



SOCIAL MEDIA ENGLISH IN NIGERIA AND THE NEW CRIME WAVE

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ABSTRACT: *This study explores the social media English in Nigeria and the new crime wave. Utilizing the theoretical frameworks of systemic functional linguistics and forensic linguistics, the study adopts a qualitative data analysis approach to examine the linguistic devices used in the portrayal of criminal activities. The research delves into the language of crime, reviewing related literature and analyzing selected posts for their use of specific linguistic devices. These devices include slang and code words, metaphors and euphemisms, sensational headlines, and biased language. The study reveals that these linguistic devices play a crucial role in the construction and perception of criminal activities on social media platforms. Slang and code words, for instance, often serve as a form of coded communication among criminals, while metaphors and euphemisms are used to downplay the severity of criminal acts or to disguise illegal activities. Sensational headlines and biased language, on the other hand, can influence public opinion and perpetuate stereotypes about crime and criminals. This study contributes to the understanding of how language is used in the context of crime on social media platforms, offering valuable insights for law enforcement agencies, policy makers, and researchers in the fields of linguistics and criminology. It underscores the need for further research in this area, particularly in the era of digital communication where language plays a pivotal role in shaping societal narratives about crime.*

KEYWORDS: Sensational headlines, Linguistics and Criminology, Digital communication.



INTRODUCTION

Linguistics is the scientific study of language and its structure, including the sounds, words, grammar, and meaning of language. Language is an indispensable means of communication which facilitates the expression of a plethora of ideas. It shapes and models' attitudes in society. It is a system of communication that enables one to evaluate ideas. With the use of language, one can persuade and influence others, play jokes, show admiration and appreciation. Language, indeed, is central to human activities. Thus, Opara (2011, p.1) asserts that 'language is essentially a way of behaving and making others behave'. Through the use of language one can express a lot of ideas, feelings and attitudes.

Furthermore, language evokes different ideas and feelings from those one communicates with. Finegan (2012, p.5) states that 'language is a vehicle of thought, a system of expression that mediates the transfer of thoughts from one person to another'. Language plays vital roles in society for it is a form of social practice. It performs many communicative functions. It conveys factual or propositional information which Brown and Yule (1983, p.6) call 'primarily transactional language'. Linguistics explores how people use language to communicate, interact, and express themselves in various contexts and situations.

Language use on the internet has been studied from a sociolinguistic perspective (Baron, 2003; Posteguillo, 2003; Crystal, 2005). Specifically, social media language has attracted the attention of scholars in recent times due to the usefulness of Facebook, as a meaningful learning environment capable of enhancing students' learning of the English language. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by examining slang and code words, metaphors and euphemisms, sensational headlines and biased language, used by criminals on social media platforms to confuse the public about their identity, intention, and behavior, manipulate, or justify their criminal activities and also serve as invaluable resource for researchers in the field.

Omera et al. (2018) examine the impact of social media on the writing abilities of Nigerian youths in English which is the language of mass communication in Nigeria using cultivation theory of the media, the authors harps on the influence of the social media on the writing abilities of the Nigerian youths. The study says that the majority of the youths adopt a certain brand of English which is completely different within the matrix of Standard English (SE) or even the popular Nigerian English variant which is called Pidgin English (PE). Such deviational patterns have crept into their writing consciousness in classes and examination. This work is similar to the present study because it dwells on the unique influence of social media in written communication by some Nigerians but differs in scope. While the former study dwells on the addition to the English lexicon by its variations, the present study is more concerned about how the social media is deployed by its users to engage in criminality and other illicit acts.

Erhiegueke et al. (2022) examine social media and its influence on the 21st century Nigerian youths: The popular music reality. Data were drawn from interviews and documentations; the study concludes that opinions have been divided over the influence of the social media on 21st century youths adding that apart from its positive influence, the social media has also been a tool for the promotion of many societal ills like violence, crime, juvenile delinquency, internet fraud, amongst others. While this work is in agreement with the present study on the dominant influence of social media by the youths in aiding or abetting crime in the society, it differs in the theoretical framework and focus used in arriving at set goals.



Commenting on the social media and the English language, Abati (2016) observes thus,

I get confused these days reading many of the posts on social media and text messages sent through cell phones because of the kind of new English that young people now write. The English language is without doubt quite dynamic. The kind of new English being written by Twitter and WhatsApp users, particularly young people, is however so frightening and lamentable because it is beginning to creep into the regular writing. Texting and tweeting is producing a generation of users of English (it is worse that they are using English as a second language) who cannot write grammatically successful sentences.

Commenting further, Abati (2016) said,

The new group of English users does not know the difference between a comma and a colon. They have no regard for punctuation. They mix up pronouns, cannibalize verbs and adverbs, ignore punctuations, and violate all rules of lexis and syntax. They seem to rely more on sound rather than formal meaning. My fear is that a generation being brought on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp English is showing a lack of capacity to write meaningful prose or communicate properly or even think correctly (Abati, 2016).

This work and the present study are similar as it brings up experiences of how most Nigerian youths have been very used to so many new coinages that are very common within the social media as captured by Abati (2016): uwc (you are welcome), brb (be right back), thbt (throwback thursday), birthday loading, 'you hammer', 'kwakwakwakwakwa', BFF (Best Friend Forever), WCW (Women Crush Wednesday). This resort to abbreviations, lingo and special English revealing certain things about the upcoming generation.

Udofot and Mbarachi (2016) report the findings of a study on "Social Media English in Nigeria", using content analysis as a framework for the study. Data were drawn online through Facebook world and Twitter handle of the researcher, as well as messages from the Nairaland website and Nigerian Punch online website. The study reveals that social media English in Nigeria is a combination of internet languages, Nigerian English, Nigerian Pidgin and codes from Nigerian indigenous languages and also relatively used in informal situations.

This work is similar to the present study in the sense that it deals with some unique features of the language of the social media but it differs in theoretical framework used and in orientation. Apart from a few investigations cited above, there is no study known to the present authors that has examined the aspect of social media English in Nigeria, the crime related activities on Facebook, Twitter and other social media handles in Nigeria. The gap is what this work intends to fill. The English Nigerians used on various social media handles constitutes a distinct variety of the Nigerian English and is currently having a crippling effect on Nigerians especially the youths.

The findings in this study will determine the distinctive features of social media English in Nigeria as well as refute or corroborate earlier studies by Abati (2016), Omoera et al. (2018), and Udofot and Mbarachi (2016) in addition to other studies on the internet language.



The Language of Crime

The language of crime is a fascinating and complex phenomenon that reflects the nature, causes, and consequences of criminal behavior. Criminal discourse is used to commit, conceal, or justify crimes, as well as to investigate, prosecute, or prevent them. Halliday (1976, p.359) argues that 'language is as much a part of a criminal act as a fingerprint'. He coined the term 'anti-language' to describe a language that is used by a social group that is opposed to or excluded from the dominant society. He also noted that anti-language can be a source of identity, solidarity, and resistance for its users.

However, the language of crime is not static or uniform, but rather dynamic and diverse. It varies across different types of crimes, such as murder, theft, fraud, rape, terrorism, and cybercrime, among others. It also changes over time in response to social, cultural, and technological changes. For example, the language of crime in the 21st century is influenced by the development of digital technologies, such as the internet, mobile phones, social media, and encryption, among others. These technologies create new forms and modes of criminal communication, such as phishing, hacking, sexting, and cyber-bullying, among others. They also pose new challenges and opportunities for law enforcement and forensic linguists. It is also contested and controversial. It can be a source of evidence or doubt, conviction or acquittal, justice or injustice. It can be used to reveal or conceal, confess or deny, accuse or defend. It can be challenged or supported by expert witnesses, such as forensic linguists, who analyze the linguistic aspects of criminal cases. Therefore, the language of crime is not only a reflection of reality but also a factor that shapes it (Coulthard & Johnson, 2007).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

The theoretical frameworks for the study are based on two main approaches: systemic functional linguistics (SFL) and forensic linguistics (FL). These approaches are complementary and relevant for analyzing the linguistic representation of criminal activities in selected social media platforms. SFL is an approach in linguistics that considers language as a social semiotic system, that is, a system of meaning-making through choices (Eggins, 2004). SFL adopts a functional perspective, which means that it views language as a resource for expressing different kinds of meanings in different contexts and situations. SFL identifies three main metafunctions of language: the ideational, the interpersonal, and the textual. The ideational metafunction is concerned with how language represents experience, both external and internal. The interpersonal metafunction is concerned with how language enacts social relations, such as roles, attitudes, and emotions. The textual metafunction is concerned with how language organizes the other two metafunctions into coherent and cohesive texts (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

On the other hand, FL is the application of linguistic knowledge, methods, and insights to the forensic context of law, language, crime investigation, trial, and judicial procedure. It is a branch of applied linguistics that deals with various aspects of language and the law, such as the language of legislation, legal writing, courtroom discourse, police interrogation, witness testimony, confessions, threats, ransom notes, suicide notes, hate speech, plagiarism, authorship identification, and voice recognition (Coulthard & Johnson, 2007). FL also examines how language can be used to commit, conceal, or justify crimes, as well as to



investigate, prosecute, or prevent them (McMenamin, 2002). Both theories are relevant to the study because they provide a systematic and comprehensive framework for analyzing the linguistic representation of criminal activities in selected social media platforms, hence their adoption.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative data analysis to examine the social media language in Nigeria and the new crime wave, taking note of the various linguistic devices. Data were drawn from selected social media platforms that are relevant to the topic. The platforms are: Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. The data consist of text messages that contain linguistic features of interest, such as slang and code words, metaphors and euphemisms, sensational headlines and biased language, logical fallacies and false alarm or attribution amongst others. The data were sampled using a purposive sampling method.

DATA ANALYSIS/RESULTS

Slang and Code Words

These are forms of language that are used by specific groups or communities to establish their identity, solidarity, or authority, as well as to conceal, protect, or challenge their activities or interests. Criminals often use slang and code words to communicate with their peers or associates, as well as to evade detection or identification by the authorities or the public.

Table 1: Data showing the Use of Slang and Code Words

Slang and Code Words	Source
“cheese”, “pizza”, “fun”, “trash”, “house”	Text 1 (Twitter post)
“customer”, “account”, “transfer”	Text 2 (Facebook message)
“Lotto Magic”, “predictions”, “tips”	Text 3 (Facebook post)
“necklace”, “gift”, “anniversary”, “princess”	Text 4 (Instagram post)

As seen from table, in the first text (Twitter post), the twitter user uses the slang terms “cheese” and “pizza” to refer to heroin and drugs in general, respectively, and the code words “fun”, “trash”, and “house” to refer to using drugs, killing someone, and disposing of the evidence, respectively. The user is trying to avoid detection by the authorities or the public, while boasting about their criminal activities. Meanwhile in text 2 (a message sent to someone on Facebook), the sender used the code words “customer”, “account”, and “transfer” to refer to the victim, the scam, and the money laundering, respectively.

The sender is trying to avoid detection by the authorities or the public, while luring the recipient into their trap. Similarly, in Text 3, the writer uses the slang term “lottery” and the code words “Lotto Magic”, “predictions”, and “tips” to refer to a type of online gambling scheme that involves paying money to receive fake or random numbers that are supposed to win the lottery,



but actually do not. With this act, the sender is trying to avoid detection by the authorities or the public, while luring the recipients into their trap. Again, in Text 4 (Instagram), the post uses the slang term “necklace” and the code words “gift”, “anniversary”, and “princess” to refer to a stolen artifact, a bribe, a crime date, and a victim, respectively. While an issue like this should be hidden, she boasts about it. The sender is by no means trying to avoid detection by the authorities or the public, while showing off their illegal possession.

Metaphors and Euphemisms

Metaphors and euphemisms are forms of language that are used to describe or refer to something in terms of something else, usually to make it more appealing, acceptable, or understandable.

Table 2: Data showing the use of Metaphors and Euphemisms

Metaphors and Euphemisms	Source
“took out the trash”, “cleaned the house”	<i>Text 1</i> (Twitter post)
“lying dormant”, “confiscate”, cooperation”, “trust”, “assistance”	<i>Text 2</i> (Facebook message)
“life changer”, “sky is the limit”, “small fee”, “unlimited access”, “favor”	<i>Text 3</i> (Facebook post)
“sweet and generous”, “master of disguise and deception”, “genius and hero”, mysterious accident”, “perfect heist”, “outsmarted”	<i>Text 4</i> (Instagram post)

From Table 2, the tweet (text 2) uses the metaphor “took out the trash” and the euphemism “cleaned the house” to refer to killing someone and disposing of the evidence, respectively. The user is using figurative or indirect expressions to avoid being too explicit or violent, while mocking their victim on Twitter. Again, the metaphors “lying dormant” and “confiscate” in Text 2 (Facebook Message) refer to the non-existent and illegal money, and the euphemisms “cooperation”, “trust”, and “assistance” refer to the complicity, deception, and exploitation of the recipient, respectively.

The sender is using figurative or indirect expressions to avoid being too explicit or suspicious, while manipulating the recipient’s emotions and actions. Similarly, the post (Text 3) uses the metaphors “dream come true”, “life changer”, and “sky is the limit” to refer to the unrealistic and exaggerated expectations and outcomes of winning the lottery, and the euphemisms “small fee”, “unlimited access”, and “favor” to refer to the expensive and unnecessary payments, the limited and unreliable services, and the harmful and exploitative actions of the sender, respectively. Meanwhile in Text 4, the post uses the metaphors “sweet and generous”, “master of disguise and deception”, and “genius and hero” to refer to the dishonest and criminal boyfriend, and the euphemisms “mysterious accident”, “perfect heist”, and “outsmarted” to refer to the murder, theft, and escape, respectively. The sender is using figurative or indirect expressions to avoid being too explicit or suspicious, while praising their accomplice. Criminals often use these metaphors and euphemisms on social media to conceal, manipulate,



or justify their criminal activities, as well as to persuade, influence, or coerce their potential victims or audiences.

Sensational Headlines and Biased Language

These are linguistic devices that are used to attract attention, arouse interest, or provoke emotion, often with the intention of influencing or manipulating the opinion or behavior of others. Sensational headlines and biased language from the selected social media are shown in Table 3 below:

Sensational Headlines and Biased Language	Source
No one can stop us”, “#cityofchaos”, “#cheeselover”, “#pizzatime”	Text 1 (Twitter post)
“very important and urgent matter”, “huge amount of money”, “once in a lifetime opportunity” “dear friend”, “honest and God-fearing man”, “generous and fair offer” “#endcorruption”, “#savethenation”, “#stayblessed”	Text 2 (Facebook message)
“amazing news”, “won the lottery”, “millionaire” “lucky”, “happy”, “grateful”, “#bestdayever”, “#thankyougod”, “#changetheworld”	Text 3 (Facebook post)
“gorgeous necklace”, “worth a fortune”, “secret history”, “best boyfriend ever”, “I love you”, “truelove”, “#bestboyfriendever”, “#justiceforprincess”, “#oneofakind”	Text 4 (Instagram post)

Table 3: Data Showing the Use of Sensational Headlines and Biased language

From Table 1, the tweet (Text 1) uses a sensational headline “No one can stop us” to attract the attention and curiosity of the audience, while using biased language “us” to create a sense of solidarity or to identify with their fellow criminals. By doing this, the user tries to appeal to the emotions, opinions, or actions of the audience, or to promote a certain agenda or perspective. The user is exaggerating or distorting the reality of the crime, while using hashtags such as “#cityofchaos”, “#cheeselover”, and “#pizzatime” to create a negative and fearful impression on social media. Similarly, in Text 2, the message uses sensational headlines such as “very important and urgent matter”, “huge amount of money”, and “once in a lifetime opportunity” to attract the attention and curiosity of the recipient, while using biased language such as “dear friend”, “honest and God-fearing man”, and “generous and fair offer” to create a sense of rapport, credibility, and generosity with the sender. The sender is trying to influence the emotions, opinions, or actions of the recipient, or to promote a certain agenda or perspective. The sender is exaggerating or distorting the reality of the situation, while using hashtags such as “#endcorruption”, “#savethenation”, and “#stayblessed” to create a positive and altruistic impression in the mind of the people.



Furthermore, in Text 3, the post uses sensational headlines such as “amazing news”, “won the lottery”, and “millionaire” to attract the attention and curiosity of the recipients, while using biased language such as “lucky”, “happy”, and “grateful” to create a sense of satisfaction, joy, and appreciation with the sender. The sender here is appealing to the sensibilities and emotions, opinions, or actions of the recipients, or to promote or chart a certain agenda or perspective in their psyche. The sender is exaggerating or distorting the reality of the situation, while using hashtags such as “#bestdayever”, “#thankyougod”, and “#changetheworld” to create a positive and altruistic impression. In the same manner, the post (Text 4) uses sensational headlines such as “gorgeous necklace”, “worth a fortune”, and “secret history” to attract the attention and curiosity of the audience, while using biased language such as “best boyfriend ever”, “iloveyou”, and “truelove” to create a sense of satisfaction, affection, and loyalty between the addresser and the addressee. The sender tries to influence the emotions, opinions, or actions of the audience, or to promote a certain agenda, perspective or course of action. The sender also exaggerates or distorts the reality of the situation, while using hashtags such as “#bestboyfriendever”, “#justiceforprincess”, and “#oneofakind” to create a positive and unique impression. These sensational headlines and biased language used by criminals on social media are to promote, glorify, or justify their activities, as well as to discredit or vilify their opponents or victims.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

It further demonstrated that sensationalist headlines and biased language are used by criminals to attract undue attention and curiosity of the audience, while also influencing or promoting their criminal activities. For example, the headline “No one can stop us” in Text 1 (Twitter post) is a sensational headline that creates a sense of power and defiance, while the language “us” is a biased language that creates a sense of solidarity or identity with their fellow criminals. Similarly, the headlines “very important and urgent matter”, “huge amount of money”, “once in a lifetime opportunity”, “amazing news”, “won the lottery”, “millionaire”, “gorgeous necklace”, “worth a fortune”, and “secret history” in Texts 2, 3, and 4 (Facebook message, Instagram post, and WhatsApp message) are sensational headlines that create a sense of urgency, importance, or curiosity, while the language “dear friend”, “honest and God-fearing man”, “generous and fair offer”, “lucky”, “happy”, “grateful”, “best boyfriend ever”, “iloveyou”, and “truelove” are biased language that create a sense of rapport, credibility, generosity, satisfaction, joy, appreciation, affection, or loyalty with the sender.

These linguistic strategies used by criminals on social media platforms are effective in concealing, manipulating, or justifying their criminal activities and intention, as well as in persuading, influencing, or coercing their potential victims or audiences into accepting their fate.

CONCLUSION

The social media English in Nigeria and the new crime wave aptly reveal how language is used to construct, negotiate and hide the identities and ideologies of the actors involved in these nefarious activities. This paper examines how some linguistic devices in the social media posts: slang and code words, metaphors and euphemisms, sensational headlines and biased language,



emotional appeal and hashtags, and intertextuality and multimodality are employed to communicate the motives, methods and perceived consequences of the crimes. The work also explores how these devices reflect and shape the social and cultural context of the platforms and the audiences. The paper concludes that the social media users demonstrate their awareness of the norms and expectations of their online communities, and attempt to establish a sense of belonging and legitimacy through their careful choice of language which are intended to conceal their criminal activities or manipulate their potential victims or audience of falling prey to their antics while they remain unpunished.

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