

# A Linguistic Analysis of *WhatsApp* Conversations among Undergraduate Students of Joseph Ayo Babalola University

Abosede Adebola Otemuyiwa<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Ayo Babalola University, Ikeji-Arakeji, Osun State, Nigeria

\* Abosede Adebola Otemuyiwa, E-mail: [adebolaotemuyiwa66@gmail.com](mailto:adebolaotemuyiwa66@gmail.com)

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## **Abstract**

*This study is an analysis of WhatsApp conversations among undergraduate students of Joseph Ayo Babalola University. Five conversations were collected from five undergraduate students. The conversations were then forwarded to the researcher's phone. Screen shots of each conversation was taken so as to use it as it is on the WhatsApp pages of the owners that are kind enough to release their phones. Pragmatics is the theoretical framework used for the study. The power of influence of given contexts is revealed on messages, on speaker's meaning and speaker's intention in the selected conversations among undergraduate student. The power of emoji and smileys which are the digital version of body language in reducing ambiguity and adding emotional context to what is said is revealed in the selected conversations among undergraduate students in Joseph Ayo Babalola University. We conclude by suggesting that more smileys and emojis be used by conversationalists, since phones even suggest them as you type your conversations. WhatsApp is also used for formal instructions between teachers and students, so more teachers should imbibe the culture of using it for passing instructions to their students. Lastly, seminars and workshops can be organized by government institutions and private organizations to train instructors especially in the higher institutions of learning, on WhatsApp technology and proper usage.*

## **Keywords**

*pragmatics, WhatsApp, conversations, context, smileys*

## **1. Introduction**

The English Language is used by Nigerians as a second language. The heterogeneous linguistic and cultural nature of the federation gives the language a prominent place not only in the affairs of government, but as a tool for socio-cultural evolution. It serves as the language of instruction, commerce, and as a lingua franca, especially its pidgin form. In simple terms, English conversation can be described as an activity in which two or more people take turns. Typically, only one person speaks at

a time and there tends to be an avoidance of silence between speaking turns. Scholars have considered conversation analysis from various perspectives. Sperber and Wilson (2005), Ogunsuji (2000), Odebunmi (2003), Osisanwo (2003) worked on conversation analysis. Odebunmi (2006) for instance, worked on locutions in medical discourse in South Western Nigeria. The paper examines the pragmatic roles that locutionary acts play in understanding the communication between doctors and patients in South Western Nigeria. Also, Mey (2001) worked on pragmatics and all its ramifications.

Talking can be said to be the most pervasive characteristics of human social interaction. Sometimes we talk to particular persons or to anyone who will listen to us. When we cannot find anyone who will listen to us, we talk to ourselves. This is to say that human language is very important and fulfills a very large variety of functions. The Ethnography Of Communication (EOC), formerly called the ethnography of speaking, is the analysis of communication within the wider context of the social and cultural practices and beliefs of the members of a particular culture or speech community. EOC takes into account both the communicative form, which may include but not be limited to spoken language, and its function within the given culture.

Schegloff and Sacks (1973) examines telephone conversational examples. The contention then was that there is a crucial difference between face-to-face and telephone conversations. The complaints were that of eye contact role in establishing or changing turns or the importance of body postures in fighting out what the other person is going to say. In the contemporary time, all these fears have been allayed with the use of emojis and smileys (the digital version of body language).

The internet is an electronic medium which present a channel which facilitates and constraints the ability to communicate in ways that are fundamentally different from those found in other semiotic situations. Originally, when the writing of language began during the Egyptian civilization, objects were made to be read. But it was deficient because the meaning usually lies with the person that made the objects. So, the use of language nowadays can be termed revolutionary (Crystal, 2006, p. 5). Users of the internet usually send mails, check e-mails, search for information on past research works, surf for entertainment, and do some social networking. The internet is one of the greatest things done by human beings.

## 2. Social Media

Social Media can be defined as forms of electronic communication through which users interact among people in which they create, freely share, exchange and discuss information, ideas, personal messages and other content about each other and their lives using a multimedia mix of personal words, pictures, videos and audio, utilizing online platforms while they are connected to the internet. Social Media, according to Kuppuswamy et al. (2010) are virtual platforms for interactivity and information exchange ... where issues are debated and defined ... social media users collaborate in content creation ... are proactive in searching information, ... and value control in social media participation (p. 330). Social media include Facebook, *WhatsApp*, LinkedIn, Twitter, Myspace, YouTube among

others and all these are available to as many that want it.

### **3. WhatsApp Technology**

*WhatsApp* is a type of technology that is commonly used on specific mobile phones and computers. Since the smart phones became popular, many messaging services were launched but *WhatsApp* has become the most popular of all. This application is highly addictive and can create a great impact on regular users. *WhatsApp* messenger functionality has recently been improved upon. It is available on Blackberry, Nokia Symbian 60, Windows phone, Android and iPhones. For users to get started, enter the telephone number of the device into the Application, it then sorts through the contacts on the phone to figure out who else also has the application already installed. Users can then invite other contacts and start sending messages to ones that the Application discovers.

People often press their phones while walking, in buses, on their beds; to mention but a few, to converse on *WhatsApp*. It is one of the most popular chat Applications in the world today. People have thousands of chatting messages, photo, video and audio attachments on their *WhatsApp*. The development of digital technology has facilitated easier communication between people and organizations. *WhatsApp* is used for various purposes like commercial purposes, teaching of students, friendship interactions among others. It allows direct interactions.

The question now is to know how speakers' meaning and intention influence a given context in *WhatsApp* conversations of undergraduate students in Joseph Ayo Babalola University, Ikeji Arakeji and how emoji and smileys, which are the digital version of body language, reduce ambiguity and adding emotional context to what is said in the students' conversations.

### **4. Smileys and Emoji**

The smiley faces vary from elated to angry. Most of them do not inherently have anything to do with emotion. Many are random objects like a rose, a camera, a foot (for when one wants to end conversation like the opening credits to Monty Python's Flying Circus), or a piece of Sushi

### **5. Methodology**

In order to elicit the data for this study, the contact of the willing students were got, then, collected their phones to random sample their conversations for selection. The subjects were five in number: 3 males and 2 females. Their age ranges from 17 to 22 years. The selected conversations were then forwarded to the investigator's phone which we screen shot so as to have the conversations as it is on the subjects' phone.

### **6. Method of Data Analysis**

The online selected conversations were examined using the qualitative descriptive approach, and specifically looked at...

- i. The power of influence that a given context can have on a message, on speaker's meaning and speaker's intention;
- ii. The power of emoji and smileys which are the digital version of body language in reducing ambiguity and adding emotional context to what is said .

## **7. The Findings**

Out of the five messages collected, two will be random sampled and analyze because of space.

### *7.1 Conversation One*

#### 7.1.1 Organization of the Conversations

Maximally one speaker at the same time is maintained in this conversation (Sacks et al., 1974; in Ewins, 1997). The speech act in line 2 is making a statement. There is no gap, nor overlap in the conversation, so there is no need for any repair (Sacks, 1995, p. 11, p. 525). There are 15 turns altogether in the conversation. The adjacency pair is two utterance lengths. The transition relevant points are acceptable; there is no intrusion from any quarters. In the turn-taking, Chibueze self-selected in lines 2, 3, and 4, then the turn shift to the second pair part, later, the first pair part took over the conversation from line 6, 7, and 8 while the first pair part took the turn from lines 9, 10, and 11.

#### 7.1.2 Smileys and Emojis

Smileys were used to indicate the body languages applied in the conversations. In line 3, Chibueze used a smiley with pleased red cheeks, while in line 5, EtzChusieBella used two smileys with grinning good mood to express the extent of her love to Chibueze. In line 8, Chibueze used two smileys to also express his love too. One of the smileys is winking one eye and the other was a smiley with heart eyes. All these have semiotic implications. The heart in the eyes signifies the kind of love that is deep in the heart of the expresser.

#### 7.1.3 Content of the Conversation

The conversations are coherent in that the content-based connections between words that make them produce sense (Mey, 1983, pp. 126-127). In terms of turns, Chibueze is the leading conversationalist. Etz is the lesser contributor. There is no interruption at all in the sequence. In terms of Speech Acts, the adjacency pairs include greeting/greeting (lines 9 and 12). The preference of the sequences is a preferred preference and an unmarked one. This is because an unmarked sequence is not structurally rich and less complex (Levinson, 1983; in Mey, 2006).

#### 7.1.4 Context

This conversation is typical of a particular set of people; the undergraduates in a university who are youths. "Love" which is the theme of the conversation, is a phenomenon peculiar to the youths. The age range of Undergraduates falls between the ages of 16-30 as the case might be. The conversation is lively and interesting. The topic can be tagged "love". The intention of the conversationalists is to express their love to each other. The two conversationalists have the same status socially. The second pair parts are preferred responses since they are relevant, briefer and linguistically simpler (Sacks et al.,

1974, p. 718). The second pair parts in the conversations are compliant and oriented towards closure. The presuppositions here are that: i) the conversationalists are lovers, ii) they are willing to get married to one another after their schooling.

## 7.2 *Conversation Two*

### 7.2.1 Organization of the Conversation

It is a conversation within conversation. The turn taking mechanism is a normal one where one speaker speaks at the same time (Sacks, 1974). There three turns within the texts and there are three other texts from the conversationalists. There is no overlap and no gap. There is a transition relevant point in the conversation by “grandma”. She shouted at the girls and the robbers that she must not be left untouched or unraped along with the girls since she has lost her husband sometimes ago. She concluded her conversation by performing a speech act of instructing the thieves to rape them all. She said: “Please rape us all”, she then added and said: “or rape me, leave them”. The TRP was acceptable to the other participants because the response from grandma was with a loud noise that shut up the mouth of the girls and robbers. The responses are self-select. The conversations all have clear cases of corresponding first and second pair parts. There are no repair sequences.

### 7.2.2 Content of the Conversation

The conversation is coherent in that it relates between communication acts (Mey, 1983, pp. 126-127) Turn-taking in the conversation, grandma contributed immensely to the conversation. Though the robbers are the movers of the conversation in the first pair part, the girls responded in the second pair part. The grandma is the one that interrupted in the conversation. The adjacency Pairs in this conversation: the robbers made an exclamatory sentence and this induced an action (crying) and there was a response in the second pair part which is a request.

### 7.2.3 Context

The conversation is one in another conversation sent by a friend (an undergraduate) to another friend. It is semantically correct and has a surface structure meaning. It is not ambiguous. Smileys and emojis are used to further show the context of the conversations. The girls were crying, apart from writing the word “crying”, smiley that are crying with tears on their faces were used in line 2. In line 3, after writing the word “shouting” five not exited smileys were used. Nine other smileys indicating crying and weeping were used to indicate the context of the conversation. It is a terrific situation and confusing situation which the smileys displayed. The conversation is a funny and interesting one. This is revealed in the last chat of the captured conversation, that “life is too short, enjoy and have fun”. The topic of the conversation can be called “Rape”. The intention of the conversationalist especially the mover of the conversation is to perform the act of raping on the girls and if possible the grandma. The grandma also wants the act of rape to be performed on her since it is a long time that she lost her husband. That fact is left unsaid but there is the presupposition that her husband is late and that it has been long that she lost him.

#### 7.2.4 About the People

The sender and the receiver of the message are both undergraduates between the ages of 16-20. The sender wanted his friend to have fun with the message. The responses here are dispreferred because they are characterized by an extreme emotional upset and there is a situation of physical danger, physical pains which is revealed in the use of smileys and emojis in the conversations. The dispreferredness markers are revealed in lines 2, 3, and 5 of the conversations. The presuppositions here are that: armed robbers have come to visit the conversationalists; the robber is planning to rape the girls, while grandma also wants the robber to include her in the rape.

#### 7.3 The Table below Summarizes the Two Conversations

**Table 1. Comparison between the Two Conversations Analyzed**

Conversations	1	2
Adjacency Pairs	Two utterance length	Two utterance length
Speech Acts	Making statement	Making an exclamatory statement
Transition Relevant Point	No intrusion	There is intrusion
Turn-Taking type	Self-selected	Self- selected
Turn Taking Mechanism	Normal sequence	Normal sequence
Number of Smileys used	5	17
Coherence	Yes	Yes
Preference	Unmarked	Marked
Conversation-Topic/Intention	Expression of Love	Rape
Ambiguity	None	None
Responses	Preferred	Dis-preferred

The goal-directed nature of speech events reflects the intentionality of language use. The two conversations have intentions. The first conversation is on “expression of love” while the second conversation is on the issue of rape. The context in the first conversation is “love context” and this is seen in the use of smileys to express the level of love that the two conversationalists have for each other. The second context is a horrific one. This was expressed by the use of seventeen smileys and emojis to express the conversationalists’ emotions at the arrival of the armed robber and the announcement of rape by them. The adjacency pairs in the two conversations are two utterance lengths. The speech acts carried out are making statements. One of the statements is an exclamatory sentence while the second one is just a statement. In the conversation 1, there is no intrusion at all to the conversation while there is intrusion in conversation 2 by grandma. The turn-taking types in the two conversations are self-selected and the turn-taking mechanisms in the two conversations are of normal sequence. The two conversations are structurally coherent. In terms of preference, in conversation 1, preference is

unmarked while it is marked in conversation 2. There is no ambiguity in the two selected conversations. In terms of responses, in conversation 1, it is preferred response while in conversation two, it is dis-preferred.

## 8. Conclusion

In order to find out the power of influence of given contexts on messages, on speaker's meaning and speaker's intention in the selected conversations among undergraduate students in Joseph Ayo Babalola University, pragmatics was used for the analysis. The study has revealed that context, meaning and speakers intention are fundamental to pragmatics analysis and has also revealed the power of emoji and smileys in reducing ambiguity and adding emotional context to what is said. This study will suggest that more smileys and emojis be used by conversationalists, since phones even suggest them as you type your conversations. The government should subsidize the cost of iPhones so that many students will be *WhatsApp* friendly. *WhatsApp* is also used for formal instructions between teachers and students, so more teachers should encourage using it for passing instructions to their students. Seminars and workshops can be organized by government institutions and private organizations to train instructors especially in the higher institutions of learning, on *WhatsApp* technology and proper usage.

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**Appendix A**

**Online Sources**


APPAMATRIX

Db,Koreascholar.com

Linkedin: How to use *WhatsApp* to Conduct Research, <http://www.gse.uci.edu/markw/comparing.html>

 winking smiley	 broken red heart	 dizzy smiley	 Listless-WhatsApp smiley
 two pink hearts smiley	 two rotating hearts smiley	 triumphant smiley	 smiley winking one eye
 Suffering emoji	 WhatsApp emoticon eyes closed	 surgical stretched tongue	 Smiley laughing smugly
 disappointed smiley	 Smiley with heart eyes	 smiley tablet	 smiley making grimaces
 smiley with hands	 smiley with halo	 smiley pinches both eyes	 smiley stretched tongue
 smiley laughing with open mouth	 smiley with sunglasses	 Smiley with tongue eat enjoy	 speechless smiley



 screaming smiley	 monkey hands on mouth smiley	 Monkey hands on ears smiley	 monkey hands before eyes smiley
 yellow heart smiley	 sparkling heart smiley	 smiley upside down	 smiley not exited
 smiley looks neutral	 smiley is relieved	 smiley pleased red cheeks	 smiley face is flushed
 smiley with squint eyes	 smiley shocked	 red heart smiley	 red balloon
 smiley	 purple heart smiley	 pouting angry smiley	 pink growing heart
 pine decoration	 nerd with glasses emoji	 tired smiley	 laughing smiley punches eyes
 Japanese dolls	 100 hundred points smiley	 heart with tied ribbons	 heart with dot smiley
 grinning smiley shows teeth	 grinning smiley shows good mood	 green heart smiley	 Ghost smiley
 frowning smiley	 smiley frightened	 Fireworks smiley	 dollar eye smiley






	 dismayed smiley	 disappointed smiley	 curved m smiley
 curly-loop-smiley	 crying smiley	 confetti-bomb emoji	 confetti-ball-emoji
 frightened smiley	 blue heart	 blue forehead	 beating heart
 arrow through heart		 zipped mouth smiley	

Figure 1. Some of the Smileys and Emojis Used by Undergraduates and Their Meanings

