

Language and Technology: Linguistic Features of Facebook in Kenya

Florence Mwithi Jacinta Ndambuki Wendo Nabea

Department of Literary Communication Studies, Laikipia University, PO box 1100, Nyahururu, Kenya

Abstract

This paper interrogates the utility of Facebook as a novel tool to observe linguistic behavior in a naturalistic setting. In this regard, this paper, seeks to identify, describe and interpret the linguistic features used on Facebook posts by a selected group of Facebook users in Kenya. It uses Herring's (2004) Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) theoretical framework and adds knowledge to the field of Discourse analysis as well as sociolinguistics especially with regards to the methodology and tools of carrying out a Computer Mediated Communications paper. The research design used was both qualitative and quantitative. Purposive sampling procedure was used to arrive at the sample for the paper which consisted of eight Facebook friends in the 22-35 age bracket. This is the age that was found to use Facebook more in Kenya. The findings showed that while Kenyan Facebook users used conventional internet language including non-standard English, acronyms, emoticons, lengthening practice, code switching and capitalization, the linguistic features varied in form and frequency.

Keywords: computer mediated discourse analysis, facebook, posts,

1.0 Introduction

Communication is one of the basic necessities to human life and has been considerably improved and enhanced for ease and expedience in every era right from the earliest known communication. Whittaker (2003) posits that the natural human communication apparatus is constrained in several ways; there are limits to the distance at which speech is audible, and visible behaviors such as gesture, gaze or facial expressions are perceptible. Furthermore, these natural communication behaviors are transient and do not persist over time. These limitations lead us to rely on some form of mediation if we are to communicate at a distance and across time. People have therefore invented media technologies that attempt to circumvent these limits to allow remote forms of communication. This is what is meant by Mediated Communication. It is any kind of communication that uses some form of intermediary for it to be accomplished. This paper focuses on Facebook as one such media technology that mediates communication.

Boyd (2006) defines Facebook profile generation as "an explicit act of writing oneself into being a digital environment." Baron (2008: 76) suggests that "computer mediated communication invites construction of new identities (for age, gender, personality, nationality and the like)". The individual can present himself/herself visually through a profile photo, and textually, giving information about the age, relationship status, origin, education, hobbies, interests, favourite quotes etc. However, a great deal of identity building is a continual process, happening through the interaction of the profile owner and the Friends on the profile Wall. Facebook users have the possibility of presenting themselves the way they want to be seen by others.

This paper examines the linguistic features in Facebook posts. At this point, in order to proceed with the analysis for the linguistic features, Herring et al's (2004) third procedure will be applied. Herring proposes that the researcher ought to operationalize key concepts in terms of the discourse features. To this end, researcher ended up with the following features (see table 1.1) which emerged from the data itself and which assisted in systematic analysis of the language used on FB posts. The total number of words on the wall posts was 7680 words. Following the categories the researcher operationalized, 413 words including 19 emoticons made up the marked features that the researcher was looking for and which were aptly called 'linguistic features'. The term 'linguistic features' in this paper is used to refer to the marked forms / deviations from the standard forms not the sum of all the features (standard and deviations) as is the norm. For the intents and purposes of the paper, the unmarked features (standard forms) do not warrant analysis. The concern of the paper are the marked forms, therefore they will form the basis of analysis. Table 1.1 represents the occurrence of the linguistic features in the FB posts.

Table 1.1 Marked Linguistic features of the wall posts and comments of the eight respondents for three months.

	Linguistic feature	Example	Frequency unit/word	Percentage frequency %
1.	Non-standard orthography		301	72.88
	a) Phonetic spellings	Hapi,gal	58	10.78
	b) Colloquial spelling			
	i) Omission of consonant at word initial or final	Meetin,doin	76	14.04
	ii) Reduction or omission of vowel in spelling	Ths,pls	67	16.22
	iii) Conventional SNS acronymy/ abbreviation	LOL,NKT	18	4.35
	c) Prosodic spellings			
	i) Lengthening practice	Hahaha,greet	30	7.26
	ii) Error in capitalization	NEED HELP	23	5.56
	d) Homophone spelling	4 U, I another	29	7.02
2	Code-switching- English/ Swahili – Swahili/English English/vernacular English/Sheng/ Kiswahili	Mvua inyeshe and your clothes are on the line..... Whoever wants gej anipate tao saa mbili.....	93	22.51
3	The use of various Symbols and Emoticons	☺ :(19	4.6
	Total		413	100

Source: FB wall posts of the eight participants

As can be seen from the table 1.1, the use of non-standard orthographies carry the chunk of the marked linguistic usage on Facebook at 72.88%. Non-standard spellings are very commonly used and accepted in such a space as social media in contrast to regulated spaces where standard forms are the norm and are highly valued, such as academic and business discourses. Social media has the limitation of “space” if you consider connecting online via ones mobile phone, or even the computer. Facebook allows a user to use up to 60,000 characters but as the internet connection cost per click is also limiting one has to be very fast and economical with the spellings in order to surmount the said limitations. On the other hand, the recipient of the posts and comments do not also enjoy the luxury of time and space and would rather read and respond to a shorter post than a long one. Code switching has a total of 93 occurrences which amounts to 22.51% of the total marked features. This percentage is relatively small when compared to the total marked features recorded. The expectation was that since Kenya is multilingual, there would have been more instances of code switching but this was not the case, perhaps because of the education level and social status of the chosen group. However, the choice of vernacular and Kiswahili is in contestation to the hegemonic status of English in Kenya. The last category of the marked linguistic features included the use of smileys and emoticons. As can be seen, the total percentage of this feature is 4.6%. This is a very small percentage when compared to the other features. This particular feature of smileys is available on the FB application. It can be said that majority of the users of FB are either not conversant with their usage or find it cumbersome and time consuming to open the feature and copy and paste the emoticons in the various places that are appropriate in their posts as they write them. That extra effort and time is what these users lack and therefore emoticons are scarcely used. Details of each linguistic feature are provided in the following discussion.

2.0 Non-Standard Orthography

The term ‘non-standard orthography’ is used in this paper as a general term for spellings that diverge from standard (codified) orthography and/or do not occur in formal writing. In this sense, it is meant to include both the transfer of spoken language features to writing, and formal modifications of signs that are not related to spoken language facts. Non-standard orthography for the current study included any word that deviated from the standard writing convention either by combining letters and number homophone, reduction of initial consonant (initial or final), reduction of vowels in spelling or the use of one letter that represents a word.

The sample set that was used for analysis comprised of users who had a post-secondary education. The implication for this was that they tended to use standard English language mostly. This is a group that had no difficulties in using standard language and so when they used non-standard orthography, they were being

innovative and were modifying their communication to adapt to the language of other ‘Facebookers’ as it were.

The analysis of these non-standard orthography reveals a number of important points about spelling choices as a communicative resource which is used to suit different purposes according to each ‘social and cultural context of orthographic practices’ (Sebba 1998 p36). Non-standard spellings are very commonly used and accepted in such a space as social media in contrast to regulated spaces where standard forms become the norm and are highly valued, such as academic and business discourses. Social media has the limitation of “space” if you consider connecting online via one’s mobile phone, or even the computer. The internet connection cost per click is also limiting, and as such, one has to be very fast and economical with the spellings in order to surmount the said limitations. On the other hand, the recipient of the posts and comments do not also enjoy the luxury of time and space and would rather read and respond to a shorter post than a long one.

The analysis presented in this section, is based on a distinction between spelling on the one hand, and their usage on the other. Facebook users have at their disposal a variety of graphemic resources, some bearing a relation to spoken language, others being purely graphemic manipulations. The graphemic resources attested in Facebook posts are discussed in four types based on graphic-phonetic relations which are: phonetic spellings, colloquial spellings, prosodic spellings and homophone spellings.

2.1 Phonetic spellings

This term is restricted to representations of standard pronunciation not covered by standard orthography, as in the case of English ‘wuz’ for was. Other examples include ‘gud’ for good, ‘gal’ for girl and ‘thx’ for thanks. This category of features consists of words that are spelled as a representation of standard pronunciation. The English alphabet contains 26 letters made up of 21 consonants and 5 vowels. The Kiswahili alphabet is also Latin based and is similar to the English alphabet except for the fact that Kiswahili language does not make use of *q* and *x*. Each of the alphabet letters has a pronounceable sound that is based on the standard pronunciation of single letters as learned in school for example [ar] for *r*. Some of the alphabet letter pronunciations are identical or close to the pronunciation of some words. The substitution of these words with the single letters that sound similar is very common in CMC texts. The following posts exemplify this first feature.

Text 1

2. **M4:** <hapi birth dei Madam ****JIENJOY >
(happy birthday madam****ENJOY YOURSELF)
1. **M1:** <LAZANIA- at the panari hotel>
(Lasagnia-at the panari hotel)

In looking at the first post, the word ‘hapi’ represents the word ‘happy’ and spelling it that way represents the standard pronunciation of the word. This is also the case with the word ‘dei’ for ‘day’. Additionally, there is English-Kiswahili codeswitching and also capitalization to emphasize the wish. This enacts orality. ‘Lazania’ is a phonetic representation of how the word ‘lasagnia’ is actually pronounced. Lasagnia is not very common in Kenyan cuisine and hence it can be expected that spelling the word would be problematic. However, the participant going with the identity he has created so far, would surely know the spelling! He is an elite, if where he has his meals is anything to go by, Panari is a high cost hotel therefore it is safe to assume that spelling the word that way, is intentional rather than an error. In these results, the phonetic spellings come about as a result of principles like ‘least effort’, ‘informality’ and ‘competition in innovation among youth peer communication’ (Crystal, 2006). The use of letters in a pronounceable manner gives the posts a typical SNS appearance which is considered acceptable among innovative youth. This acceptability is important as it leads to further acceptability of the user in these circles. This aspect of youth identity has popularized the phonetic spellings in SNSs.

Phonological spelling in Kenya is closely influenced by Kiswahili. Kiswahili orthography stays very close to pronunciation. Kiswahili phonology is characterised by a CV syllable structure. It has a five vowel system [a], [ɛ], [i], [o] and [u] represented as *a, e, i, o, u*. Users adapt Kiswahili spelling on English words. This leads them to write words in relation to their sound. Nevertheless, it is important to note that in many cases the relationship of the word to the sound presented is not exact but an approximation. Examples of these are in Text 3 and 4 ‘hapi’ for ‘happy’ and ‘lazania’ for ‘lasagnia’

A point to note is that in some cases, words are written using the phonological spelling without reflecting any shortening. This shows that although phonological spelling may have been exclusively used in least effort and mode limitation contexts, it is currently a ‘standard’ CMC style. The use of phonological spelling is a common feature and is registered in previous researchers like Bodomo (2009:70) who groups it under approaches to shortening. Friert (2007:104) refers to it as phonological approximation. From this paper’s findings, the English phonological spelling in Kenyan FB posts is advanced by the nature of Kiswahili writing which closely reflects pronunciation. As part of using phonological spelling, people also use letters whose standard pronunciation represents the intended pronunciation. It is worth noting that the practice in Kiswahili spelling is to spell words through their closest phonetic transcription. Examples of this involve the mechanism of

using /ei/ for 'ay' for instance 'dei' for 'day'

The principle of informality in FB posts is clearly seen in the data through the phonological spelling. It is important to reiterate that Sheng and Engsh codes are unavoidable when dealing with the youth and communication in Kenya. However, their manifestation has mainly been in speech (verbal) form. It is notable that currently with the emergence of CMC like FB, Sheng and Engsh have invaded the written scene.

Text 2

M4: < just started my leave Feb next year ndio inaamua sass mmmh kwa raha zangu broz happy birthday bro., hav fun..!!>

(I have just started my leave February next year will decide now (expression of approval) at my own pleasure my brothers happy birthday brother, have fun)

Text 2 has several CMC features; 'feb,sass, mmmh, broz, bro, hav'. For the purposes here, I propose that the recurrent features under discussion may have been influenced by the way the words are pronounced in Engsh. Several posts contain words that use /z/ at the suffix position. From a linguistic view, some of the words have the /z/ suffix solely as an Engsh marker. This conclusion is reached based on the observation that in many such words, the /z/ suffix does not hold any linguistic function. It acts as a filler to mark the word as being Engsh. In spite of this, there are many other cases as described here where the /z/ suffix acts as a replacement for a suffix written as s, e.g. wuz for was. This follows speech but has now been integrated into CMC spelling not only to replace the suffix s but also to mark the word as Engsh. For English nouns, this /z/ is used in the orthographic position of the -s suffix in English regular plurals.

The /z/ suffix is also used as a plural marker in some words as shown, for example: gyz-guys and frenz-friends. Another occurrence to make note of is that there are some Engsh words which do not exist without the -z. Although this -z has its origin as a plural marker, in these cases it does not serve as an element of plurality. Examples include: shagz (rural home) is derived from the earlier form ushago (rural home), diggz (home), mawayaz (financially broke). Other words include adverbs that appear with the /z/ suffix like: bilaz-without, hukuz- huku (here) etc. For lexemes with English origin, the -z suffix is added due to the influence of pronunciation of the words as shown in table 1. 2

Table 1.2: /z/ suffix on English words found in FB posts

FB Sheng	English equivalent
1. Hiz	His
2. Wuz	Was
3. plz/pliz	Please
4. nawadeiz/nowadays	Nowadays
5. bcoz/coz /cos	Because
6. thoz	Those
7. huzzy/huzy/hubby	Husband
8. athaz	Others
9. siz	Sister
10. diggz	Home
11. mawayaz	Financially broke

Source: FB Wall Posts of the eight Participants

2.2 Colloquial Spellings

Colloquial spellings is used as a cover term for the representation of reduction phenomena typical of colloquial speech, including so-called weak forms. Although the Kenyan users under investigation used a remarkable variety of colloquial spellings, not all features of colloquial spellings are represented in their posts as in the case of Tagliamonte's (2008) work on Instant Messaging. Some of the colloquial spellings observed include: lol (laugh out loud), nkt (good night), haha (laughing). Forms such as wff (what the fuck), brb (be right back), omg (oh my god) are rare though not all together lacking in the Kenyan context. This perhaps shows that the users are civil in their communication and as much as possible they try not to be offensive or vulgar. Colloquial spellings comprise the reduction or omission of consonant (initial or final) or reduction or omission of vowels in spellings and conventional SNSs spellings like abbreviations and acronyms such as 'nkt, omg' and 'LOL' . These type of spelling can further be divided into the following three subtypes:

2.1.1 Omission of consonant at word initial or word final

Omission of consonant at word initial or word final. This includes words such as: 'prob' for 'problem', 'floodin' for 'flooding', and 'watchn' for 'watching', b.day for birthday.

Text 3

1. F2: <happyb.day to my pretty daughter>
 (happy birthday to my pretty daughter)

In 'happyb.day' the consonants 'rth' are omitted. The compound word 'birthday' has been written in non-standard orthography severally. The very fact that the word is compound makes it look too long to spell the whole way. Interesting though is that a word like daughter is equally long yet, it has been spelt the whole way. Therefore this might be a matter of perception, and wanting to ease the burden of compound words. Similarly, because the word has been contracted severally, it has become accepted, almost conventionalized.

Text 4

1.M2: <It really ticks me wen u enjoy me 4 watchin anime do I enjoy u for watchin afro-cinema, hindu and worst of all....nkt>

(it really ticks me when you make fun of me for watching animations, do I make fun of you for watching afro- cinema, hindu and worst of all...goodnight)

2.M2: <Live ur life>

(live your life)

1.F4: <I'll be there. Niko job kesho hadi kedoo 1.30pm. Then we'll kuja watch out great team take those mad men down. Thanks guys & nytnyt. My dear girls that bleach; if on judgement day your face doesn't match the one on angel Gabriel's laptop. Don't argue. JUST GO TO HELL.>

(I will be there. Am at work, tomorrow till 1:30pm. Then we will come to watch out great team take those mad men down. Thanks guys and goodnight. My dear girls that bleach; if on judgement day your face does not match the one on angel Gabriel's laptop. Do not argue. JUST GO TO HELL.)

Omission of consonants is exemplified by 'watchin' for 'watching' and the suffix -ing, has been reduced to -n. Other words which have the suffix omitted in other posts include: 'Fixin, headn, doin, chillin, floodin'. This feature supports Ross's (2006) cited in Barasa (2010) findings about reduction of consonant at word initial or final as a normal feature of spelling in online language. The other colloquial spellings are 'anime' for 'animation' and 'nkt' for 'goodnight'. 'Nkt' and 'nyt' are both variations of the word goodnight as has been used by the participants. Others include 'omg' for 'oh my god', 'lol' for 'laugh out loud'. F4's post in this text, has omitted letters in spelling. Hers is a classic use of FB language. There is codeswitching from first from English to Kiswahili then to sheng as seen in these two sentences, 'I'll be there. Niko job kesho hadi kedoo 1:30pm.' The participant here is multilingual and she therefore uses the codes in her repertoire in writing her post. 'We'll kuja' on the face value seems like an English-Kiswahili switch, yet that is not so. It is a popular English phrase for 'we will come'. This form is popular among the urban sophisticated young people, who refine sheng so as to differentiate themselves from the 'ghetto' people who use sheng predominantly. The choice of codeswitching, signals conformity to the informalization that is FB language in Kenya and the need to fit in the group. F4 is young and hip and this comes off through her language choice. This young sophisticated trait is also seen by her choice of the word 'laptop' for angel Gabriel. It is as if in heaven they conform to the current computer usage as the world in this era. That depiction of angel Gabriel evokes humor. The capital letters emphasize as well as foregrounds the gravity of the consequences of bleaching one's skin.

2.1.2 Reduction or omission of vowel in spelling

The next sub-feature under colloquial spellings supports findings from other researchers (Ross, 2006; Baron, 2006 in Barasa, 2010) would be the reductions or omissions of vowel in spelling. Some of the examples are as follows:

Text 5

1. F3: <Ouch with the same bugger again hope ths tym il have fun nt regrets again omundu!>
(ouch with the same bugger again hope this time I will have fun not regrets again, man)

1. F2: < hppy brthdy Dan

2. F2: <hav a blast Dan!

1.M1: < God i pray for this much in dollars or kshs,i promise i will tithe.....nifungulie njia baaaba...can i get an amen ppl....nikipata ntawakumbuka pia

(God I pray for this much in dollars or Kenya shillings, I promise I will tithe....open the way Father...can I get an amen people...if I get it I will remember you (plr) too.



Vowels have been omitted in the words *'ths'* for *'this'*, *'tym'* for *'time'*, *'nt'* for *'not'* and *'hav'* for *'have'*. In *'hppy'*, *'a'* has been omitted and *'i'* and *'a'* have been left out in the word *'brthday'*. In fact the words *'happy and birthday'* have been realized in various forms all through the posts. These are common words that participants use for each other every time someone's birthday comes up. There is an inbuilt feature in Facebook to remind the users of birthdays. It is therefore common to find posts on birthdays from lots of people directed to an individual. Some of these variations in writing happy birthday are *"happy bday, hppy birthday, h.b.d, happy birth dai, HBD"*

In the post made by **M1**, the word *'people'* is shortened to *'pple'*. Similarly, there is reduction in spelling for the words *'Kenya shillings'* to *'kshs'* which is a conventional short form for the same word. However the dollar currency lacks a conventional shortened form owing to the fact that it is not an everyday word in use and therefore not easy to recognize if it were to be shortened. Similarly, the Kiswahili words do not render themselves easily to short forms as they would otherwise be hard to recognize. In contrast, the Kiswahili word *'baba'* for father has been lengthened to *'baaaba'* to bring about the besieging tone, as if to mimic prayer because the participant is praying to get money and lots of it. Not all words can have their vowels omitted, only the ones which will be recognizable and understood even after omission, otherwise confusion would abound. Other common words that have vowels omitted include please –*'pls /plz'*, he is-*'hz'*, need- *'nid'*. The omission of vowels also supports some opinions of others (see Ross, 2006; Baron, 2006,) who believe that the needs for speed and to be precise are some factors which lead to the varieties of short forms emerged in online communication. With limited space and an urgency for spontaneous feedbacks, many online users resorted to this online writing behavior, which did not meet the requirements of standard writing form and structure. Findings also demonstrate that most of these words that have vowels omitted are among common words that people use in their daily conversations.

2.3 Prosodic spelling

Prosodic Spellings are representations of prosodic patterns, e.g. the simulation of word stress by the use of capitals and hyphens or the representation of vowel lengthening, i.e. in discourse markers, intensifiers and evaluators (e.g. *kabisaaaa!* -totally). In Smith and Schmidt's (1996: 50) terms, spelling choices of this kind operate as "paragraphemic" components of textual style'. These type of spellings represent prosodic patterns, features of orality as well as acting as intensifiers. The participants frequently employed vernacular and English lengthening practices when they were exchanging photo comments and messages on Facebook.

Certain spellings were found to occur in a regular, patterned manner throughout the data, typically representing informal speech. Such spelling choices can be regarded as a part of the writer's orientation towards the oral mode of communication or 'conceptual orality' as defined by Koch and Oesterreicher (1990, 1994). Looking at spellings as part of the text's orthographic regularities includes looking at their systematic appearance as regards structural differences between written and spoken language. Additionally, certain spelling choices played a key role for the point the participant wanted to make. This included graphemic contextualization cues (Gumperz, 1982, 1992). For the purposes of this research, graphemic contextualization cues can be defined as spelling choices which signal certain attitudes or evoke certain frames of interpretation by establishing a contrast to the text's spelling regularities or to the default spelling of a linguistic item. For instance, FB participants manipulated spelling in a manner analogous to intonation or style shift in spoken discourse. In order to contextualize a change in their attitude or footing, consider the following post:

Text 7

1. **F1:** <Mvua inyeshe ukiwa mbali na hao na nguo zimejaa kwa clothesline probably zishakauka, donno the shortest way bak home, arghhhh....>

(if it rains while you are far from the house and clothes are many on the clothesline and probably they are already dried, I don't know the shortest way back home, arghhhhh)

1. **M1:** *furahi day....ukienda na gari,alcoblow....ukienda local....ati haina licence.....ukikaa tao,mat zinapungua....ukikunywa kwa nyumba,watoto wataonja.....kenya gani hii sasa. aggrrrr....*

(Friday...if one goes with their vehicle... alcoblow...if one goes local...theres no licence....if one stays in town, the mat (public service vehicle) get few...if one drinks at home, the children will taste....which Kenya is this now, aggrrrr.....)

The non-standard spelling 'arghhhhh' in both posts signals anger, frustration and by lengthening practice mimics prosody. Even by writing, it reads as if the participant is actually speaking and her impatient, unpleasant mood is evoked clearly. No one likes to have their clothes rained on after tirelessly washing them. This is the position that F1 finds herself in; contending with the inconvenience of rained on clothes she had put out to dry. Again by looking at the second clause in the sentence, the non-standard spelling really shows the urgency, impatience and high speed with which the first female participant would like to arrive home. 'donno the shortest way bak home'. 'Donno' is 'I don't know', there is contraction and pro dropping/ ellipsis of pronominal item 'I' in the subject position. 'Bak' is 'back' again shortening to enhance that sense of hurrying and urgency.

The second post is written in frustration. **M1** is frustrated that he can longer enjoy his Friday evening owing to the terror of alcoblow-a gadget used by traffic policemen in Kenya for measuring the amount of alcohol one has drunk. The use of the alcoblow device is a fairly recent phenomenon in Kenya, having been introduced as a measure to curb drunk-driving. M1 is particularly irked by it, like so many other drivers in Kenya, who incidentally enjoy their bottle as well. It is from this background that **M1** writes his post. FB is conditioned by social factors as has been mentioned. The topic of alcoblow use by police that is the talk of Kenyans, especially in Nairobi and other urban areas also becomes the topic of talk in FB. In subsequent sections this topic will be explored further under motivation for use of FB. To further compound the misfortunes of **M1**, this participants notes that there are few public vehicles therefore his need to use his own car which would not suffice in the face of the alcoblow. The last option would be to carry on drinking at home, but even that is not an option because the children would want to taste the alcohol. All these justify the use of the non-standard spelling 'aggrrrr' to signal his utter frustration.

2.4 Homophone spellings

Homophone spellings is used as a cover term for graphic alterations without a correspondence to phonic alterations. This includes "lexical substitutions" whereby a graph, a combination of two graphs or a number replaces a homophone word or word part; examples 'u' for you, 'I another' for one another, 'b4' for before. This feature entails combinations of letter and number homophone in producing various words. The research recorded a total of 29 words made up of a combination of letters and numbers in participants' conversations within the three months. '2 b' for 'to be' and '4 u' for 'for you' were the most preferred number-blending words used on Facebook among Kenyan users.

Text 11

1.**M1:** *<Dear God pls keep me in your detail, I really wanna do a GUARD OF HONOUR 4 U 1 day in Heaven, n let my friends b there with to mount it. Amen.>*

(Dear God please keep me in your detail, I really want to do a GUARD OF HONOUR FOR YOU 1 day in Heaven, and let my friends be there with me to mount it. AMEN)

5. **M1:** *<God is good :) u can share it 2other>*

(God is good (smiley) you can share it to other)

2. **F2:** *<Of all th days ths had 2 b th one I get into a bad mood>*

(Of all the days this had to be the one I get into a bad mood)

1. **M3:** *<I really enjoy 2 cook>*

(I really enjoy to cook)

From the text, the homophone spellings include '4 u 1' for 'for you one', '2 other' for 'to other', '2 b' for 'to be', '2 cook' for 'to cook'. Combinations of letters and numbers are seen as a normal feature in online language (Squires, 2010; Crystal, 2006; Ross, 2006; Baron, 2004). There are also some features that are not popular among young Kenyan Facebook users such as '2m'-them, 'g9'-good night as well as 'str8'-straight. This goes in contrast with Squires (2010) who found the word 'str8'-straight as among the most popular among his respondents, probably because of the first language of his respondents

It was also observed that the participants used one letter to represent a word. Altogether, 29 units of this feature were recorded with 'u' (you) appearing to be the highest number as seen in Text 12 that follows;

Text 12

2. **F4:** *<cant wait to get home n just b myself the holidays r calling>*

(I cannot wait to get home and just be myself, the holidays are calling)

6. **F3**: <he he he!! Smile happy vals to u my dear. Napelekwa wapi>

(Expression of laughter, smile happy valentines to you my dear. Where am I being Taken?)

F4 begins her post with an ellipsis of the pronominal item at subject position 'I'. This is a common feature in CMD. Pro-dropping does not in any way interfere with the meaning of the sentence and is a short cut in CMD writing. The contracted word 'cant' for 'can't' lacks the apostrophe, signaling the informality in this writing; an already informal form is made further informal by omitting the apostrophe. There is no pressure of conforming strictly to the rules of grammar, the participants are free to write as they wish. The post also has 'n' for 'and', 'b' for 'be' and 'r' for 'are'. All these are common graphs which replaces a homophone word on FB. The second post by **F3** also has another common lexical substitution that is 'u' for 'you'. Others in the data include, 'c' for 'see', 'l' for 'one', '4' for 'for'. These homophone spellings are favoured because of the economy of time and space and for making the writing fast.

There is also a second way of realizing the homophone spelling although it has not been widely observed in the Kenyan context. This is what is known as grapheme substitution; where a graph is replaced by another graph. A good example would be 'ma' for 'my'. The letter 'a' replaces 'y' or 'lyfe' for 'life' where 'y' replaces 'I'. It is more convenient and quicker to express thoughts in a spoken manner. In order to be quick and economize on time, space and money, users of FB resort to informality which is always seen as an aspect in online communication. This somehow correlates with Baron's (2008) idea of multitasking. Activities like checking and writing emails, reading, web-surfing, online gaming or maybe other daily activities such as eating are among the common daily routines people normally perform while online. As suggested by Baron (2008), multitasking is very common for someone while going online as internet offers many other activities apart from just communicating with others.

This paper is in agreement with Ross's (2006) and Baron's (2008) contentions that the short forms and non-standard orthographies in online communication emerge due to the fact that users need to be speedy and economize on time, space and money. Similarly, the need to be fast and concise is highly needed as one is basically occupied with many other things while communicating online. Apart from writing posts on FB, the users also engage in other activities like, uploading photos, chatting in a synchronous fashion, and working etc., therefore this multitasking calls for reduction in the writing process.

2.5 Code switching

The second main linguistic feature is the use of Non-English code or code switching used by participants on Facebook posts. In Kenya, The languages spoken range from vernacular (around forty two), Sheng, English and Kiswahili. Kiswahili is a National language and shares a co-official status with English and therefore it is expected that the participants would use any of these codes in their communication. The group under study is young and learned and from their conversations, English is observed as the code of choice for use although there are several instances where they use Kiswahili, vernacular, sheng or simply codeswitch.

Text 13

1. **MI**:<Poa headn hm nw>
(okay heading home now)
3. **MI**:<Sawa,drive safe, nietele kiveti>
(okay, drive safe, I am waiting for my wife)
- 4.....

In the first post, **MI** begins in Kiswahili then switches to English. In his second post, he also begins in Kiswahili then English then finally switches to Kamba, a vernacular. As mentioned earlier there are several languages available for the Kenyan FB user to communicate by. Therefore, the user picks from the wide repertoire of languages to fit into his purposes. Familiarity with English in the spoken medium often incurs a more frequent use of the language also in the written medium, where a good knowledge of English, particularly of the informal variety as well as the spelling norms, becomes much more essential. The latter aspect of the written medium may obviously discourage people from resorting to this variety, yet, when in a fairly safe environment (non-threatening, informal, like CMD), non-native users of English as an international language apply this language more readily.

The electronic media, which are rather informal, or at best semi-formal in their nature (Crystal, 2006; Baron 2008), certainly encourage the use of English, firstly, due to this sense of safety and acceptance, and secondly, because this is a space where people interact with friends as well as strangers from other countries. This aspect is notable in Facebook where the users used code-switching less as compared to the use of English. Further, the very set up of Facebook presupposes English usage. For example the birthday reminder is in English and therefore users might send birthday wishes also in English. Using English more may simply be a (subconscious) adjustment to the Facebook context and a community of practice type of behavior.

Facebook as a social network, whose main purpose is to connect people rather than separate them,

would prompt strategies that bring people closer together. Therefore code-switching is one of the strategies that bring people together, whereby participants shift back and forth in the languages that unite them. In the Kenyan situation, these languages would be Kiswahili, English and Vernacular. English in general is a language of international communication and the most frequent language used in the CMC (cf. Crystal 2006) as a community of practice marker. English just like Kiswahili and Vernacular, as the discussed posts demonstrate, also bring together those who already speak the same language, and thereby act as a strong marker of in-group membership and an expression of positive feelings towards the interlocutor.

For the Kenyan FB user, English is used firstly due to the familiarity with the language and the enormous roles it plays, the sense of safety and acceptance and lastly because it is a marker of CMD. Kiswahili is similarly very familiar with most Kenyans knowing and using it. However, it is yet to be seen where a participant would use Kiswahili in CMD as the first language of choice, and not just as another code used by multi-linguals in instances of codeswitching. In this research, instances of Kiswahili or vernacular usage were in codeswitching and not as independent codes. Nabea (2009) argues that English in Kenya is Hegemonic and that there has been contestation and mediation with this hegemony among the masses. Perception plays a huge role of putting English at a pedestal and marginalizing Kiswahili or even vernacular. The language situation in Kenya is such that although English and Kiswahili share a co-official status, English plays more roles than Kiswahili or even vernacular. English has a covert prestige and is a marker of social class, education, technology, style and sophistication. In his study, Nabea (2009) opines that the masses have mediated and contested this Hegemony through abrogation of English and the assertion of African languages, appropriation of both English and Kiswahili to the people's circumstances, and through the evolution of patois like Sheng and Engsh. In the current paper, the participants seem to contest this linguistic hegemony through assertion of vernacular and appropriation of both English and Kiswahili to their circumstances. Consider the posts that follow:

Text 14

1. **F2:** <Sasa how am i supposed to countercheck my daughters French h/work while i know nothing about that language? Inaitwa kuwa mama..>
 (Now, how am I supposed to countercheck my daughters' French homework while I know nothing about that language? It is called being a mother..)
1. **MI:** <Kadrink kau ongele itweke madrink Ngaema ukaaathima muilea kwituua..... Nuenda nithingitye mutwee!!>
 (add on to that drink, so that they become drinks If I do not bless it you will diarrhea, do you want me to shake my head?)
1. **MI:** <Ndumei mbeu.....tumi vaa kwakwa mpesa.....ngatwaa>
 (send me your seed....send to my mpesa.... I will take it)

.....Kikamba translation

2. **MI:** < English was Kamba xxx >
1. **MI:** ENTER THE FEVER



Naskia jana Brazil kulikuwa saba saba (I hear that yesterday in Brazil it was 7/7)
Hii saba saba ya Raila imeenda global (This 7/7 by Raila has gone global)

Text 14 exemplifies the kind of appropriation of English and Kiswahili made by the FB participants. **F2** Kiswahili-English codeswitching post reads as if she is actually speaking and wondering how she should supervise her daughter's assignment. In her post she uses an 'incorrect' spelling 'h/work', which is a spelling convention that is acceptable in CMD. Her expression of 'ni kuwa mama' is easily understood when rendered in Kiswahili rather than its English translation 'it is being a mother'.

MI by choosing to code-switch (Kamba- English) becomes very expressive and humorous. The cultural nuances come by when communicating in Kamba rather than if the post was written in all English. The translated post does not carry the exact meaning of what the participant wanted to express. In such situations, the message intrinsic factor necessitated the code-switch. Code-switching in Kenya can be summed up using the following general motivations of language use as given by Myers-Scotton (1993b: (i) Least effort and mode limitation: A major reason for code-switching in CMD is that users want to spend as little effort and time as possible to compose the message. In some cases, they also need to save space. They therefore use words in different forms so long as the receiver will understand the message. ii) Rapidity: A major characteristic of code-switching is that the switched word is the first one that the user thinks of. (iii) Search for accuracy: Some words or phrases are very difficult to translate into other languages. Therefore users find it more accurate to use these words in the original language provided the receiver will understand them. (iv) Identity and creativity like in the following post:



1.MI: < kivavai laptop watia va? >
(pawpaw where did you leave your laptop?)

The photo is posted as a satire on the provision of laptops for primary school children in Kenya, which was one of the campaign promises made by the president during his election bid. There has been mixed reactions to the laptop debate in Kenya, some positive and others negative. However, **MI** chooses to make fun of the project by posting a photo that shows what would happen to a pupil in the event of him coming to school or going home without his laptop. The rural set up surely needed a rural language and that is why **MI** added that local touch by way of vernacular. **MI** in posting a photo which has a Kamba caption is creative. Not only is the photo humorous but it is also interesting in that the manipulation of a photo is in vernacular. Most of the times, the language used for captions in such photos would be English. The choice of a vernacular, is therefore refreshing and novel thereby showing creativity and innovativeness on the part of the participant

The last post in this text by **MI** has Kiswahili captions, a choice that evokes humor not only of the substance but the form of the language that the dignitaries use given that one of them is not even Kenyan. The joke is more on the language choice than even what they are saying. An observation of their interaction is that they are speaking on cross purpose; on the one hand is a comment on football scores (emphasis on the seven goals) while on the other hand is a comment on the call for demonstrations on 'saba saba' (seventh July has historical importance in Kenya) by Raila, the opposition leader having gone global. This photo shows the very essence of miscommunication. The scripts the two leaders are reading could not be any different and therefore there is bound to be lack of mutual understanding as has been the case in the past. The creativity is in the joke using two current happenings; football and politics that most Kenyans reading the post would easily understand. Other functions that the Facebook use of code-switching appears to perform are: introducing humor, a lack of equivalent vocabulary in the L1, topic specificity, a reinforcement of uttered meanings, and reporting somebody's words as they were originally uttered, language accommodation, emphasis and expressing emotion.

3.0 Conclusion

This paper has interrogated the utility of Facebook as a novel tool to observe linguistic behavior in a naturalistic setting. The paper, has identified, described and interpreted the linguistic features used on Facebook posts by a selected group of Facebook users in Kenya. The paper has examined the use Facebook and has found out that language evolution is an ongoing process and the development of online communicative language is always unpredictable even though it might have originated from a re-thinking process of some old

spelling conventions in media, and not some patterns of language that is derived on its own. It is also interesting to note how English language in Kenya is taking a step further by evolving and adapting its usage in online communication settings. The findings show the use of various features and characteristics which lead to the conclusion that Kenyan Online Communicative English corresponds well with the concept of 'informality', which acts as an informal language used in online communication settings. It is assumed that online communication settings might also serve as a new platform that allow users to ignore the need to be accurate in spelling which could be an advantage for those who are actually having problems in spelling words accurately. As spelling errors and other language inaccuracy are perceived as an acceptable norm in online communication, it somehow gives a room for non-native English speakers to employ such features with ease; without having to worry about being judged by the others, on their real language proficiency and capabilities. Through the emergence of thousands spelling innovations or perhaps spelling misbehaves; the paper argues that online communication is actually a platform that gives its users a chance to practice the language with no fear of displaying mistakes and a huge freedom to be creative with the language.

References

- Acquisti, A., & Gross, R. (2006). *Imagined Communities: Awareness, Information Sharing, and Privacy on the Facebook*. In P. Golle & G. Danezis (Eds.), *Proceedings of 6th Workshop on Privacy Enhancing Technologies* (pp.36-58). Cambridge, UK: Robinson College.
- Anis, J. (2007). Neography: *Unconventional Spelling in French SMS Text Messages*. In B. Danet and S.C. Herring (Eds.). 87–115.
- Barasa, S.N. (2010) *Language, Mobile Phones and Internet: A Study of SMS Texting, Email, IM and SNS Chats in Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) in Kenya*, Utrecht, The Netherlands, LOT
- Baron, Naomi S. (2008): *Always on Language in an Online and Mobile World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Baron, R. A., & Byrne, D. (1997). *Social psychology* (8th Ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon
- Baron, S. (1984): "Computer-mediated communication as a Force in Language Change". *Visible Language* 18 (2): 118–141.
- Baron, N. S. (2003a). "Language of the Internet." In *The Stanford Handbook for Language Engineers*, Ed. Ali Farghali, 1–63. Stanford, Calif.: CSLI Publications.
- Baron, N. (2004). See You Online: Gender Issues in College Student Use of Instant Messaging. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*. 23, 397-423.
- Boyd, D. (in press-b). *None of this is real*. In J. Karaganis (Ed.), *Structures of Participation*. New York: Social Science Research Council.
- Boyd, D., & Heer, J. (2006). *Profiles as Conversation: Networked Identity Performance on Friendster*. *Proceedings of Thirty-Ninth Hawai'i International Conference on System Sciences*. Los Alamitos, CA: IEEE Press.
- Boyd, D. M., & Ellison, N. B. (2007). Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(1), 210-230. doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00393.x
- Crystal, D., (2006) *Language and the Internet*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Freiert, M. "14 Million People Interacted with Facebook Applications in August." *Compete.com*. 14Sep.2007. <<http://blog.compete.com/2007/09/14/facebook-activity-breakdown-application/>>
- Gumperz, J. (1982). *Discourse Strategies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gumperz, J. (1992). Contextualization and understanding. In C. Duranti A.; Goodwin (Ed.), (Tran.), *Rethinking context: Language as an interactive phenomenon* (229-252). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ Press
- Herring, S. C., Scheidt, L. A., Bonus, S., & Wright, E. (2004). Bridging the gap: A genre analysis of weblogs. *Proceedings of the 37th Hawai'i International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS-37)*. Los Alamitos: IEEE Computer Society Press. <http://www.blogninja.com/DDGDD04.doc>
- Myers-Scotton, C. (1993b). *Social Motivations for Codeswitching: Evidence from Africa*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Nabea, W. (2009) *Appraisal of Literary Practices Among Villagers in Rural Kenya: The case of Murugi Location, Maara district*, Unpublished PhD. Thesis, Vienna: University of Vienna
- Sebba, M. (1998). Phonology meets ideology: The meaning of *orthographic* practices in British Creole. *Language Problems and Language Planning* 22(1). 19–47.