Original Article

Linguistic Accommodation and Identity in The Context of Social Media Discourse

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ABSTRACT

Peaceful coexistence among members of the society is paramount. However, conflicts among the people living together are inevitable and therefore conflict resolution mechanisms must always be put in place. This paper focuses on how language can be used as a tool for resolving and maintaining peace among the individuals in the context of social media. Our society is organised in such a manner that people interact at various levels in the community and there are different forums and platforms that individuals use in the interaction process. During their interactions, language plays a very important role in ensuring that people live in harmony. Living harmoniously may be a concern for people that work together, live in the same neighbourhood, go to church together or live together. These people may interact on face-to-face basis and or use other media such as social media to reach out to one another. This paper narrows down to the kind of interactions that take place in the social media and how the interactants accommodate or cope with each other. The paper analyses texts extracted from Chuka University Students' social media discourse (from the author's PhD thesis) to reveal how students accommodate one another. This is an important aspect particularly nowadays when people have made social media an integral tool of communication and interaction. There are different platforms and genres of social media interaction platforms such as Facebook, twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp just to mention a few but this paper focuses on WhatsApp. The WhatsApp groups from which data for analysis were extracted, were those formed by Chuka University students in Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya. This paper is informed by Communication Accommodation Theory and Social Identity Theory. Since it was a qualitative investigation, a descriptive research design was used. Snowballing was used in the identification of the WhatsApp groups from which the texts were extracted purposively. The texts used in this paper were purposively collected on the basis of their content to show accommodation and identity among the social media users. The content analysis of the texts was done and results discussed. The findings revealed that students accommodate one another in their interactions and that they use language to mark their identity. The accommodation is achieved by using language in a manner that is peculiar to them. They for instance come up with

their own jargons, phrases and forms of words that they use in their communication.

INTRODUCTION

There is a saying in our community, Meru in Kenya, that says '*mathoka ya kiondo kimwe yatirea kuringana'* when translated loosely it means that if you put axes in the same bag, they must make noise, possibly due to friction. This implies that for people living together in a community, friction or conflicts are inevitable and as a result, the resolution of such conflicts once they occur is very significant in restoration of peace.

People strive to accommodate one another for peaceful coexistence in any given society. One of the vehicles through which meaningful coexistence is realized is through the use of language. Accommodation among people becomes exceedingly essential when the interactants hail from diverse linguistic and cultural orientations. There are different forums, platforms and groups that people find themselves in and are bound to interact with one another. In order for these people to interrelate harmoniously, language plays a pivotal role and cannot be taken for granted.

Although resolution of conflict among people belonging to a certain group is paramount, scholars have not adequately studied how language can be used in the resolution of conflicts among members of the same group in the context of the social media. The few studies already done have focused on emails and Facebook but no studies have been carried out on WhatsApp platform, focussing on linguistic accommodation among the university students. There was therefore a need to carry a study on WhatsApp platform where the interactants are the university students. Thus, this paper examines the manner in which the online users, who are the university students, accommodate one another as they engage in the day-to-day conversations on WhatsApp platform. In other words, the paper focuses on how people cope with one another as they interact in social media.

Research Objectives

- To describe the strategies used by Chuka University students to linguistically accommodate one another

- To explain the lexical features employed by Chuka University students to linguistically accommodate one another

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is informed by two theories; Communication Accommodation Theory and Social Identity Theory. Social Identity Theory (SIT) was developed by Tasfel (1981). It is founded on the connection of people in different groups. It posits that individuals in a group have a tendency to maintain a unique social identity by conforming to the behaviour of the social community that they join and become members.

According to this theory, individuals in a group discard their individual identities and conform to the main group identity. As far as language is concerned, the conformity is achieved by individuals in the group by assuming and adopting a variety of a language that can be a dialect, group slang, jargons or unique register.

Social Identity Theory shares a lot of similarity with Speech Accommodation Theory that was later developed into Communication Accommodation Theory. The main argument of the theory is that interactants converge and diverge in their speeches for solidarity purposes and end up creating a distinct group identity. According to Giles (1977), in the Speech Accommodation Theory, interactants can intentionally use linguistic devices at their disposal so as to mark or create an identity in the conversation process. It is worth noting that people have a choice of either adopting the group identity or ignoring it. The Speech Accommodation Theory was later improved to be referred as the Communication Accommodation Theory that has two main components; convergence and divergence. According to Giles (1991), linguistic convergence is evident in the manner in which interactants adjust their communication behaviours in order to accommodate one another. This may be manifested through language, nonverbal features, phonology, smiling and gazing. The divergence strategy on the other hand leads to the accentuation of speech and non-verbal differences between the interactants.

The Communication Accommodation theory and Social Identity theory are relevant for this paper since the use of social media jargons, and special register depicts a clear manifestation of how students mark their identity in social media through language. By converging, interactants appear similar and by so doing, they end up marking their identity in the process.

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) by Giles, et al. (1991) and Social Identity Theory (SIT) by Tasfel (1981) underscore the essential role of identity and similarity traits inherent in

social grouping and how communication efficiency can be achieved in such groupings. The main concerns for the two theories are the manner in which unity and solidarity among the individuals in groups, platforms or community are realized, maintained and more importantly, how communication efficiency is achieved. The article focused on WhatsApp groups formed by Chuka University students. These are students who hail from different communities but have a common interest; academics.

An examination is done on how students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds are able to accommodate one another and mark their identity as they interact in their WhatsApp groups. During their interactions, students tend to portray similar linguistic behaviour so as to achieve harmonious coexistence within their groups and more importantly, to mark their identity. Bearing in mind that these students hail from the more than forty-two (42) communities in Kenya, speaking different languages, they are bound to use languages that are mutually intelligible to all. These languages include: English, Kiswahili and Sheng. Besides these languages, students come up with their own jargons and create new forms of words that are peculiar to them so as to interact effectively in their own unique manner. By use of special jargons, interactants results into lexical accommodation. Therefore, this article attempts to explain how accommodation can be realised from the perspective of Communication Accommodation and Social identity theories.

The main strategies of communication accommodation theory are convergence and divergence. According Giles, et al. (1991), linguistic convergence is evident in the manner in which interactants adjust their communication behaviours in order to accommodate one another, which may be manifested through language and nonverbal features of communication. Conversely, linguistic divergence is where interactants portray their linguistic differences in relation to their speeches and nonverbal cues during their interaction. Crystal (2001) on the online accommodation, points out that in the virtue world, communicators also converge in

order to develop a shared language character that is equivalent to a local accent or dialect. Moreover, Giles and Ogay (2006) posit that convergence demonstrates greater solidarity and significantly reduces social distance. This paper examines how students accommodate one another through convergence.

Research on accommodation and specifically in social media has been done. For instance, Sabater (2017) studies the linguistic accommodation in online communication by establishing the role of language and gender. His findings conclude that women tend to demonstrate many incidences of convergence as compared to their male counterparts. That the language practices of women indicate homogenization rather than diversification implying presence of sociability of their exchanges; hence, demonstrating the necessary conventions of use in order to belong to a particular speech community.

Moreover, Bunz and Campell (2004) study politeness accommodation in electronic mail. The findings reveal that accommodation in the context of computer mediated communication is a common phenomenon and that convergence occurs when email feedback mirrors the politeness cues of the original text or message. Similarly, Thomson, R et al. (2001) explore communication using mails as the media of communication. They establish that both male and female interactants converge in the manner in which they use language. Similarly, this study reveals that students use various linguistic artefacts in endeavour to accommodate one another.

METHODOLOGY

The data used in this paper was obtained from the social media discourse of Chuka University students in their WhatsApp platforms. The data was collected from the various WhatsApp groups that were formed by the students. Qualitative research technique and descriptive research design were used. Snowballing was used in the identification of the WhatsApp groups that the researcher used to collect the data from while purposive sampling was utilized in the collection of the texts from the WhatsApp groups. The researcher purposively collected the texts that were adequate to answer the research questions. After selecting and recording adequate texts that answered the research questions, content analysis of those texts was done and the research findings presented in prose form. The conclusions and deductions were then drawn from the findings

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Convergence and Divergence

Online community, informally referred to as netzens, just like any other type of community, experiences conflict related challenges. At times, netzens engage in 'bare knuckle' fights in their various platforms. Herein, examples where students diverge in their communication resulting to hot exchanges are provided. In the example here the students from Kisii (a tribe in Kenya) are in conflict with other students from Kamba (another tribe in Kenya).

TEXT 1A

A: *Okirete tata*

(You are so silent father)

B: *Togende gaki*

(Let's go please)

C: *Moturaa akoria*

(Is he eating muturaa

(a type of meat) A2: *Achachacha omoture tata*

(Hey! wake him up)

C: *Qwani tuko grup ya Wakisii*

(Are we in a group that belongs to Kisiis)

D: *Eee tata* (Yes father)

E: Imagine Wakisii mkimaliza mtushw na sis tuanze

(You people from Kisii tell us when you are through so that we also begin.)

C2: *Wamalize,, lakn tuchange wkianza kurapp bana,, tutasubiri hadi kesho*

(They finish…. But let's change because if they start rapping, we will wait up to tomorrow.)

F: (*I think this group should be changed into Kisii coalition*) (I think this group should be changed into a Kisii coalition)

A3: *Exactly*

(Exactly)

B2: *Omosiki riogo... riogo obongo gopoesha situresi asema omonto ndirindidu*

(Somebody said that music is like medicine…. It can reduce stress)

From the above text, the conflict begins when a Kisii student employs the Ekegusii language to initiate a conversation. This does not go well with other students especially the Kambas that avenge in the following text by also switching to their mother tongue and then using abusive language. Look at the conversation below.

TEXT 1B

A1: Mwamba ata balicha iii sya kuu desi..ko mute atanduu mnno inye, misingooo iii

(How are you members of this group whom I don't know. You are so stupid, necks)

B: Now it is your time

C: *Yes, it is my time, kwoou kila mundo ekune kando kana nimie guluvuni oyu* (Yes, it's my time, so everybody be 'aside' or else I go for a long call in this group now.)

A1: *Toa ukamba hapa*

(Stop everything that has to do with ukamba here)

D: *Uka vaaa mwakome pyu,,, Syinduu iii sitena undo wa kwika,,, kukilwe vyu mumiiwa ni ithe,,*

(Just sleep, you are useless people with nothing to do, and be silent as if your dad has farted on you.)

Incidences of 'violence' and conflicts are witnessed in the above conversations. This is a clear demonstration of the fact that online users, just like the people involved in spoken discourse, are also susceptible to such unacceptable social evils. However, since the interest of the main group surpasses that of the subgroups, the resolution of the conflicts becomes unavoidable

and students again start to converge in their communication and also resume to their mainstream identity. The following text shows a resolution after the divergent communication.

TEXT 1C

A2: All wat I mean tuache kusumbuana waseee

(All that I mean is, that let's stop disturbing one another comrades)

E: Exactly Richard, sasa tutafanya handshake brazah.

(Exactly Richard, let's do a handshake brother)

B1: This group is meant for all of us. Everyone should have a sense of belonging........ ama namna gany?

(This group is meant for all of us….everyone should have a sense of belonging….or what do you think?)

F: Nadhani iko ivo...............ama namnagany my fren, awa watu wa vitendawili...............kieleweke,,,,,,

(I think so…or what do you think my friend, or people who use riddles…..it will be understood…)

Students come to the realisation that it does not pay to abuse one anther anymore and therefore they start to converge in their communication by aligning themselves to the mainstream identity. The use of words such as "*brazah*" (brother), "*my fren*" (my friend) and "*wasee*" (a word they use to refer to one another that is equivalent to comrade) is an indication of convergence.

Lexical Features in Accommodation and the Marking of Identity

Lexical features are a set of vocabulary of a given language defined in terms of words and idioms that have a distinctive use within that variety (Crystal, 2001). Social media users and in this case, university students, use lexes in a unique manner; hence, demonstrating their identity as well as converging in their discourses. They for instance create their own jargons that are peculiar to them. They normally draw these jargons from English, Kiswahili or local languages and then adapt them to their social media discourses with meanings that are sometimes generally different from their denotative use in other contexts. Consider the examples below.

TEXT 2

A: *Wapi Yule mzai wa lapi yuko wapi? Wish to do bisna na yy*

(Where is that person who sells a laptop? I wish to do business with him/her.)

B: *Ni kama amelala* (It's as if he is asleep)

C: *Lala pia wewe* (You can also sleep)

D: *Laleeeni nyinyi* (Sleep you people)

A1: *Wewe umelala matter core hii?*

Have you slept, you buttocks?

An alien to the group may encounter difficulties in decoding the intended meaning of some of the words used in the context of the social media. The phrase "*matter core hii*" is a mixture of English and Kiswahili with an intended use as *'matako hii'* which can be translated to mean, '*this buttock'*, and is used impolitely. In the above construction, one is not likely to see the relationship between "*matter core hii*" and "*matako hii*" which are English and Kiswahili words. It is only the pronunciation that points out that there is some kind of relationship. The students make use of such forms to lessen the effect of the usage of such socially unacceptable forms and as such, it ensures that their solidarity is not messed up with. In other words, it is used to avoid mentioning '*matako*' which is a taboo word referring to a private part of a body. The creativity is evident in the way students come up with such a form whose orthography is to a large extent informed by the manner in which the real word (*matako*) is articulated. The other words used in an unusual manner are "*mzai wa lapi*" (*the laptop man*) and "*bisna*" that refers to "business". Students use words whose meanings are mainly understood by the group members implying that their style of writing is unique to them.

As students interact with other members of the society, they learn some phrases that are used by other members of the society and then incorporate them in their conversations. Consider TEXT3 below

TEXT 3

A*: Hata mimi I was late that class …. lakini kuongea vibayai nayo !!! pliz respect others even ka wamekosa*

(I was also late for that class…. But you are so rude!!! please respect others even if they have wronged you)

B: *Pliz apologize* (Please apologize)

C: *We can't support that, she gonna style up*

(We can't support that; she should change her behaviour.)

The example above shows how peace and understanding is sought in the group. A person who becomes a deviant is reprimanded or admonished by other group members. Before the text, the participants had exchanged words concerning the lecture they had attended. Student A, points out that people are rude and there is need to respect one another. B, another student calls for an apology and then student C categorically says that the student who had offended others '*gonna styleup'* meaning, she needs to change her behaviour. The colloquial use of the language is evident especially in the usage of the form *"gonna'*. Colloquialism is a pointer to the informality as depicted by the university students. Informality is used to mark identities and also demonstrates the common use of language; hence, convergence strategy.

Another mostly used unique term by the university student is '*sleepover*'. The word means spending a night at partner's place. Mostly, it implies a boy spending the night at his girlfriend's room or vice versa. Consider the following example.

TEXT 4

A: *Zle books laibu zinakaa side gani*

(Where can we get those books in the library?)

B: *Hahahaha!!! Consolt google*

(Hahahaha!!! Consult Google)

C: *Google topic yako na Simo ka hakuenda sleepover*

(Goggle your topic together with Simo, if he did not go to spend the night with his girlfriend.)

It may not be easy for one to decode the meaning of the compound word "*sleep over"* if you are not conversant with the way university students or the young generation use language. Student C tells A, that he, together with another student called Simo should check their topic in the internet using Google but expresses his doubt that Simo may have gone for 'sleepover'. In this context '*Sleepover"* is used by students to mean spending a night in an opposite partner's room and as result, one finds himself in "*a walk of shame"* the following day in the morning as he/she walks towards his/her room with the same clothes and unmade hair in case of a lady. "A walk of shame" is therefore a phrase used by students as they interact with one another and it may not be easy for a person who is not a student to make sense of it. Another phrase commonly used is "*bora uhai*" (being alive is the most important thing) which is used by students while comforting themselves in case something that is unfavourable happens to them. The phrase came into existence during the World Cup games in 2018. In case a fan whose team he/she was supporting was defeated, he/she would simply utter the phrase, "*bora uhai*" to comfort themselves. The phrase later found its way to the students' social media discourse.

TEXT 5

A: *weekend unaona inaanza then u are here stressing us on cats. Nkt !!!!*

(You see the weekend has started and you are here stressing us with the issues of Continuous Assessment test?? Nkt!!!(expression of annoyance)

B: *Bora uhai utafanya niskie ukiitisha special endelea tu*

(To be alive is the most important thing, I will hear you ask for a special exam)

There are words that are uniquely used by the university students in the social media platform. Some of these words are adopted from English, Kiswahili, or local languages and then given another usage. The word "*watunguyas"* (my people) is a compound word formed by combining two Kiswahili free morphemes "*watu*" and the inverted, '*yangu*' (*nguya*) which means mine and an English bound morpheme which in specific terms is a plural inflectional morpheme *"s"*. This word is formed in a unique manner indicating the peculiar way in which university students mark their identity leading to convergence.

Consider the following example;

TEXT6

A: *Hey, form leo ni gani watunguyas* (Hey, what are today's plans guys)

B: *We will meet 2 day @2*

(We will meet today at 2 P.M)

C: *Kila mtu akuje amejipanga*

(Everyone should come while prepared)

The following table provides some of the lexical items commonly found in the students' social media discourse and may not be found in any formal written discourse.

Lexical Features

Form	Meaning
Screw	To have sex
Screw raw/ hit raw Dry spell	To engage in unprotected sex
Dry spell	To stay for long without engaging in sex
Bae	One's intimate friend
Swee	One's intimate friend
Secret crush	Secret admirer
Form	Plan
Sleep over	Spending a night in a partner's place
A walk of shame	A walk after one has slept in a partner's place
Femicide	Killing of females by their partners
Be thinned by yours	Mind your own business
Watunguyas	Watu wangu (my people)
Matter core hii	Matako hii (buttocks)
Nop	No
Lamba lolo	To engage in oral sex
Kujisort	To find a solution
Formless	To have no plan
kuchecwo	To be cheated
Hike	An outing/ tour
Show as in nitakushow	To inform
Utajua ujui	A threat, meaning that you will be proved wrong
Bora uhai	A comforting phrase used when something has gone wrong
On point	Something that is pleasant
Feel as in nakufeel (I feel you)	It means that one has romantic feelings towards the other

It should be noted that some of the words in the above table are normally used in spoken discourse by the young generation and children and they have found their way to the written discourse in social media.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that students interact in social media conversations via their WhatsApp platforms by exploiting a number of languages that they code switch and code mix as evident in the findings presented. The languages used were English, Kiswahili, Kikamba, Ekegusii and a Kenyan based slang, Sheng. By use of these codes, the interactants are able to converge and diverge in their interactions.

Convergence is a common phenomenon that was evident in this study and it promoted cohesion in the group and enabled the interactants to mark their identity and resolve any conflict that arose in

the process of interacting with one another. This corresponds to the findings by other researchers. Sabater (2017) studied online accommodation focusing on the extent of convergence between men and women. The study revealed that both men and women converged in their communication although women demonstrated more incidences of convergence than their men counterparts. Similarly, Thomson, R. et al (2001) studied linguistic accommodation using mails and it was clear that both men and women converged in their communications. These findings therefore indicates that convergence occurs in social media platforms just like in the face-to-face conversations.

Convergence and divergence can be realised through lexical features and the style in which language is used. This study has explored some of the lexical features that enhance linguistic accommodation and has demonstrated how convergence and divergence takes place in an online context. These findings corroborate with Hilte et al (2020) study that focussed on linguistic accommodation in teenagers' social media writings that shows that convergence predominantly manifest itself in the frequency of typographic expressive markers i.e the level of maxim of expressive compensation. On the hand the insertion of oral versus expressive features in online discourse largely corresponds two distinct ways of 'diverging' from formal standard ways writing.

This study harbours theoretical implications based on the two theories; Communication Accommodation Theory and Social Identity theory that informs this study. Linguistic accommodation enriches our understanding of language as a social tool that can influence identity, interaction and cultural dynamics. Communication Accommodation and Social Identity theories are closely linked and reinforce one another. Whereas the former has the implication for understanding social identity, group dynamics and communication strategies as evident in the students' social media discourse, the latter underscores the importance of identity among members of the same group. In marking

of social identity, language choices reflect and shape group membership. As such language used by a particular group reinforces social boundaries and influences perception of in-group and out-group dynamics

This study has two practical applications; firstly, linguistic accommodation can help enhance interpersonal communications and play an integral role in conflict resolutions. A good understanding of linguistic accommodation can result to better use of communication strategies among the interactants hence fostering better personal and professional relationships, understanding and rapport. Secondly, linguistic accommodation is key when it comes to resolution of conflicts among the interactants. Awareness of linguistic accommodation strategies can enable the interactants engage in meaningful discussions and at the same time encourage parties to adopt their language styles that aims at reducing tension and misunderstandings among them

The data for this study was analysed qualitatively and was limited to only one social, media platform, WhatsApp, where the interactants were University students. Studies can be done using other social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, twitter among others. Similarly, studies can also be done in the context of social media where variables such as age, gender and social class are put into consideration. This study analysed the data qualitatively, another study can be done where data collected is analysed quantitatively.

CONCLUSION

Conflicts are evident in social media discourses as online communities engage one another in day-to-day basis. However, the conflict is normally resolved by the users accommodating one another linguistically and maintaining a mainstream identity. This paper has attempted to shed light on how online users ensure that peace prevails as they interact with one another. It can be concluded that linguistic accommodation through convergence is a common phenomenon in the students' social media discourses. This

accommodation is realised in the social media discourse as students mark their identity. This is a clear demonstration of how solidarity is enhanced in the communication process resulting to peaceful coexistence. Lexical features are exemplified by the manner in which lexis are used in the students' social media discourse to mark identity and convergence in their communication. Peace in the interaction platforms prevail when the interactants use language in a manner that accommodates every member of the group. Language is therefore a tool that can help in the ensuring peaceful coexistence among individuals in a given group, forum, platform or community.

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