its questioning while the latter does not have any. Equally, the imperative mood is separated into jussive imperative and non-jussive imperative. The choice of including either of the speaker and addressee as performer of an action in a sentence yields a jussive imperative while the choice of excluding both of them yields a non-jussive imperative. The jussive has two further options: the exclusive and the inclusive. The exclusive excludes the speaker while the inclusive includes him/her.

Searle (1979) identifies five types of illocutionary acts, namely: representatives, directives, commissives, expressive and declarations (Odebunmi 2001). Representatives are utterances that describe situations through assertions, conclusions, claims, etc. A directive is an utterance which uses ordering, commanding, begging, requesting and asking to get something done through the hearer. Commissives are acts that get the hearer committed to getting

something done. These are promising, vowing, pledging one's allegiance etc. Expressives are acts that reveal the psychological workings of the hearer, e.g., thinking, apologizing, congratulating and condoling. Declarations go to a large extent with institutionalized situations. A declaration causes a change to be in such situations, e.g., christening a baby, firing a worker, excommunicating a worker and declaring peace (2001:91).

Table 1: Data Presentation and Discussion

S/N	PROFILE NAMES (Pet Names)	PROFILE STATUS	SPEECH ACT TYPE(S)	CONTEXT OF SITUATION	MOOD STRUCTURE
1	Mg	If you have never failed...it means you have not tried something new	Representative	The user seems to have written several job interviews, all of which did not generate something worthwhile	Indicative declarative
2	Ak	Make your order for cheaper data of any Gigabyte (MTN, ETISALAT & AIRTEL)	Directive	user is a part 3 student of a tertiary institution in Nigeria; he hustles to make ends meet and pay his school fees	Imperative jussive
3	B B	When you boldly speak your mind or you are confident...you are labelled as arrogant/difficult	Expressive/representative	The user seems to have been frustrated after several failed attempts to secure a job	Indicative declarative
4	Dpg	Beauty	Expressive	User has recently finished his NYSC from Damaturu, Yobe State, where Boko haram insurgents had killed several people in recent times	Imperative jussive
5	Ez	No worries, Oluwa is involved	Expressive/commissive	The user seems to be long due for a wedding and she is still seriously searching for a marital partner. She has also not got a good job.	Indicative declarative
6	Eng N	It shall be well with me	Expressive	The user is a fresh graduate, searching for a good job.	Indicative declarative

7	Fat	Lord of host, perfect your work in my life	Directive	The user is a job seeker	Indicative declarative
8	Aji	Joy everyday	Representative/Expressive	The user has just got married to the daughter of a popular politician in Nigeria	Imperative jussive- inclusive
9	Keni	Blessed beyond measures	Expressive/Representative	The user is a Nigerian but based in the US.	Imperative jussive- inclusive
10	Mujojo	I am Mr Perfect, do you care?	Commissive	The user is an emerging musician	Indicative declarative
11	MsOlas	I fall, I rise, I make mistakes, I live and learn, I've been hurt, but am alive, I'm human but not perfect, and I'm thankful.	Expressive/Representative	The user is a divorcee	Indicative declarative
12	Sly Road	Let my joy be full o Lord	Directive	The user is single; still searching for a husband	Imperative jussive- inclusive
13	Pato	Life is short, live it	Representative	The user works with NNPC	Indicative declarative
14	Wby	We are all failures...at least the best of us are.	Representative	User is an ardent politician but his party lost in the just concluded presidential election in Nigeria	Indicative declarative
15	Osc	Keep your face always towards the sunshine and shadows will fall behind you.	Directive	The user has just got a job after seven years of graduation from the university	Imperative non- jussive
16	Huty B.	The less you give a damn, the happier you will be.	Expressive/Directive/Repr esentative	The user is still seriously searching for a job after many years of graduation from the university.	Indicative declarative
17	Guti	In life, it's not about finding yourself, it's about creating you.	Directive/Expressive/Repr esentative	The user is a man of God	Indicative declarative
18	Pablo	I wish I could carry your smile in my heart forever. Love you!	Commissive	The user is preparing to get married; probably in two months	Indicative declarative
19	Tsyin	Do you know how it feels to be ignored? It hurts.	Expressive/Directive	The user seems to have been jilted	Indicative Non- Wh Interrogative
20	Solly	Being single is not a time to look for love, use that time to work on your mind and grow as an individual	Directive/Expressive	The user is single but aged; she seems to have given up on getting a husband	Imperative Non-jussive

6 Discussion of Findings

For the speech act analysis, the data are dominated by representatives, expressive and directives but very few instances of commissives are observed. From the total acts of 31, representatives occur 9 times, directive occurs 8 times, expressive occurs 11 times, and commissive only occurs 3 times. Through the representatives, the profile users of the selected profile status criticize, condemn, state, report and analyse. For instance, in sample 14 below,

We are all failures...at least the best of us is. (Sample 14)

the user (Wby) criticizes the role played by the agents that have contributed to the sociopolitical and economic failure of the Nigerian nation and concludes that everyone (regardless of status or rank) has played a part in the bankruptcy of Nigerian society. This is inferred from the choices of “we are all” and “the best of us” which clearly implicate a devastating influence. Another fascinating example of a representative is cited in sample 16 below:

The less you give a damn, the happier you will be. (Sample 16)

Here, the user (Huty B.) appears to have condemned the attitude of the nation’s post-independence political leaders who seem to care less about the plight of the oppressed masses. Huty B. seems to be saying that revolution probably seems to be the key to the masses’ happiness in Nigeria.

The directives in the data are used to challenge, advise, request and order. Two examples will suffice:

Keep your face always towards the sunshine and shadows will fall behind you. (Sample 15)

In this excerpt, the user (Osc) advises and challenges the oppressed masses of the Nigerian nation to be resolute and determined in making the country a better place for the commoners. The user probably feels that their socioeconomic predicament will someday be a thing of the past, only if they are resolute in their campaign against marginalisation, oppression, corruption and inhumane attitudes of the nation’s leaders. Another instance of a directive is seen in sample 2 below:

Make your order for cheaper data of any Gigabyte (MTN, ETISALAT & AIRTEL). (Sample 2)

By this directive act, the user (Ak) requests people to patronise his illegal business of gaining unauthorised access to computer data, held by other organisations like MTN, ETISALAT, GLO and AIRTEL, among others. This criminal act explains the need for the masses to survive in a country that has no plan for everyone except a few individuals.

The expressive in the data are used to lament, think, condole and apologise. For instance, in sample 3 below,

When you boldly speak your mind or you are confident...you are labelled as arrogant/difficult. (Sample 3)

the user (B B) laments the disgusting reactions of Nigerian political leaders to constructive criticism. Over time, government critics in Nigeria have often been seen as enemies and rebels. The user condemns such attitudes and probably advocates for a more reasonable way of conceiving constructive criticism in the country. Similarly in sample 5 below,

No worries, Oluwa is involved. (Sample 5)

the user (Ez) condoles herself, perhaps over the death of someone dear to her or over her socio-economic challenges.

Meanwhile, with regard to the mood structure, the indicative declarative mood is widely deployed in the data to make a factual statement about users' economic challenges and the country's failure to meet those challenges. It also conveys the users' disappointment and disillusionment in the country's political leadership which has failed significantly over time. The users' attitudinal meanings show that the country has become a hell for uncountable numbers of its citizens who suffer in silence. To cite a few examples, sample 1 echoes "failure", which means the tragedy of the oppressed masses. Also, sample 5 shows the manner in which the oppressed masses have taken to religion as a result of their economic actualities. The interpersonal meaning of this sample emphasizes the notion of religion as the opium of the masses. For instance, it is only in Nigeria that workers are retrenched a few months after their appointment. It is also in Nigeria that workers don't receive a salary for six months. The sample depicts the scenario of a failed nation with failed leadership. Sample 14 stresses the metaphor of failure and expresses the fact that the country is corrupt from the top to the bottom. Sample 16 seems to proffer a solution to the plight of the oppressed masses by calling for revolution "The less you give a damn, the happier you will be".

The imperative mood in the data is used to express command, order and request. It indicates the users' desires that the action expressed in the data takes place. For example, sample 1 shows the user's desire that people will patronize his business. Sample 12 requests God for divine help from above. The interpersonal meaning in sample 12 is that of disappointment in the country's leadership. Sample 9 is imperative non-jussive because

neither the user nor the addressee is involved. The sample seems to romance the phenomenon of divine assistance from heaven. Meanwhile, sample 15 is imperative jussive because it involves the addressee but not the user. The sample seems to request the masses to be resolute in fighting for a true and egalitarian society. On the whole, all these examples above have explicated the state of mind of the users with regard to the country's economic realities.

7 Conclusion

So far, the study has done a pragmatic investigation of selected Nigerian WhatsApp profile status, with emphasis on mood structure and speech act model. From the analysis, there is a preponderance of indicative declarative mood (with 12 occurrences) and imperative mood (either jussive or non-jussive) with 8 occurrences. The indicative declarative mood expresses facts about the users' socio-economic predicament and the failure of the country to attend to such. The imperative mood expresses the users' attitudinal meanings with regard to their various desires for divine assistance. In the speech act analysis, there is a pre-eminence of expressive, representative and directive acts.

The expressive acts reveal the frustrations of the users, with such acts as "I fall, I rise..." (sample 11), "No worries..." (Sample 5), "The less you give a damn..." (Sample 16) and "Do you know how it feels to be ignored?" (Sample 19), among others. The directive acts show the attitude of the users in calling for assistance from far and near: "Lord of host..." (Sample 7), "let my joy be full..." (Sample 12). The representative acts describe the conditions of the users through assertions, conclusions and claims. Findings reveal that mood structure and speech act analysis account for attitudinal, affective and interpersonal

meanings in the data. The study posits that WhatsApp profile statuses are characterised by attitudinal, affective and interpersonal meanings. The study concludes that not only does the selected profile status exemplify the socio-political and economic woes of the masses/users in post-independence Nigeria, the profile status help to realise the significance of pragmatic theory to the study of online-related discourse.

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