

Genre Analysis of WhatsApp Group Chat among Students at University

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Abstract

Aim: This study examined Whatsapp group chat in connection with its influence on proficiency in English.

Methods: Employing purposive sampling and mixed-method (quantitative and qualitative) approach to research, a group chat used for educational purposes by selected students of the University of Cape Coast, was analysed.

Findings: the study revealed that most of the group members were not living in the same area within campus. Hence, the use of backchannel signals (Ok) with the sole aim of ascertaining whether communication is progressive and the information passed is well deciphered. Additionally, the study also shows that unlike drama, Oh is sparingly used on Whatsapp chat whereas Ok and its deviant form, were generously used. Ok was used to indicate initialization of conversation, reception of an information or message and closure of a conversational sequence. It was also shown that both Oh and Ok do not affect the truth conditions of the text; neither does it add any special meaning to the propositional content of the chat.

Recommendation: In view of the findings that Oh and Ok do not enhance grammaticality of a sentence nor does it create propositional meaning, it was recommended that students should balance their use of Whatsapp messenger because much dependence on it for communication purposes could erode students' grammatical construction of sentences as well as spellings in the English language.

Contribution to the body of knowledge: investigating the use of discourse markers on WhatsApp group chat fills the knowledge gap regarding Whatsapp group chats among university students and educationists.

Keywords: Whatsapp, Group Chats, University Students, Discourse Marker, English Language

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INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that information technology and the several mobile devices it creates, such as the mobile phone, are hugely popular (Webster, 2020; Mohammadi, Sarvestani & Nouroozi, 2020). Cha and Seo (2018) further indicated that with the ownership of smartphones increasing rising to 1.85 billion people worldwide in 2014, it is expected that this figure will be 2.87 billion in 2020. Mobile devices in general term can be referred to as handheld computers because they are highly portable and can perform the function of a laptop or desktop computer while fitting into the grip of your hand.

Mobile devices include but not limited to iPods, tablet, smartphones and e-readers. Webster indicated that mobile applications on mobile phones have become a powerful forum for communication due to the uniqueness of their sizes, packages and styles as far as functionality are concerned. Findings of several studies (Matimba & Anney, 2016; Farrah & Abu-Dawood, 2018; Mohammadi et al., 2020) revealed that the ubiquity of mobile phones and its numerous applications has resulted in its adoption in several fields of human endeavor including higher education field.

Scholars indicated that as a mobile phone application and social media platform, WhatsApp is widely used by university students (Crystal, 2013; Kemp & Wood, 2016; Stangel, 2018). Govender and Krishna (2013) indicated that with the use of WhatsApp on mobile and web-based technology, a highly interactive platform was created worldwide that fosters creation, sharing and co-creation of user-generated information. This process is highly interactive and transformative that relevant information which could have taken several years on a radio to be relayed to millions of users can be transmitted within minutes (Awake, 2011; Apejoye, 2015).

Stangel (2018) asserted that following its introduction in 2009 by Brian Action and Jon Koum, WhatsApp messenger has drastically increased its customer base to over 1.5 billion users. This is due to its user-friendly features, emphasis on privacy and varied features that enhance interactions among users via texting, audio and video calling, and group chat. In his comprehensive study on social media platforms and genre, Lomborg (2011) contended that social media such as WhatsApp can be classified as communicative genre in view of its interactive functionalities. This is as a result of its unique features at the software level and its use for distinct social purposes at the social level. In both levels, users are orientated towards a common form of communicative practices.

Going by Lomborg assertion, emphasis is on what can be learned from examining social media such as WhatsApp via in-depth genre analysis (Lomborg, 2011; Patil, 2016). The ground breaking works of some linguists and scholars (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Swales, 1990; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1993; Martin, 2001) revealed

that genre describes commonality or shared set of communicative purposes. In effect, genre, according to Berkenkotter and Huckin (1993) and Rosenfeld, Sina and Sarne (2018) refer to similarity in stylistic, thematic criteria and compositional levels of texts within and across media in individual and group chats. Essentially, genre refers to a collaborative achievement by individual members of a particular genre as expressed in recurrent text and communicative practices. It follows the principle of social recognition and what is view as appropriate and suitable to the genre. As a result, Luder, Proitz, and Ramussen (2010) indicated that “genre development always rests on and refers to already established genre conventions and expectations” (p. 952).

Several studies (Perez-Sabater, 2012; Rosenfeld, et al., 2018; Mwai, 2018) conducted investigation into type and functions of discourse markers with the objective of determining extent of usage in conversation or chats. Leech (2000) posited that such investigation can be utilized to conceptualize characteristics of verbal or written English. Perusal of studies on discourse markers revealed that there is paucity of studies investigating the extensive use of discourse markers and their functions on WhatsApp group chats among students of the University of Cape Coast, Ghana. Conceptualization of features of verbal or written English and filling the knowledge gap regarding discourse markers on Whatsapp group chats informs the present study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In his pioneer work, Swales (1990) clearly demonstrated that examination of how members of a given genre employ linguistic devices in achieving communicative purposes could be instrumental to understanding the rationale for the genre. He stated: “this rationale shapes the schematic structure of the discourse and influences and constrains choice of content and style (p. 58). In effect, understanding why members of a genre use certain linguistic expression or device requires in-depth analysis of linguistic style and content. This will allow for adequate examination of textual traits as indicated by Swales, so as to uncover the communicative purposes of the linguistic device used.

In their studies, Jones and Hafner (2012) and Perez-Sabater (2012) posited that interactions through media chat like WhatsApp group chats and instant messaging on mobile phones comprises certain traits and features similar to written language. These trait or features of media discourse include abbreviations, discourse markers, ellipsis, one-word transmission, and non-standard forms. In harmony with Swales (1990) definition of genre and its analysis, it is paramount to examine textual traits in WhatsApp group chat, so as to uncover the communicative purposes of discourse markers employed by members of media genre.

Investigation into discourse markers on WhatsApp group chat is very important in view of the controversy surrounding the use of linguistic device such as discourse markers on this social media platform. For instance, some scholars such as Crystal (2006) favours the use of electronic language, with the conception that it is a new brand of language use and at present challenging the way linguists view English and its usage. On the other hand, several scholars including Ken (2006) and Proysen (2009) claimed that chats on online platforms such as Whatsapp contains expressions that are less correct, less complex and less coherent than other forms of language. By this assertion, Ken and Proysen claimed that sentence constructions on WhatsApp group chat are less structured, less formal, non-standard and highly deviant form of the formal English.

Concretizing Ken and Proysen perspectives, Crystal (2006) cited several examples of abbreviated expression and deviant variety of the English language. Such expressions on WhatsApp group chat include the following: kk (Ok), gud pm (Good afternoon), fone (phone), great (gr8), kool (cool). This form of conversation, according to Perez-Sabater (2015) and Sampietro (2017), is currently gaining popularity among Whatsapp users and rapidly replacing face to face discussion due to its appeal to online interlocutors especially the youth. The use of this deviant forms, according to Ahmed and Alkadi (2016) and Sampietro (2017) and Rosenfeld et al. (2018), often involve extensive use of discourse/pragmatic markers and paralinguistic features such as emoticons and emojis.

Discourse and Discourse markers

Language is not arbitrary rather it is a part of a wider ideological process of representation and construction of meanings. It is not passive rather it is active in the process of representing the world and as a process of performance rather than a process of quiescent and neutral mirroring. Several scholars (Cook, 1990; Bolander & Locher, 2014; Sampa, Sitali, Mpolomoka, Lubbungu, Kangwa, Nyirenda & Chitondo, 2022) described discourse as the use of language for communication. They further explained that discourse in some instances could be made up of one or more well-formed grammatical sentences – and indeed it often is-but it does not have to be (Beetz, 2012; Mulambia, Mpolomoka, Lufeyo & Muyendekwa, 2023; Dube & Mpolomoka, 2018).

Investigation into understanding discourse (Akmajian, Demers, Farmer & Harnish, 2010) reveals that it is the study of units of language and usage. These authors maintained that the study of discourse is the study of units of language and language use comprising more than a single sentence, linked by some systems of related topics. In a similar vein, Fromkin, Rodman & Hyams (2011) indicate that linguistic knowledge focuses on the speakers’ ability to combine phonemes into morphemes, morphemes to words, and words into phrases, clauses /sentences. Proficiency in a language also allows combining sentences to express complex thoughts and ideas (Banda &

Mpolomoka, 2016).

Fromkin et al. (2011) made reference to the larger linguistic units as discourse and they also indicated that discourse or discourse analysis is primarily geared towards studying how speakers combine sentences into broader speech units. It entails questions of appropriateness, cohesiveness, style, rhetorical force, topic/subtopic structure, grammatical properties and identifying differences between written and spoken discourse.

Providing additional insight into the meaning of discourse, some scholars (Simone, 2005; Michaela, 2017), described discourse as successive coherent sentence, spoken or (in most usage) written. Their viewpoint shows that discourse could be on a social media platform, or any other series of speech events in which successive sentences or utterances hang together. They further indicated that discourse in general usage refers to particular style or type of language such as media discourse, academic discourse or political discourse. Simone and Michaela demonstrated that discourse comprises units of language larger than word and sentence.

Unequivocally, discourse markers plays important role in the attainment of effective and free flowing communication in both written and spoken discourse. Kohlani (2010) indicated that discourse markers function across sentence boundaries to connect discrete units above the sentence and guide readers' interpretation of textual production according to members of WhatsApp group chats' communicative intentions. Apart from their appreciable role in contributing to semantic aspects of media discourse, discourse markers are known to be optional and grammatically empty.

However, beyond their meaningless and stylistic nature, Mwai (2018) mentions that discourse markers perform a variety of pragmatic functions on the textual and interpersonal level of discourse. Discourse markers perform verbal functions. It initiates various kinds of boundaries, and assists in turn-taking in spoken discourse and episode segmentations in written discourse. Discourse markers again perform interpersonal functions by expressing writers or speaker's attitude, and a rapport is born between the participants. Truly, ideas are evaluated and organized by discourse markers which qualify them as good communicative tools. This is to say, these linguistic markers are inclined to bring communicative purpose to a text.

According to Aijmer (2002), discourse markers are highly context specific and indexed to attitudes, participants, and text. Therefore, they have discourse functions both on the textual and interpersonal levels. Examples of discourse markers includes *I mean, Ok, Oh, therefore, but, well, I think, in conclusion and more*. Due to the fact that a genre comprises a class of communicative events defined by a set of communicative purposes (Swales, 1990: 58), the kinds, the number of occurrence and functions of discourse markers that give credence to texts are not the same among genres. This paper is set out to study the distribution and functions of discourse markers on WhatsApp group chats among students of the University of Cape Coast.

METHODOLOGY

This type of research allowed the researchers to build a complex, holistic picture, analyses words, reports detailed views of informants, conducts the study in a natural setting (Ghosh, 2008; Creswell, 2013; Punch, 2014; Banda, Mpolomoka, Mbono & Sampa, 2017). Creswell further explains that a qualitative research is a means of exploring and understanding the individual or group ascribed to a social human problem (Banda, et al., 2017). This implies that the focus is on an individual or a group and that was the case in this study as individuals and groups from various Micro Teaching Groups were interviewed about the use of 'discourse markers'.

This research design also helped in describing the use of 'oh' and 'ok' as 'discourse markers' from the point of view of its participants; and establishing a representation of a 'way of using the discourse markers' are used by some participants (Banda, et al., 2017). The researchers also spent an extended period of time in the community that was being studied, a practice that Punch (2014) emphatically highlights.

Employing purposive sampling and mixed-method (quantitative and qualitative) approach to research, the researcher selected and analysed a group chat (Micro Teaching Group Five, University of Cape Coast) on Whatsapp among the students of the University of Cape Coast, so as to underscore the extent of usage of a discourse marker and its function thereby highlighting the rationale for the genre in students messages while chatting. Best and Kahn (2009) posit that qualitative research uses purposive sampling in studying real world situations as they unfold naturally. The strength of purposive sampling is deep rooted in selecting information for in-depth analysis associated to the central issue being studied (Kombo and Tromp, 2009). Doubtless, the researchers targeted this population of Micro Teaching Groups because of its originality and productivity in providing the data needed for the study.

The study was delimited to the use of 'oh' and 'ok' as discourse markers. Thorough investigation was done to ascertain the extent of use of Oh (oo) and Ok (kk) by members of Group Five WhatsApp group alongside their function in conversation.

This research used semi-structured interviews supplemented observations of the group whatsapp. They were utilized because of their comparative benefit over structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews accorded respondents the rarest opportunity to express themselves freely in the way they understood the study area as guided. Bryman (2008) defines semi-structured interviews as "a context in which the interviewer has a series of questions

that are in the general form of an interview schedule but is able to vary the sequence of the questions". This corroborates with what Banda, et al., (2017) postulate about use of questions in a study, contending that they give rise to in-depth responses, rich in description of activities and actors, perceptions, experiences, opinions, knowledge and observations.

The data collection exercise took place simultaneously as data analysis process commenced. Data was analyzed as it was being collected, generated and transcribed in key thematic areas and patterns. Thematic analysis hinged on identification of themes by careful reading and re-reading of data. During this process, emergent themes formed categories for analysis and descriptions (Rice and Ezzy, 1999).

Ethical Considerations

The study respected all respondents, took into consideration their rights and assured them of confidentiality in the entire course of the study (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). The researchers made sure that permission was obtained from all the relevant gatekeepers. In addition, consent was got from all the participants before being involved in the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section houses the findings and discussion. The first segment of the analysis focuses on examining the extent of usage of the two discourse markers (Oh and Ok) in their deviant forms. This means this section was analysed by means of quantitative measure as depicted in Table 1.

Table 1: Discourse Markers in WhatsApp Group Chat

Discourse Marker	Frequency	Percentage
Oh	4	20%
Ok (kk)	16	80%

Source: Field Survey (2020)

A careful look at Table 1 revealed that Ok in both the standard and deviant form occurred in the group chat severally (80%) than Oh (20%) with fewer occurrences. This demonstrated that the members of the group chat employed Ok more than Oh when chatting on WhatsApp. This result is consistent with Siniajeva’s findings that Oh is often used in drama unlike social media platform. Its limited use on social media platform is because it is often used in spoken register to denote shift in speaker’s thinking, flow of information or sudden need to change the focus of discussion. Siniajeva also indicated that speakers employed this linguistic item for clarification purposes. For example, in (1) and (2):

Oh sorry for not informing the house duly.....(1)

Oh wat are family for.....(2)

The writer in (1), *Sir Reuben* realizes he made a mistake of not telling group members that he has found his phone, and apologizes for not informing them earlier. Hence, Oh was used for corrective purposes and a means of strengthening a faltering bond. The member in (2), *S_Abigail* employed Oh as a means of underscoring friendship or close ties existing within in the group. By creating a pause through the use of Oh, she reaffirms and underscores her commitment to the group’s united front.

Findings of the study revealed that Ok and its deviant variety (Kk) were severally used by members of Group five Micro Teaching for communicative purposes. This linguistic item (Ok), which, according to Swales (1990), is instrumental to the determination of the rationale of a genre, was used severally to denote closure of a sentence, confirmation, commencement of chat and attention getting device. These are depicted in Figure 1.

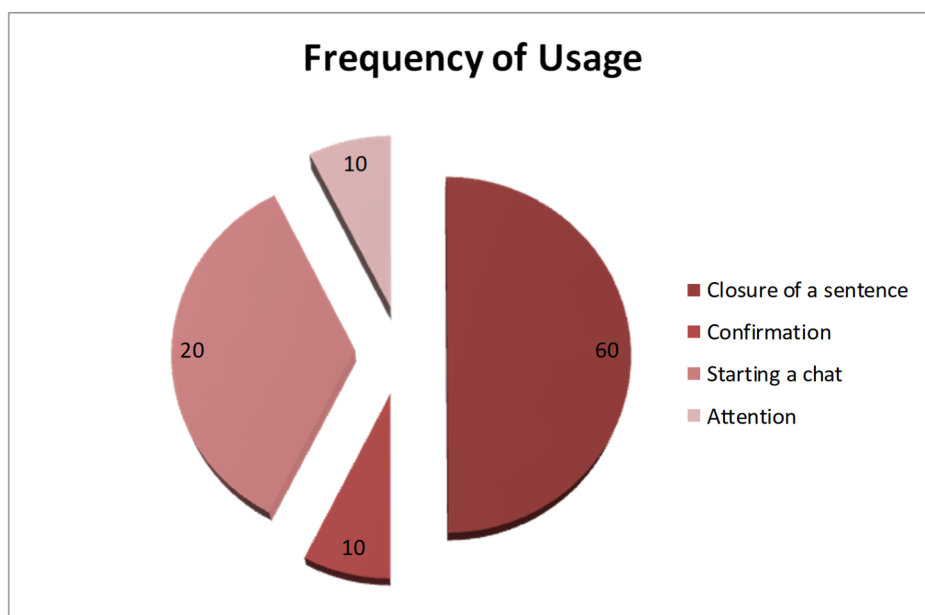


Figure 1: Frequency of usage (Standard and Deviant)

The results, as depicted in Figure 1, show that most of the group’s members used *Ok* (60%) for the closure of their expressions. *Ok* was also used (10%) for confirmatory purposes, while others (10%) used it to gain attention. The remaining members (20%) of the group used it in starting or initiating conversation. Finding from Figure 1 above clearly demonstrated that *Ok* was mostly used to close a sentence and in few other cases employed to start a conversation. This result is in harmony with the findings of Aijmer (2002) and Mwai (2018) that *Ok*, as a discourse marker, serves the useful purpose of closing conversation as depicted in (1), (2), (3), (4) below:

- How do we subscribe to Sunday Special. I no do before.....*(1)
- Okk.....*(2)
- *5050#.....*(3)
- Ok.....*(4)

The excerpts in (1) and (2) revealed that the “Starboi” closed the question raised by the other member of the group by using the deviant or non-standard form (*Okk*) of *Ok* and initiated an action at the same time to respond to the inquirers’ plea on how to do “subscription for Sunday special”. On the other hand, in excerpts (3) and (4), it was clearly seen that “Starboi” employed the linguistic item *Ok* in its standard form to close the conversation with his group member. This was done after filling him in with the required information thus cementing their friendship.

Location of *Ok* in Sentences

Concerted effort was made to investigate the relative position of *Ok* in sentences so as underscore the rationale for genre of this WhatsApp group. Result, as depicted in figure 2, revealed that in most cases *Ok* was mainly used for reception and confirmation purposes (100%) whereas in terms of questioning it was (0%) in the groups’ chat.

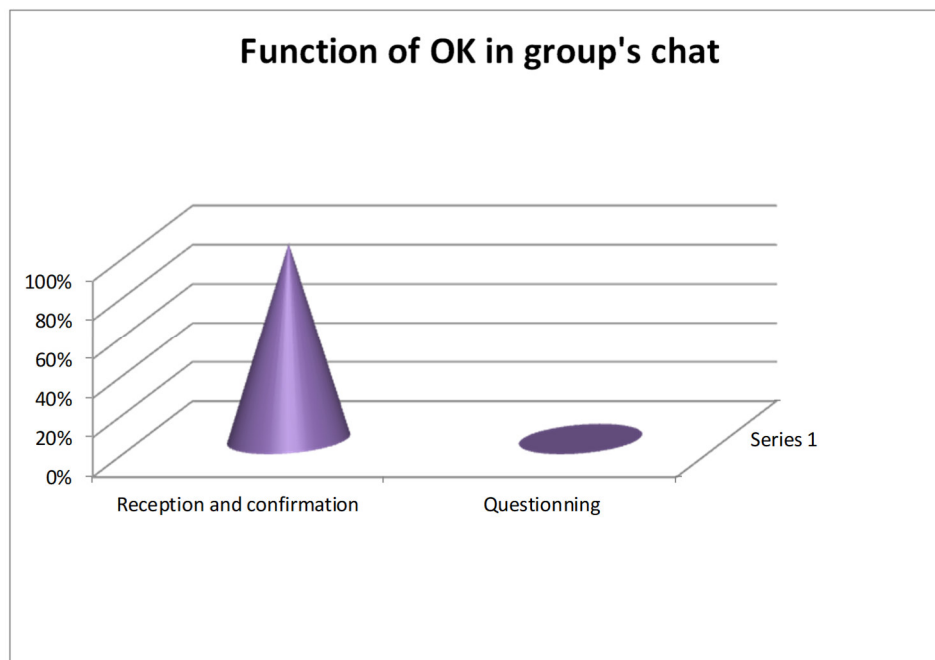


Figure 2: Function of OK in group chat

Analysis – Functional Level

Table 2: Function of OK in groups’ chart

Usage	Ideational relations	Structural relations
Attention-getter	Separate different aspects of information	1. Chat Initiator 2. Shift Chat mode
Progress Checking		1. Elicits response 2. Seek assurance

Source: Field Survey (2020)

As shown in Table 2 (based on Group 5 Micro-Teaching members’ chat on Whatsapp in the Appendix) members of the group used *Ok* to serve different functions. For example in 1 and 2 below, the two group members got the attention of the other member (Members A and B) by initiating a chat, painstakingly isolate vital points of their information, clearly identifying their idea for the chat. These interlocutors succeeded in eliciting response and shift the chat mode because the other members have to quickly check relevant information to provide a response.

On the other hand, in (3) and (4), Member C checked with another member of the group regarding his items whether it is with him, which elicited response (in structural terms) from the other group member “*they are with me*” and he also employed this approach to seek for assurance that the item is with the other group member. Member D on the other hand was interested in paying a due and wanted clarification hence inquired about the amount thereby seeking confirmation or assurance (in structural terms) in connection with the due which elicited instant response.

Member A: *Pls the executives of Esag are having a meeting with the provost.
 So I ll come late Class prefect. Inform Sir Ben for me*

Member B: *Okkk.....(1)*

Member A: *Please I need Ghanaba’s contact...*

Member B: *Ok.....(2)*

Member C: *Pls if the marker and the duster we used yesterday is with u let
 me know cos the I took is from someone, waiting for ur response.tnx*

Member D: *They are with me*

Member C: *Kk, kindly bring it to me in class tomorrow. Thank u all.....(3)*

Member D: *Ok, Yh, how much is it pls?(4)*

Results of the study, as depicted above in excerpts (1) to (4), are in consonance with the findings of studies conducted by Taguchi (2002), Othman (2010), Jurcevic (2016), Sampietro (2017) and Mwai (2018). The conclusions of these authors tally with the finding of this study because it was clearly demonstrated that *Ok* was used extensively (16 times) whereas *oh* was used only on few occasions (4 times) by members of group 5 of Micro

Teaching on WhatsApp social media platform.

CONCLUSION

Thorough analysis of the content of their students' chat on Whatsapp demonstrated that most of the group members are not living in the same area within campus rather they are far apart from each other. Hence, the use of backchannel signals (*Ok*) with the sole aim of ascertaining that the communication is progressing and the information passed is well deciphered. Additionally, the study also shows that *Oh* is often used in drama whereas *Ok* and its deviant form, are generously used in the chat to indicate initialization of conversation, reception of an information or message and closure of a conversational sequence. As discourse markers, both 'Oh' and 'Ok' are short, prosodically subordinate to another word, independent from the content of the sentence and syntactically separate from the sentence. In essence, according to Holker (1991) and Mwai (2018), it does not affect the truth conditions of the text; neither does it add any special meaning to the propositional content of the chat. In effect, as Perez-Sabater (2015) puts it, 'Oh' and 'Ok' do not affect the grammaticality of a sentence nor does it create propositional meaning but it does underscore the rationale behind the genre of Group 5 based on the recurrent text and communicative practices adopted by members of the group. These were underscored via exemplification and pictorial illustrations. The study revealed that the use of Ok and Oh on Whatsapp group does not enhance grammaticality of a sentence nor does it create propositional meaning.

RECOMMENDATION

It is therefore recommended that students should be balance in their use of Whatsapp for educational purposes because much dependence on it for communication could erode students' grammatical construction of sentences as well as spellings in the English language.

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