

Original Paper

Abbreviations/Acronyms and Neologisms in English and French

WhatsApp Communication: A Comparative Study and Implications for Translation

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Abstract

Since the invention of the Internet in 1962 when J. C. R Licklider of MIT presented the first recorded description of the social interactions that could be enabled through networking in his Galactic Network concept, what has come to be known as social media has gained a lot of prominence and momentum in the dissemination of information. Prior to the dawn of the Internet age other communication tools like the telegraph, telephone, radio, and computer had served as precursors. A tool of immeasurable capabilities, the Internet is also a medium for collaboration and interaction between individuals and their computers without regard for geographic location. Other social media tools that have boarded this 20th Century information superhighway wagon include Yahoo co-founded by Jerry Yang and David Filo in 1994, Facebook co-founded mainly by Mark Zuckerberg in 2004, Twitter by Jack Dorsey in 2006, WhatsApp by Jan Koum and Brian Acton in 2009 and Instagram by Kevin Systrom in 2010. Our focus in this paper is on the use of WhatsApp as a social media tool. Adjudged one of the fastest and easiest to use, people of all walks of life have taken full advantage of it. Our aim in this paper is to examine how it has impacted on the use of English and French by Anglophones and Francophones in Nigeria and Cameroon so far as neologisms and abbreviations are concerned. Our approach which is comparative in nature has as its principal tenet the implications for translation to and from the two languages involved in this study.

Keywords

social media, Internet, WhatsApp, neologism, abbreviation, acronym, translation

1. Introduction

Language, a major communication tool common to man, is very essential in his daily activities. He cannot survive without communication be it verbal or non-verbal. Language is therefore a distinct attribute of the human being denied other animals. As a means of communication used by people who belong to the same speech community, its importance to man cannot be overemphasized. This is owed to the fact that communication would be nearly impossible without this quality inherent only in human beings among all animals. We do not in any way suggest that other animals do not communicate. According to Anagbogu, Mbah et al. (2010), even though other animals may be able to communicate with other members of their species, their communication does not go beyond a sort of response to certain stimuli to signal hunger, sexual excitement, fear, happiness and other feelings. For example a hen makes different vocal sounds to indicate danger (with the appearance of a predator like hawk or kite), fear (like when it sees an unfamiliar animal), and to call her chicks to come and eat.

An observation of the activities of ants and bees also point to the fact that animals too have their own means of communication. Anagbogu, Mbah et al. (2010) posit that communication in animals does not amount to language because it is genetic. "This means that the animals came into existence with the ability to communicate the way they do. Communication for them is automatic". He also says that language is "a means which human beings have devised for communicating ideas, feelings, emotions, desires, etc. through complex vocal or written symbols". Baylon and Fabre (2003) quoting from *Dictionnaire de linguistique* defines it thus: La langue est considérée comme un système "en ce sens qu'à un niveau donné (phonème, monème,...) ou dans une classe donnée, il existe entre les termes un ensemble de relations qui les lient les uns par rapport aux autres, si bien que, si l'un des termes est modifié, l'équilibre du système est affecté".

Language is considered a system "to the extent that at any given level (phoneme, momeme...) or in a particular class, terms are so interrelated that if one is modified the equilibrium of the system is affected" (Our translation).

The main thrust of Baylon and Fabre's submission lies in the fact that language is a system made up of different parts. If any of its parts is modified the system is bound to be affected. Quoting from Martinet's *Elements de linguistique générale*, they go on to say that a natural human language is an instrument for communication in which human experiences are analyzed differently in every community.

Saussure's point of view with regards to language also deserves our attention given the enviable position he holds as the father of modern linguistics. We also consider his linguistic theory, structuralism as the framework on which we hinge our assertions in this study. Among other aspects of the theory we have chosen his concept of arbitrariness because it tallies with the creation of abbreviations/acronyms and neologisms in WhatsApp use. Saussure thinks that language as an organized whole, is a system in which every term is defined in relation to others. We are equally

conversant with Saussure's point that language is arbitrary and as such the same object/item is represented differently by different speech communities. This arbitrariness is evidenced in the way language is used on social media especially among peers.

The relevance of these definitions to our study lies not only in the fact that they stress that language is a human phenomenon (Anagbogu), but also that it is a system peculiar to every community (Baylon & Saussure, n.d.). Dada (2015) adds the cultural import of language to the other definitions when he stresses that "language can be relied upon as a major factor in cultural maintenance. It is like this: a people's language is the greatest legacy nature has endowed them with. Language is a precious resource encapsulating the intellectual wealth, world view, identity, verbal art, etc., of its owners". Rather than discard the emergence of "orthographically wrong words" borne out of arbitrariness, we should rather see the language of the social media, especially its informal phase as a cultural aspect that has come to stay.

Akmajian et al. (2007) posit that "It is apparent that people have been fascinated with language and communication for thousands of years, yet in many ways we are only beginning to understand the complex nature of this aspect of human life". It is this fascination that has prompted us to examine the way Anglophones and Francophones use abbreviations/acronyms and neologisms in WhatsApp messages. This trend deserves to be investigated because it has come to stay given the very fact that language is dynamic, alive and will continue to grow in various directions like an octopus.

With the rapid growth in technology, there is an increase in the rate of communication. Not so long ago the major form of written communication between individuals who were separated by distance was letter writing which had as its major limitation a separation marked by time. Today the case is different. Even as the sender types the message, the receiver is a witness to the process. According to Leiner, Cerf et al. (1997) since the invention of the Internet in 1962 when J. C. R Licklider of MIT presented the first recorded description of the social interactions that could be enabled through networking in his Galactic Network concept, what has come to be known as social media has gained a lot of prominence and momentum in the dissemination of information. Prior to the dawn of the Internet age other communication tools like the telegraph, telephone, radio, and computer had served as precursors. A tool of immeasurable capabilities, the Internet is also a medium for collaboration and interaction between individuals and their computers without regard for geographic location. Other social media tools that have boarded this 20th Century information superhighway wagon include Yahoo co-founded by Jerry Yang and David Filo in 1994, Facebook co-founded mainly by Mark Zuckerberg in 2004, Twitter by Jack Dorsey et al., in 2006, WhatsApp by Jan Koum and Brian Acton in 2009 and Instagram by Kevin Systrom in 2010. Our focus in this paper is on the use of WhatsApp as a social media tool. Adjudged one of the fastest and easiest to use, people of all walks of life have taken full advantage of it. Our aim in this paper is to examine how it has impacted on the use of English and French by Anglophones and Francophones in Nigeria and Cameroon so far as abbreviations/acronyms and neologisms are concerned. Our approach which is comparative in nature has as its principal tenet the

implications for translation to and from the two languages involved in this study. To achieve our objective, we intend to shed some light on the following sub headings: social media and WhatsApp, abbreviation/acronym and neologism; short message service and WhatsApp; abbreviations/acronyms and neologisms in WhatsApp messages in English and French; translating abbreviations/acronyms and neologisms.

2. Social Media and WhatsApp

An umbrella term that includes internet based sites and services, social media are computer-mediated technologies that facilitate the creation and sharing of information, ideas, career interests and other forms of expressions. According to Eke (2018) “Kaplan and Haenlein define social media as a group of internet based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundation of web 2.0 and allow creation and exchange of user generated content”. She goes further to state that “social media are generally defined as forms of electronic communication as website for social networking and micro blogging which allow its users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages and other content such as images, videos and so on” (2018).

WhatsApp founded by Jan Koum and Brian Acton in 2009, is one of the most effective and user friendly social media tools. It has the capacity to disseminate text and video messages to individuals and groups within seconds. With WhatsApp virtually everyone has become an amateur journalist with evidences of positive or negative actions of individuals captured surreptitiously and disseminated in the social media. Government bodies and other organizations are known to have reacted to such messages with positive outcomes recorded in some instances. Bearing in mind that communication also has its non-verbal component as it relates to gestures, the use of emoji (ideograms and smileys used in electronic messages and web pages) further help in the interpretation of messages and conveyance of feelings. Our aim in this paper is to examine how communication with particular reference to abbreviation/acronyms and neologisms is effected with the use of this social media tool. It is therefore expedient that, at this juncture, we consider the import of these expressions.

3. Abbreviation/Acronym and Neologisms

Webster defines abbreviation as “a shortened form of a written word or phrase used in place of the whole word or phrase ‘Amt’ is an abbreviation for ‘amount’. ‘USA’ is an abbreviation of ‘United States of America’” (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/abbreviation>). Abbreviations may be used to save space and time, to avoid repetition of long words and phrases, or simply to conform to conventional usage. An abbreviation should only be used if the recipient of the message knows what it means. In a write-up the author should therefore write in full before providing the abbreviation in brackets immediately after. However for abbreviations that are already well known and accepted the author is at liberty to abbreviate in the first instance. Michaela Panter in an online article “Editing Tip: When to Use Abbreviations” puts it thus: “Many journals do not require definitions of abbreviations

that are pervasive in the literature, based on the assumption that most readers will already be aware of their meaning”. Webster further posits that The styling of abbreviations is inconsistent and arbitrary and includes many possible variations. Some abbreviations are formed by omitting all but the first few letters of a word; such abbreviations usually end in a period: Oct. for October, univ. for university, and cont. for continued. Other abbreviations are formed by omitting letters from the middle of the word and usually also end in a period: govt. for government, Dr. for Doctor, and atty. for attorney. Abbreviations for the names of states in the U.S. are two capitalized letters, e.g., AR for Arkansas, ME for Maine, and TX for Texas.

The inconsistency and arbitrariness in the styling of abbreviations is definitely a characteristic dependent upon by users of WhatsApp. Acronyms too are used in the transmission of WhatsApp messages. According to Webster.

Acronyms are abbreviations formed from the initial letters of an expanded phrase and usually do not include periods: *PR* for *public relations*, *CEO* for *chief executive officer*, and *BTW* for *by the way*. Some acronyms are pronounced as words: *FEMA* for *Federal Emergency Management Agency* and *NATO* for *North Atlantic Treaty Organization*. Although some people assert that all acronyms not pronounced as words, such as *EPA* for *Environmental Protection Agency*, be referred to as *initialisms*, the term *acronym* is in fact applied to both.

Since the difference between abbreviations and acronyms is almost negligible, we have treated them in this work as one by referring to them thus: abbreviations/acronyms. Besides cases of abbreviations and acronyms noticed in WhatsApp messages, neologisms have also been found. It is therefore expedient, at this juncture to throw some light on what we mean by neologism.

4. Neologism

Neologism simply refers to the creation of new words in a language. This can be done through derivation (affixation), back formation (removal of an affix), compounding (juxtaposition of two existing words), repurposing (changing the context of a word), conversion (changing the class of a word), eponyms (words named after a person or place), loanwords, onomatopoeia, reduplication (repetition or near-repetition—goody-goody, flip-flop, hanky-panky, hip hop). Other mechanisms used to actualize neologisms include nonce words (words pulled out of thin air), and error. So far as neologisms are concerned in relation to WhatsApp messages, error is the most common device. According to Andy Bodle in his online article, “How New Words are Born”, *The Guardian* “Misspellings, mishearings, mispronunciations and mistranscriptions rarely produce new words in their own right, but often lead to new forms in conjunction with other mechanisms” (<https://www.theguardian.com/media/mind-your-language/2016/feb/04/english-neologisms>). Like abbreviations/acronyms, neologism too is used in WhatsApp messages in virtually all codified languages. The Short Message Service (SMS) may give us a clue as to how we might have arrived at this abbreviation/acronym junction in our internet linguistic journey.

5. Short Message Service and WhatsApp

The very fact that the Short Message Service (SMS) preceded the birth of the WhatsApp tool as an online communication platform might have largely influenced the way people communicate. According to Christine Erickson (2012), the SMS concept was developed in the Franco-German GSM cooperation in 1984 by Friedhelm Hillebrand and Bernard Ghillebaert. The first text message was sent in 1992 from Neil Papworth, a former developer at Sema Group Telecoms. Mobile phones didn't have keyboards at the time, so Papworth had to type the message on a PC. Papworth's text—"Merry Christmas"—was successfully sent to Richard Jarvis at Vodafone.

Onuigbo (2015) makes us understand that the SMS allow for text messages that violate established grammatical and orthographic conventions. Users create words with little or no regard to norm. This accounts for the creation of acronyms and words in such a way that comprehension is hindered if one is not an "initiate". Linguistic analyses of text messages reveal an irregularity in the shortening and creation of words.

Although WhatsApp allows unlimited writing space to its writers unlike the SMS, we think that the earlier birth of the former may have conditioned the way people write WhatsApp messages. We also think that the abbreviations and neologisms may be as a result of time factor. Sometimes as the writer is on his message the recipient is aware and thus waiting anxiously to have it. This process definitely affects how the messages are written.

6. Abbreviations/Acronyms and Neologisms in WhatsApp Messages in English

In this section we intend to present, in tabular form, abbreviations, acronyms and neologisms commonly used in WhatsApp messages in English. Their meanings are also provided:

Table 1. Abbreviations, Acronyms and Neologisms Commonly Used in WhatsApp Messages in English

	Abbreviation/ Acronym	Standard/Regular meaning		Abbreviation/ Acronym	Standard/Regular meaning
1	brb	Be right back	18	tnx	thanks
2	bft	Be right there	19	imp	important
3	bff	Be friends forever	20	atm	At the moment
4	ctn	Can't talk now	21	btw	between
5	ilu	I love you	22	cn	can
6	u	you	23	pls	please
7	lol	Laugh out loud	24	jst	just

8	jc	Just checking	25	E123	Easy as 123
9	op	Off point	26	drmz	dreams
10	poc	Point of correction	27	bby	baby
11	btw	By the way	28	cont	continue
12	sup	What's up	29	swthrt	Sweet heart
13	frm	from	30	c	see
14	hrt	heart	31	kk	ok
15	ur	your	32	hw	how
16	r	are	33	bc/bcos	because
17	tnk	thank	34	b4	before

Neologisms		Regular	Neologisms		Regular Interpretation
		Interpretation			
1	api	happy	13	fyn	fine
2	alow	allow	14	swit	sweet
3	dan	than	15	sori	sorry
4	dis	this	16	nite/nyt	night
5	eva	ever	17	Gud am	good morning
6	hop	hope	18	Gud pm	good evening
7	hu	who	19	luv	love
8	hapinx	happiness	20	2day	today
9	rite	right	21	2moro	tomorrow
10	fone	phone	22	2nite/2nyt	tonight
11	tink	think	23	4get	forget
12	tym	time	24	9ja	Nigeria

From the Tables above one can say that the abbreviations/acronyms are more difficult to decode than neologisms. We have earlier stated that the most common technique used in the creation of new words on social media platforms especially WhatsApp is the error technique. It should be noted that this technique has nothing to do with the author not knowing the right spelling. This case poses very little problems to the reader because the new spellings accorded the words have to do more with how they sound: phone-fone, night-nite/nyt, love-luv, etc.

The mixture of Arabic figures and letters is also worthy of note. In these cases the syllables represented by figures sound like the ones used to replace them: forget-4get, today-2day. They are more commonly used in English.

7. Abbreviations/Acronyms and Neologisms in WhatsApp Messages in French

A presentation of abbreviations/acronyms and neologisms as used by Francophones in WhatsApp messages is necessary so that we can compare the two cases and proffer solutions for translation.

Table 2. Abbreviations/Acronyms in WhatsApp Messages in French

Abbreviation/Acronym		Standard/Regular meaning	Abbreviation/Acronym		Standard/Regular meaning
1	ptd	pendant	18	ts	tous
2	bjr	bonjour	19	cie	compagnie
3	stp	S'il te plait	20	pers	personne
4	svp	S'il vous plait	21	ns	nous
5	cpte	compte	22	num	numero
6	c	C'est	23	ds	dans
7	coe	comme	24	pk	pourquoi
8	qd	quand	25	c	ce
9	pb	probleme	26	RIP	Repose en paix
10	atds	attends	27	d	de
11	msg	message	28	mn	mon
12	dde	demande	29	tn	ton
13	st	sont	30	sn	son
14	bcp	beaucoup	31	ns	nous
15	sr	soeur	32	sms	sommes
16	pr	pour			
17	ttes	toutes			

Table 3. Neologisms in WhatsApp Messages in French

Neologism		Meaning
1	ki	qui
2	juskou	Jusqu'ou
3	prkoi	pourquoi
4	ke	que

Just like in the English language, we realize that WhatsApp users in French also abbreviate and use neologisms indiscriminately. These new words created are also in line with the error technique. The question that concerns us at this juncture is this: What are the implications for the translation of this new linguistic phenomenon that defies laid down rules of orthography in both English and French?

8. Implications for Translation

One of the most comforting statements ever made in the field of translation, according to us, is the one that borders on the fact that whatever is said or written in one language can be expressed in any other. Akmajian (2007) puts it thus: “There is nothing that can be expressed in one language that cannot be expressed in any other”. This concept that owes its origin to the theory of meaning as espoused by the Paris school of thought did not only destroy the principle of “intraduisibilite”, it also placed a heavy burden on the translator who must ensure its veracity is upheld.

One may wonder the relevance of even seeking to translate utterances that are informal in nature. While it may not be relevant in non-literary translation, we must consider its importance so far as literary translation is concerned. Over the years translators have battled with the translation of Pidgin English especially in African literature. It should be noted that Pidgin English, as a language is still undergoing the process of standardization. Our research is future looking since WhatsApp conversations are bound to appear in literary texts given the fact that they represent real life situations—and literature is a mirror of life.

If we need to consider the abbreviations/acronyms and neologisms identified in this study simply as lexical items whose equivalents need to be found in the other language, we will be violating another principle of the theory of meaning which states that we do not translate words; we translate meaning. We should therefore not be bothered that only 7 of the 92 lexical items we identified in both languages actually coincide in this recent technology-driven linguistic phenomenon. They are:

Table 4. Recent Technology-Driven Linguistic Phenomenon

French			English	
1	bjr	bonjour	gud a.m.	good morning
2	bsr	bonsoir	gud p.m.	good evening
3	msg	message	msg	message
4	num	numero	num	number
5	pk/prkoi	pourquoi	y	why
6	RIP	Repose en paix	RIP	Rest in peace
7	ki	qui	hu	who

However, we need to ask ourselves whether translation is only about meaning. It is not just the content that counts in translation; the manner in which it is presented is equally important, especially in literary translation. Taber (1980), supports this point of view when he posits that “Translating...consists in producing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent to the message of the source language, first in meaning, and secondly in style”. Since the reader conceives the two as one, the translator does not have to translate them separately. In a case such as ours the translator can maintain the very colloquial style embedded in the abbreviations/acronyms and neologisms by compensation. What this

means is that in cases where he fails to find equivalent abbreviations or neologisms he should use complete words/expressions in the target text and compensate elsewhere by using other abbreviations or neologisms that were not used in the source text. By so doing he will maintain the colloquial style of the source text. Let us consider the following examples in context:

Table 5. Colloquial Style of the Source Text

	French	English
1	Bsr sr, stp kel est le pb?	Gud p.m. sister, pls what's d prob?
2	Tu as vu mn portable ?	Hv u seen my fone?
3	Il y a bcp de monde ici.	Der re a lot of ppl here.
4	Donne-moi tn num.	Give me ur num.
5	Tu as vu le msg?	Hv u seen the msg?

In the first sentence in French “bonsoir, soeur, s’il te plait” and “problème” are abbreviated while in the English equivalence “sister, what” are not. This is compensated by the abbreviation of “the” which is written as “d”. In the second sentence, while only “mon” is abbreviated in the French sentence, “have” and “you” are abbreviated in the English version. Also note that a new word “fone” replaces “phone”. In sentence 3 “beaucoup” which is abbreviated in the French sentence as “bcp” has its English equivalent written in full as “a lot of”. The inability to have it shortened is compensated with the use of “ppl” to translate the unabbreviated French word, “monde” in the source language. In example 4 we see a coincidental abbreviation of exact words in both versions: “tn”-“ur” and “num”-“num”.

9. Conclusion

The ever dynamic nature of language has always been a fascinating phenomenon. Language is alive and ever growing as evidenced in our technology driven world powered by the Internet. To keep pace with the speed of such linguistic mutation, researchers are duty bound to continue to investigate its effect on communication. It is this quest that has been our driving force in this paper.

Since the founding of the Internet and other communication tools that have found it a worthy host, the use of language has especially been affected in many areas. Our aim in this paper was to consider how Anglophones and Francophones use the WhatsApp platform to convey written messages with specific emphasis on abbreviations/acronyms and neologisms. We were able to identify 34 abbreviations/acronyms and 24 neologisms in English while in the French messages we identified 32 abbreviations/acronyms and 4 neologisms. These figures definitely tell us that WhatsApp users in English are more creative when it comes to formation of new words with the use of the error technique. How these abbreviations/acronyms and neologisms in both languages are supposed to be translated was also a subject of our investigation in this study. Our findings indicate that there are very few lexical

coincidences that could facilitate translation. This should not pose any problem to a translator since the goal is the transfer of meaning. So if the translator fails to find an abbreviated equivalent or neologism in the receptor language, he should simply use other complete words that convey the meaning. However, in order to preserve the style that borders on colloquialism, he should compensate the absence of the direct equivalents in the receptor language by using other abbreviations/acronyms or neologisms not found in the source text.

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