

SOCIAL NETWORKING IN FACEBOOK: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC APPROACH

EMMANUEL CHUKWUDI UGWU

ec.ugwu@unizik.edu.ng

AND

JANE NKECHI IFECHELOBI

jn.ifechelobi@unizik.edu.ng

**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE NNAMDI
AZIKIWE UNIVERSITY, AWKA**

ABSTRACT

Language and society always go hand in hand, so much so that the society determines the successful usage of linguistic items. Meanwhile, language changes and varies because society exists. Holmes acclaimed that “sociolinguistics aim is to move towards a theory which provides a motivated account of the way language is used in a community, and of the choices people make when they use language” (16). Akindele and Adegbite define sociolinguistics as “the relationship which exists between a language or languages and culture and tradition as well as the politics of a particular community” (3). Hardly does one board a bus, enter a classroom or any gathering or others of social cluster without a sizeable percentage interacting on a social network. One needs therefore to be knowledgeable about this new trend which is in vogue because the linguistic attributes and behaviours are unique and impeccable in the social network structure of the present age. The end point of the communicative competence among Facebook users is the ability to manipulate their various kinds of linguistic skill in their speech community. In other words, this paper seeks to look into the social norms of interactions among the Facebook and its users, the languages and attitudes involved, the normal interactivity to the monolingual, bilingual and multilingual network speech community in the social network: Facebook. The paper will be based on features in the home, wall and profile where the society takes part in the linguistic manipulation using features on the mobile phone.

Origin of Facebook

Facebook was born out of social interaction of sociolinguistics and its community in trying to bridge the gap of communication among people of identifiable mind. The Facebook was invented by a Harvard Computer Science student, Mark Zuckerberg, along with his classmates Edwardo Saverin, Dustin Moskovitz and Chris Hughes. In an attempt to get to know their fellow students, a popular social networking website originated. However, the website was originally called faceMash. It was closed down in 2003 because of the series of hitches, charges and challenges it faced. It was later re-launched with a new website: “The Facebook” and finally “Facebook”. At first, the site was restricted to Harvard College students, but later upgraded and expanded to incorporate additional universities and colleges. The idea that emanated from Zuckerberg’s dormitory room has today metamorphosed into what everyone from different parts of the world can access.

Activation of Facebook

One thing is to know about the existence of Facebook, another, is to access it and make use of it. To activate, one has to google the word 'Facebook' or type "*facebook.com*" on web address and strictly follow the instruction, once the page opens. The intending user must already have an e-mail account or a phone number, and within five minutes everything is set for one to start using it. A friend, Marcus writes on another friend's wall: "wishing u an E-week of: e-Exciting, e-Xtra-ordinary, e-Encouraging, e-Empressive, e-Evolving, e-Educating e-Entertaining week, see u @ e-Uzuakoli, hopefully". In social networking the world has become a global village so one needs to brace up with E-sociolinguistics in the E-speech community.

Facebook Features

The continuous re-packaging of Facebook has made it more standard and attractive compared to other social networks. Its features since 2004 are being continuously upgraded and if it still exists in future, new things are likely to be added to it. Once the page is opened, one is likely to see *home, profile, friends, messages, photos, updates, what is on your mind, like, comments, notifications, places, groups, events, pokes, links notes, SMS* etc with sub-features once one clicks on any of the above-named features.

Features and Codes

Wardaugh ascertained that

availability of computers and various kinds of handheld wireless devices has produced entirely new types of networking which many young people now use extensively (131).

When two or more persons communicate with each other in speech, the system they use is called code. In Facebook, when a post is updated, it is usually filled with switching and mixing of codes; like, when an update is made in pidgin, the preceding comments are usually in pidgin but if it is an indigenous language the commenters usually follow the pattern. Moreover, if there is a switch or a mix-up in language, the person must have the knowledge of the language. For example, a user on Facebook posted this:

Angeli to n pinre oju re da o.... meaning - "Angels as you are distributing blessing ..." and four friends replied as follows –

1st – Oju angeli yen maa ri gbogbo wa o. Meaning - Eye of the angel is watching everywhere.
Happy Sunday Sir.

2nd – It's my time 2 shine Oju re da.

*The first still comments:

1st – Ogo wa maa tan ni agbara Olorun. Ao ni waye lasan. - Our glory will shine in the name of God. Our existence will not be in vain. Surely, we will shine

2nd – Amen loruko Jesu

3rd – Don't pass me by

4th – Mr 9ice carry go

Another friend has this on his page: "on my way to Kaduna please your prayer is important to me", and three commented with these.

1st – Safe journey

2nd – Allah ya kiyaye hanya - (God provides safe journey)

3rd – Alla yakaika lafiya – God leads us in peace. – Great all your frd thanks.

Finally, the essence of code switching and code mixing which usually occur between sentences (inter-sententially) or within a single sentence (intra-sententially) are not left out in Facebook.

Facebook and Society

A society is a group of people related to each other through persistent relations or a large social group sharing the same geographical territory, subject to the same political authority, linguistic ideology, and dominant cultural expectation (en. Wikipedia.org). In a technological setting, a large society is formed depending on the people involved and the one live online. Some, usually make their societies on Facebook larger than any other thing by the number of friends they keep. The extent of the linguistic usage in a given wall post is largely dependent on the number of people using it. It is acclaimed that Facebook proclaims to be a chain of social networking graciously digging into our interpersonal, individual skills, more often to a person with much friends on Facebook, at least to keep in touch by writing, commenting and communicating effectively with all. Here, one allows people to pry into one's privacy once the setting is open to the public, also another to idle away time, snooping around and poking on what other friends updated. A friend updated on a group page that these are types of people on Facebook:

- (1) The Lurker – Never posts anything or comments on your posts, but read everything, and might make reference to your status if they ... see you in public ...
- (2) The Hyena – Doesn't ever really say anything, just LOLs and LMAOs at everything.
- (3) Mr./Ms Popular – Has 4367 friends for no reason
- (4) The Gamer – play Words with friends, Mafia Wars, Bakes Virtual Cakes, and Stuff etc, ALLDAY.
- (5) The Innocent – Every post makes reference to God or Jesus
- (6) The Thief – Steals status updates ... and will probably steal this one.
- (7) The Cynic – Hates their life, and everything in it, as evidenced by the somber tone in all of their status updates.
- (8) The Collector – Never posts anything either, but joins every group and becomes fans of the most random stuff.
- (9) The promoter – Always sends event invitations to things that you ultimately delete or ignore.
- (10) The Liker – Never actually says anything, buy always clicks the like button
- (11) The Hater – Every post revolves around someone hating on them, and they swear people are trying to ruin their life.
- (12) The Anti-Proofreader – This person would benefit greatly from spell check, and sometimes you feel bad for them because you don't know if they were typing fast, or really can't spell.
- (13) Drama Queen/King – This person always posts stuff like "I can't believe this!", or "they gonna make me snap today!" in the hope that you will ask what happened, or what's wrong ... but then they never finish telling the story.
- (14) Womp Womp – This person consistently tries to be funny ... but never is.
- (15) The News – Always updates you on what they are doing and who they are doing it with, no matter how arbitrary.
- (16) The Rooster – Feels that it is their job to tell Face book Good Morning every day.

While some commenters made their free comments to the above with also addendum of numbers 17 and 18 during their comments and it reads as follows:

- (17) The Commentors – comment usually on the most posts
- (18) The Hahaha – Likz commentn on every post containn hahaha.

Without doubt, the above summaries are what usually go on daily in a speech community like Facebook.

Facebook and Language

According to Sapir in Lyons, “language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols” (3). The above definition is today unique for what Facebook is made for. There are various definitions of language but Sapir’s definition stands out for Facebook’s language. Daily on Facebook, humans usually use a lot of non-instinctive methods in communicating with one another while on social networks.

The Facebook language idea is so unique that new ideas are generated everyday once one opens his page for interaction which also makes people to comment on their friends’ page when something is posted on an individual’s wall. Ideas such as prayers, wishes, information, quote, entertainment-comedies, motivational versus inspirational speeches, news update etc. are regular features in the Facebook. These days, there is hardly a newspaper that its news is not updated on Facebook at least hourly. Moreover, whenever an incident happens, people usually generate ideas on how to post it to the Facebook. Everyone wants to be the first to give out the information to Facebook users. New ideas are daily shared on Facebook in order that friends on a particular page will not be left out.

Facebook Language: Emotions and Desires

Friends always pour out their emotions once they arrive despite their grammatical errors in their linguistic updates. Posts on comedies and other forms of entertainment never lack commendable language due to people’s interest in such areas especially when it has the savour of African entertainments, jokes, riddles and comedies. Linguistically, once apathy post is there, like deaths, killings, accidents etc. comments are usually laden with emotions. For instance, during the Dana air crash of Sunday 3rd of June, 2012, most posts about the crash on Facebook received comments to reflect the emotions people had on such situations. A good number of people with their emotions usually hit (click) “the like button” to show solidarity towards the update or to show concern that the person that updated such information did well by informing various groups on the said incident.

Also, due to the fact that peoples’ walls (pages) are always for public views and opinions, whenever some have desirable language, for the friends on Facebook, they normally go with message (inbox) because it is bi-friends’ issue. Desires such as privacy, foul language, sexual desire, intimacy, etc, whenever it occurs, friends usually go for inbox discussion. It is obvious that when such desires are on open (public) page, the majority usually shy away from commenting or rather comment on the person’s private message.

Facebook Language Symbols

In Facebook, distinctive symbols are social use based, to lay emphasis on a society, language, peoples and their situations. Symbols speak volumes on culture, wishes and language that we use daily without our maximum knowledge.

Hudson ascertained that “given this heavy symbolic load that language bears, it is entirely to be expected that bilingual speakers will use their choice of language in order to define the situation, rather than letting the situation define the choice of language” (52).

Emoticons

Emoticon is a kind of symbol used in the social networks in which Facebook is also involved. It was derived as a kind of ‘portmanteau word’ from words such as ‘emotion’ and ‘icon’. It is a pictorial representation of a facial expression using letters and also punctuation marks, to

indicate a person's facial mood especially in writing. Emotion is usually used to inform the reader about the tone, tenor, temperament or degree of a particular statement or the feelings of the sender towards his relationship on the matter under discussion. The expressions for sadness can be reduced with an emotion (smiley) sign :-), happiness as :), crying as ☹, angry as :e, heart as >3, shock or sudden surprise as :O, wink as ;), and other innumerable emoticons. The symbol can reduce a word, phrase and even a sentence to a single emotion to address issues on ground in the Facebook.

Facebook and Identity

Identity in the Facebook is one of the major aspects of sociolinguistic situation, especially groups that are usually open (activate) for people in a particular class that share common identities such as culture, language, age, belief, ideas etc, associate and interact among themselves.

Thornborrow explains that:

Identity, whether it is on an individual, social or institutional level is something which we are constantly building and negotiating all our lives through our interaction with others, ... is also multi-faceted: people switch into different roles at different times in different situations ... sometimes conflicting ... the ways in which we accomplish and display this shift is through the language we use (136).

Friends usually identify easily on celebrities, legends, nobles and notable figures on Facebook, and when such men update a post, commenters always grace their walls' updates. Ladies also get more reply easily on their updates than men. Somebody once posted that if a lady updates a joke, she will attract numerous comments but if it is a man that shares the same joke, he might end up having numerous negative responses. Sports lovers will not delay in identifying with a friend that writes sports comments. It is the same with entertainment, fashion and so on. Facebook has made many multifaceted comments in their profiles just to be identified with the class in vogue. Identities like false educational status, pseudo place of work, even fake addresses, and with other un-existing and assumed profiles (pictures, sex, marital status, age, positions) are usually updated to make one identify in the social strata and in lingual norms.

Conclusion

Sociolinguistics strives a lot in the social network as this paper has adjudged, also in bringing ethnicity that is very acceptable and attractive to intending friends on Facebook. Age also plays its role in Facebook: such that social network is usually and widely used by the adolescents and young adults while the older adults are trying to catch up with the trend in the language and society. A picture was once uploaded on Facebook with this inscription

“Dad joined facebook.

Kid's Status update: Dad on FB, wtf!

Dad commented, What is wtf

Kid replied him, Welcome to facebook”

Eckert agrees that “while aging is universal, it is incorporated into social structure and invested with value in cultural specific ways” (155).

Finally, “although we may assume that each speaker has a unique experience of language, and on this basis develops a unique grammar, a number of generalizations can be made about the stages through which people may be expected to pass in their sociolinguistic development”

(Hudson 14). So as the trends and norms of language are actually shifting, one needs to stay tuned with the contemporary issue on various networks in order not to be left in the dark.

Works Cited

- Akindele, Femi and Wale Adegbite. *The Sociology and Politics of English in Nigeria: An Introduction*. Ile-Ife: O.A.U. Press, 2005.
- Eckert, Penlope. "Age as a Sociolinguistic Variable". *The Handbook of Sociolinguistics*. Ed Coulmas Florian. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000.
- Holmes, J. *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. London: Longman, 1992.
- <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/society>. Accessed 30 July 2012.
- Hudson, R.A. *Sociolinguistics*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Lyons, John. *Language and Linguistics: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Thornborrow, Joanna. "Language and Identity". In *Language, Society and Power: An Introduction*. Eds. Linda Thomas and Shan Wareign. New York: Pentledge, 2000.
- Wardhaugh, Ronald. *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. 6th ed. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.