

Handbook of Research on Discourse Behavior and Digital Communication: Language Structures and Social Interaction

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Chapter 7

Discursive Practice and the Nigerian Identity in Personal Emails

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ABSTRACT

As communication by the electronic mail spreads and becomes increasingly common, more and more people are taking the advantage of its flexibility and simplicity for communicating social identity and cultural matters. This chapter, focuses on how Nigerian users of the electronic mails, apply the medium for expressing their identity through discursive means. Data comprises 150 personal emails written and sent between 2002 and 2009 in Lagos and Ota regions of Nigeria by individual email writers, comprising youths and adults from a university community and the Nigerian civil service. Applying socio-linguistic approach and computer-mediated discourse analysis, the study shows that the most common discursive means of expressing the Nigerian identity are greeting forms and modes of address; religious discursive practices and assertions of native personal names. The data also show evidences of Nigerian English in the email messages.

INTRODUCTION

As Information technology and computer based communication becomes the vogue across the world, computer-mediated communication (CMC) including email, has almost replaced other forms of individual and workplace modes of communication. Anyone who has access to a computer system and internet network is eligible to employ the advantage

of email communication to send documents ranging from a single sentence greetings/information to a whole page report, newsletters, notices, announcements, adverts or academic materials (Taiwo, 2007). Hence email has become a tool of mass global communication (Lan, 2000) with the advantages of simplicity, cheapness and flexibility. In terms of its flexibility, an email writer may attach visual items such as pictures or articles to their messages and may be forwarded or copied to several other receivers across the globe. Kankaanranta, (2005)

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identifies three overall email genres namely the noticeboard, postman, and dialogue. The dialogue genre is used to exchange information that relates to organisational issues/activities; the postman genre is to deliver documents for information/comment and the noticeboard is to inform employees about workplace matters. Both personal and workplace emails perform significant functions and roles. At a personal level, emailing has removed difficulties associated with verbal communication such as shyness, stuttering or fear and enhances the freedom of self expression (Baron, 1998). At the workplace, email communication increases access to new people; weakens spatial and status barriers, and provides access to information that otherwise would have been unavailable (Garton & Wellman, 1995). It also enables managers to control their subordinates at a distance (Brigham & Corbett, 1997) and since in some organisation, employers have access to their employees' email accounts, the email system facilitates monitoring and control of the on-going working process (Skovholt & Svennevig, 2006).

Email as a widespread means of personal and workplace communications reveal interesting aspects of people's cultures and language habits. Workplace emails for instance, contributes significantly to the construction of aspects of social and professional identity/relationship and provide indications of workplace culture and sociolinguistic variables of status, social distance and gender of interlocutors (Abdullah, 2003; Waldvogel, 2005; 2007). Like workplace emails, personal e-mails reveal discursive practices that indicate social identity and reflect socio-cultural practices/belief systems. A study of email greetings and closings reveal that they construct status, social distance, and gender of receivers (Waldvogel, 2005; 2007). And they are also often governed by factors such as sex and religion as well as local communicative strategies (Al-Khatib, 2008). This research aims at defining and identifying discursive practices that are peculiarly Nigerian in email text samples written, received and read by Nigerians. 'Discursive

practice' represents how discourse is involved in the construction of social and cultural practice including beliefs, knowledge, religion, norms and values. Hence, the study reveals:

- (i) Aspects of discursive practice/identity such as greeting forms and forms of address, and personal names associated with the Nigerian people
- (ii) Discursive features of the Nigerian peculiar religiosity and
- (iii) Features of Nigerian English

The study centres on "personal emails" which implies that they are not situated workplace emails, i.e. they are written by and sent to friends, colleagues (from different workplaces), relations (spouses, siblings, etc) or acquaintances. The corpus is derived from Nigerian email users (teenagers, adults and the elderly) from a university community and the civil service who have adopted the use of email in their day-to-day communication needs. The study seeks to establish that:

- (i) Computer-mediated communication (CMC) whether as Email, SMS, Instant Messaging etc. (Herring 2001), promotes and indeed enhances relational information dissemination, group communication and social interaction
- (ii) Email as a form of CMC is a significant medium employed by language users for communicating issues that reflect social identity, and cultural practices and indeed a platform for social practice (Herring, 2001).
- (iii) Email texts written in English are language samples that reveal regional varieties

BACKGROUND

The Richness Media theory views email as a "lean medium" incapable of communicating rich

information since it excludes non-verbal cues and social presence, and tends to render communication too impersonal and mechanical, (Draft & Lengel, 1984). However, the widespread use of personal and workplace emails, suggests that email communication has been successfully adapted into conveying rich information often attributed to traditional modes of communication with an added advantage of being able to reach different people in diverse locations and time zones at the same time (Waldvogel, 2007). According to Abdullah (2003) workplace emails for instance are indeed rich repository of relational communication, that enable writers personalise their message especially among participants who share well-established relationships within a particular workplace culture. The absence of non-verbal cues in email messages is in fact considered as an advantage because in most cases, the email writer has control over the planning and composing of appropriate message which sometimes may be difficult in a face-to-face communication (Walther, 1996).

As noted above, personal and workplace emails contribute significantly to the construction of aspects of social and professional identity/relationship and provide indications of workplace culture and sociolinguistic variables of status, social distance and gender of interlocutors (Abdullah, 2003; Waldvogel, 2005; 2007). Considering greetings and closings as some forms of politeness strategies in workplace emails, (Waldvogel, 2007) argues that greeting forms like other politeness markers express warmth or distance and also used as a means of reinforcing status relationships and expectations. More importantly it shows that people's relational practices at work consolidate relationships and establish the relational basis for future communication. Similarly personal e-mails often governed by factors such as sex and religion as well as local communicative strategies reveal discursive practices that indicate social identity and reflect socio-cultural practices/belief systems (Al-Khatib, 2008). Abdulla (2003) discovers that in the Malaysian society, email writers are

particularly sensitive to the relative status of the recipients of their messages and this generally detects the level of imposition they will convey. According to Bunz and Campbell, (2002) email texts containing politeness indicators elicit the most polite responses, while Jessmer and Anderson (2001) note that message recipients view more positively polite messages that are grammatically correct than those that are impolite and ungrammatical.

In another study, Kankaanranta (2005) observes that e-mails with salutations and first names are common with non-native speakers of English, i.e. Swedes and Finns. She notices that email writers that are conversant with the American internal memo with usually no salutations do not generally include salutations. She concludes however that salutations as a discursive practice construct relationships, give messages some friendly tone and contribute to maintaining good social relationships.

Email like other means of CMC is heterogeneous and significantly influenced by a number of social and cultural factors that define the communication taking place (Yates, 1996; Collot & Belmore, 1996; Skovholt & Svennevig, 2006). Email in particular is viewed as an unstable system and linguistic studies of email messages have emphasized the need for analysing CMC in specific socio-cultural contexts. Early studies of contextual issues in email view this medium as a communicative practice that is linked with communicative purposes and hierarchical roles within a community (Yates and Orlikowski, 1992; Orlikowski & Yates, 1994; Nickerson, 1999; Kankaanranta, 2005). Orlikowski & Yates, (1994) show that communicative practices of community members using email are organised through a repertoire of four genres namely the memo, proposals, dialogue and the ballot genre and it turns out that dialogue becomes the most acceptable.

Individuals communicating via new technologies rely on communicative conventions

and practices which they had imbibed in other contexts and in emails expectedly, participants in interactions import practices, norms and culture based conventions from conversations and traditional written forms (Orlikowski & Yates, 1994; Hutchby, 2001; Skovholt & Svennevig, 2006). Hence the study of email messages reveals an interesting emergence of new kind of literacy – that of how communicators using email apply a set of social practices associated with particular symbol systems and their related technologies (Barton, 1994). In this vein, the present study examines discursive practices that are peculiarly Nigerian in email text samples written, received and read by Nigerians and how social traditions, conventions and norms characteristic of conversations and the written genre are imported in emails.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Applying a Computer mediated discourse analysis (CMDS) attempts to explicate and describe the place of discursive practices such as greetings, forms of address and religious tradition in online communication. Hence, the discourse analytical methodology applied here is such that views discourse as a social practice (Fairclough, 1989); this approach is an attempt at analysing signifying practices as discursive forms (Howarth, 2000). With the influence of structuralism, post-structuralism, and post Marxism in the social sciences in the 70s the concept of discourse was extended to include some wider sets of social practices and phenomena (Howarth, 2000). Drawing extensively from the works of Michel Foucault (1981, 1991) and Jacques Derrida (1982) discourse became associated with social actions, attitudes, concepts and practices. Everything became discourse, including the world itself. And this is based on the fact that all objects and actions are meaningful, and that their meaning is a product of historically specific systems of rules. It thus enquires into the way in which social

practices construct and contest the discourses that construct social reality.

Computer-mediated communication in this context views all forms of communication/messages produced and transmitted through computer networks as discourses, revealing feature of real life identities and dimensions of social practices. Herring (2001:9) observes that some researchers have erroneously believed that CMC was a “cool medium well suited to the transfer of data and information, but poorly suited to social issues,” (Baron, 1998; Kiesler et al., 1984) but the present day avalanche of social life on the internet confirms that the Internet (in this context emails) does indeed provide a rich source of data for the study of discourse and social practice (Herring, 2001). Because email Communication is a genre with a vast linguistic variations yet demonstrating a “moving linguistic target rather than a stable system” (Baron, 1998:144), it therefore holds a lot of promise to research in CMC centring on specific social and cultural context as is the aim of this study.

Although this study is exclusively not a cultural analysis, its focus on the Nigerian identity via cultural discursive practices immediately brings to fore the propositions by Hofstede (1980; 1991) which suggests that despite online intercultural practices, and the fruitful results of intercultural research, there is indeed a national culture and a consciousness of same which identify a group from among other social groups. Hofstede identifies four dimensions of national cultures, namely power distance; collectivism vs. Individualism; femininity vs. Masculinity and uncertainty avoidance. Collectivism is the strong cultural bond that integrates people into cohesive groups which throughout their entire life continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty (Hofstede, 1991). Culture consist of habits and tendencies to act in certain ways, comprising language patterns, values, beliefs, customs and thought patterns (Barnett & Sung, 2005); it is a socially shared activity and a property of a group rather than an individual

(Nieberg, 1973). Critics of Hofstede, especially researchers in CMC argue that what is important is how national as well as other cultural identities (ethnicity, youth culture, gender etc.) interact with intercultural communication online (Ess and Sudweeks, 2005). Hofstede model would not be appropriate were individuals use the internet to observe and to initiate a new style from abroad as a kind of resistance against their dominant culture (Ess and Sudweeks, 2005)

Nigeria is a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual nation; yet certain language habits and discursive practices are evidently perpetuated in the language of the average Nigerian, ethnic differences notwithstanding. Indeed, the average African has a uniqueness about him or her that marks off national identity and national pride. Interestingly, even Nigerians living abroad observe these practices in their email messages to their relatives at home.

METHODOLOGY

As already stated in the introduction, analysis of data is mainly qualitative, focusing on the sociolinguistic and CMDA of opening and closing of the emails showing forms of address, greeting forms, personal names that are peculiarly Nigerian, and aspects of Nigeria's obsessive religiosity. Some features of Nigerian English are also identified in the course of the analysis. The CMDA framework describes different levels of analysis of online discourse which include structure, meaning, interaction management and social practice (Herring 2004).

The corpus comprises 150 personal email samples that were written and sent between 2002 and 2009 in Lagos and Ota regions of Nigeria from a university community and the Nigerian civil service; they were collected between mid 2008 and early 2009. Data were collected from men and women of different age groups - teenagers, adults and the elderly. "Adults" represents non-

teenagers and "the elderly" are those above 50 years. 70% of the emails however come from the university community, consisting of mails from teenagers and the adults. Only about 5% of the data are obtained from the elderly from both the university community and the civil service. Since the study focuses on personal emails received from and sent to relations, friends, and acquaintances, it is likely that mails would have come from people from the private sector or virtually from all works of life. Emails received from and sent to Nigerians currently living outside Nigeria form part of the corpus since the study also intended to see the extent to which cultural transfers have affect Nigerians living abroad.

During data collection, it was discovered that "personal" emails were not common in most people's inboxes. Most of the emails were business-oriented, comprising mostly attachments and forwarded items relating to career and studies. Such emails were therefore not included in the corpus. For a study that centres on discourse and sociolinguistics of social practice and identity, it is only appropriate to investigate private emails. While workplace emails may betray cultural traits, the researcher considered the possibility of informal messages much more likely to convey elements of social practice and cultural identity. This is however a subject of further research.

It was also observed that a number of people were indeed reluctant to release their emails for purpose of confidentiality while some freely gave up theirs for the study. Others said they preferred phoning or texting to emailing for communicating personal matters and that emailing seldom gave them ample room for private communication. These are actually the main reasons for the leanness of the corpus. But again whether email does not give sufficient opportunity for communicating private issues will be a subject of another study. In the analysis, the actual identities of the writers are not disclosed. The 'names' of the emails writers are mere pseudonyms: the email addresses have also been extensively modified.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Forms of Opening/Address

Like in many other cultures, e.g. Malaysian, (Abdulla, 2005), where forms of address is sensitive to status of the addressee, the style of openings in email messages by Nigerians is generally determined by the age, social status and roles of the sender and that of the receiver. For example opening of emails by teenagers to teenagers especially those of the same age group defer from those from youth to adults and the elderly. Generally mails between teenagers do not always begin with any form of opening or greeting. While mails from teenagers and youths to the elderly reflect status and social roles of the addressee; mails from adults to teenagers and those from the elderly to either the adults or teenagers begin with either the receivers' first names or no opening at all. Unlike the Jordanian society (Khatib, 2008) where sex and religious considerations are so important in greeting forms, Nigerian email writers pay no particular attention to gender issues. Apart from the usual 'sir' for men and 'madam' for women, men and women enjoy the same level of respect in email texts. Interestingly however, the corpus consists of email communication between men and men than men and women. This means that more of the mails in the data were written and sent by men. This is not to conclude however that more Nigerian males write personal emails than their female counterpart. Another study will perhaps investigate this. In the data, most emails from young people to adults and the elderly begin with:

- (i) Sir (2, 92, 96 etc.)
- (ii) God bless you sir (4, 17, 18, 19 etc.)
- (iii) Hello sir (23, 103, 107 etc)
- (iv) Dear Sir (24, 27)
- (v) Good afternoon sir (67)
- (vi) How're you sir (46)
- (vii) Good evening sir (102) etc.

The tone of unfamiliarity and distanced is deliberately sustained as a matter of social tradition. The addressee naturally feels respected to be so addressed. Like in most cultures, the use of the address form 'sir' is to recognise the addressee's age, and social status. In the Nigerian cultural context, it is mandatory for a younger sender of a message, whether through texting, verbal or other means to add 'sir' to the male addressee and 'Ma' or 'Madam' to the female addressee.. Even in the religious context where Christians often begin and close emails messages with prayer, the 'sir' requirement is also often met as some of the mails being with:

- (i) God bless you sir
- (ii) May God bless you sir
- (iii) God bless you richly sir etc.

This kind of opening normally functions as greeting/politeness and indicates the type of message that follows and the kind of feedback that is anticipated. Most of the openings, usually from younger persons would rather indicate, not just the attitude of showing respect but also construct the social/professional status of the receiver as a dimension of politeness strategy; this way the message first of all, introduces the receiver's professional/cultural titles and sometimes extol his well known outstanding qualities.

Greetings perform very important socio-cultural roles in emails especially informal ones. As a matter of fact, the subject matter of many of the emails in the data is merely greetings. The *Yorubas* for examples are often said to be 'social greeters,' having several greeting forms for all seasons, times and social activities. The form of greetings would generally construct the addressee's social status and sometimes suggest his roles within some specific social groups. In emails, greetings naturally set in motion the tone and content of the message. Greetings and closing remarks usually establish the basis for future communication (Waldvogel, 2007) and in most cases

reflect cultural discursive traits. The data shows that not only do messages from younger persons construct social/professional status as a form of greeting, but adult to adult and elder to elder messages do the same thing. The most common forms of address/greeting in the data include:

- (i) Prof (22)
- (ii) Good day prof (9)
- (iii) Igwe (equivalent to 'chief' or 'ruler')(10)
- (iv) Oga Ctarlpe ('Oga' is equivalent to 'master') (15)
- (v) My dear Prof (21, 83)
- (vi) Dear Dr. Ojzh (26)
- (vii) Dear Dr. Adrtogza (84)
- (viii) Dear Professor Slwu (85)

As a matter of social practice, the average Nigerian likes to be recognised and addressed by whatever social achievement he/she has attained. In some cases certain individuals are addressed as 'Rev. Dr...' or 'Chief Dr. Engr...' etc. reflecting the many academic degrees/traditional titles they have acquired. It is often taken seriously if a younger person fails to recognise an elder by adding 'sir,' or a title like 'doc', 'prof.' or 'chief.' In the emails under study, the openings and greetings show this kind of title-conscious tradition. This is different from what we see in many European cultures where salutations with first names are common; Kankaanranta (2005) cites the case of the Swedes and Finns. In Nigeria, emails between adults and adults or adults and the elderly, overtly reflects this social practice, even while conveying informal tones. Below are a few examples:

- (i) Prof my broda ('broda' is a colloquial form of 'brother')(8)
- (ii) My brother (14)
- (iii) Thanks Charlie (13)
- (iv) My prof.(20)

Interestingly, data reveals that openings such as 'hello' or 'hi' are not common in greetings among adults and elders. Even while communicating with younger persons, the most frequently used opening is by simply addressing the addressee by his first name like 'Sola' (a short form of 'Olusola' or 'Adesola') or 'Bunmi' (Olubunmi). In email (105) (Table 1) an adult simply writes the addressee's first name as part of the introduction of the mail and went ahead with the content of the message: he concludes the message without even signing off with his name.

By using the short form of the bearer's name, the email writer conveys the elements of informality, congeniality and fondness. These also functions as politeness and greeting at the same time; for some, the introductory part of the message still includes greeting forms such as 'how're you,' 'happy new month' or 'compliment of the season.' As in the youth emails, adult to adult emails sometimes do not include any form of opening but may contain some forms of greetings. This reflects the degree of acquaintance, the informality of relationship and how frequently they communicate with each other. Emails (72) and (77) (Tables 2 and 3) also illustrate this.

Email (77) begins with a mixture of English and *Yoruba*, a typical intra-sentential code-mixing that underscores a popular cultural message pat-

Table 1.

<p>(105) From: Dmla Wandt <dwdt@gmail.com> To: Abymp Ipdela <prfyymexy@gmail.com> Sat, Jan 31, 2009 at 10:32 AM</p> <p>Thanks Yomt for the mail. my interest in that you know exactly what God has in mind for you and that you stick to it. The most important thing is being accurate. I pray the Lord will lead you aright. You sound very convincing so I am relieved. If you are fully persuaded then follow your heart, if any doubt exists no matter how small about a decision like this then it is better to attend to it first. I give a more detailed later. regards.</p>
--

Table 2

(72) From: pece <peptce@yahoo.com>
To: sign <s7giy@yahoo.co.uk>
Date: Tuesday, April, 2006, 12:00 A.M
How expressive. So it is out of sight out of mind right? no problem. How's work and your "Obidiya".
The next time you send me a mail I would appreciate a little more detail (oh ye programmer).
Have a wonderful tym.
Sign

Table 3.

(77) Tuesday, 16 September, 2008 11:22 PM
From: "Yzbn Woonito" <ysko4@yahoo.com>
To: siny2010@yahoo.co.uk
Young man kosi nkankan to n shelee. sho oo wa kpa sha. hope the yoruba isn't too complex 4 u.....or lets go english. how are you doing.....or lets go down to broken eng chairman, guy, bros sie, how far, hope say na u dey hammer life, say no b life dey hammer u. oh boy hope u have started writing ur own novel cause his mail is a classic best seller..... i hav neva recved a mail dis long in y life...tanx 4 making d record. hey i don't agree wit u on d fact dat girls are way more confused than women or in fact boys. may not hav the prove now but will jam u in skl wit d prove. i believ the rule that ladies first was put as a form of protection and as a form of elevating any form of stress...TAKE CARE

tern among most Nigerians. 'Obidiya' in mail (72) above, meaning 'her husband's heart' is an Igbo coinage for 'wife.' In the two emails, a formal opening/greeting is absent but the tone of communication is kept sufficiently jovial and friendly. From the above samples, it is clear that another way of expressing cultural issues/identity in text messages is by a deliberate appeal to discursive forms such as local coinages, borrowing from local languages and code-switching. This way, ideas and concepts that are absent in English are easily expressed. As a matter of fact, this is one of the hallmarks of Nigerian English as in the examples below. The writer of mail (72) above, closes with 'have a wonderful tym (time),' and he/she signs off with the short form of his/her first name, while the writer of mail (77) like in many other mails by the youth signs off with simply 'take care.'

Emails by teenagers are the most creative and often quite bizarre, completely different from that of the adults and the elderly. While the messages of the adults deal with family, work, promotion, career, religion and festive seasons, emails by teenagers centre on concerns about school, holiday, friendship, music and fashion. The youth emails generally do not include opening or greetings but sometimes consist of greeting forms in the introduction. Emails like the following (Tables 4-6) are common in the data:

Emails by adults and the elderly often follow the structural pattern of introduction, body and conclusion, where opening/greeting forms part of the introduction. Main issues of the messages are generally discussed in the body of the text. Unlike the adult emails however, none of the emails above begins with any form of opening/greeting but

Table 4.

(79) From: Spy <syi@yahoo.com>
To: Jny <switty7ng@yahoo.com>
Date: Wednesday, March, 2007.
Jenny guess what can u imagine what dad did he went to aba on tues and left with his cheque book s leaving us to suffer and ekeoma is going back to school non sun day well iam just returning from the bank and i just thought u should no about it. Bye

Table 5.

(60)
Subject: Na Wao00
To: "anty" <odla@yahoo.co.uk>,
Date: Thursday, February 12, 2009, 12:13 PM
Na wa 4 U sef, U sabi waka oooooo. I hear say U and Grace comot 4 morning and U came back with Joy. U spent Ur night with Peace and woke up with Blessing discussing about the Favour waiting 4 U at the office, while Happiness and Prosperity are waiting 4 U in the car. Make U carry go cos na so dem go follow U thru out this year. GOD has Blessed U and it cannot be Reversed. Have a lovely day!! Your Dreams will not die, Your Plans will not Fail, Your Destiny will not be Aborted, the Desires of your Heart will be Granted. Say a Big AMEN. Money will know your name and address from now on. If you Desire to claim it send it back 2 ME and ALL UR FRIENDS.

Table 6.

(71) From: gee <gegen1@yahoo.com>
Subject: I'm impressed!
To: chma <speppy@yahoo.com>
Date: friday, January, 2002, 10:30 P.M
hey i was really impressed after the fone call.i would like to advice us both, pls lets stop wat we never started, do you know u really hurt me wen u said u were gonna do to me wat my last gf did that was very awfull of u.anyway theres nothing to fear now that u have your life to leave without me pestering you. its been your pleasure, and i guess u enjoyed it while it lasted. good bye.
Your friend
Chma

the language forms sufficiently reflect the socio-cultural root of the writers. The message begins immediately and ends suddenly, though some contain some bits of sign-off. Interestingly the tone of the mails is still quite informal and familiar. One generally gets the feeling of intimacy as he reads them. Mail (60) is an example, with evidences of spelling manipulation, Nigerian pidgin, and a lot of religious sentiments. Email (71) includes some bit of 'Americana.' Mails (60) and (71) sign off with 'bye' and 'your friend, 'Chma.' The above emails like the others in the data are reflective of the dynamism of electronic communication, which according to Crystal comprises a 'much wider stylistic range than it does at present, as the medium is adapted to suit a broader range of communicative purposes' (2001:107).

Closing

Findings here coincide with Waldvogel, (2007) which concludes that greetings and closings encode social information such as status, social distance and gender. Social distance refers to the

degree of acquaintance whether formal or informal. In the Nigerian context, however closings do not often encode the same information regarding social distance. Adult to adult (and the elderly) emails in the data, close on a formal note although the content of the mails are informal messages. While all the mails in the corpus are those written by friends and relatives to their acquaintances, they still end formally. Many of the closings follow the traditional letter-writing subscription pattern such as:

- (i) I remain yours truly
- (ii) Regards to your family
- (iii) Kind regards
- (iv) Thanks
- (v) Kindest regards
- (vi) Your sister
- (vii) I remain your humble landlord
- (viii) Sincerely etc.

A few, notably those by the youths end on a friendly informal note such as:

- (i) Best
- (ii) Cheers
- (iii) Love
- (iv) Bye etc

Significantly, most of the emails by the adults and the elderly in the corpus open or close with reference to the family. In Nigeria like in many other societies and cultures, there is a lot of respect for the family and most Nigerian greeting forms encode reference to the family's welfare. Examples in the data include:

- (i) Top of the day to you, brother. How is your family? (1)
- (ii) Regards to your family...(2)
- (iii) Special greetings to your family (13)
- (iv) I believe all is well with you and your family (15)
- (v) What about the wife and the children (22)
- (vi) God bless our celebration of his joy. Our families, our heart (43)
- (vii) Please extend my love to your family (86)
- (viii) How are you and your family? (92)
- (ix) I trust you and your family are doing fine (104) etc.

In constructing the family, the emails also construct identity and solidarity and therefore exclude all forms of gender difference. In the African culture, the family, including the extended family is the root of existence. In the traditional religion, the 'family' includes the ancestors and the children yet unborn. So when an elder says: 'how's the family, the 'family' actually transcends the nuclear one. While emails by teenagers and youths pay no attention to this form of greetings, omitting it by an adult/elder is often viewed as an insult on the addressee/receiver and negligence on the part of the speaker/sender. In traditional Africa, a man's dignity and worth actually depends on the size of his family. Even when it is a known fact that a man is unmarried, an elder will deliberately ask after his family (i.e. his wife and

children) – a discursive strategy to spur him up to family life. It is possible therefore that some of the emails above are received by those who have no nuclear families of their own, who are being pulled to that direction by the culture and discursive practice.

Religion as a Discursive Practice

Religion is practiced on the internet, and since it is culture-bound and expressed within a cultural context most of its features are reflected in email messages written by Nigerians. Nigeria is said to be the most religious country in the world with about 95% of the population attending religious service and 80% as regular church goers, (Johnstone & Mandryk, 2001, Emenyonu, 2007, Chiluwa 2008). In Nigeria, like in many other countries in Africa, religious practices are discursive, and play significant roles in moulding the thoughts and lifestyle of the people. As the data have revealed in the opening and closing of email messages, religious undertones have been quite clear, ending as prayers or well wishing.

Most of the emails with religious messages follow the opening, body and closing discourse structure, with the peculiar church-based address/greeting forms. Many of the openings follow the usual formal letter opening. Religious subjects are often assumed as having impersonal and universal implications, so the writers of the emails assume a formal stance in writing them. Below are a few examples of the openings/greetings from the data:

- (i) May God bless you, Sir. (4)
- (ii) Dear Bro. Innocent (5)
- (iii) Dear Sis. Ekaete (6)
- (iv) May God bless you richly, Sir. (7)
- (v) Bro. Olaolu (32)
- (vi) Dear Brethren (81)
- (vii) My dear Bro. Simon (87)
- (viii) My dear Pastor Abraham (93)

Notice the forms of address/titles, i.e. ‘Bro’ for males and ‘Sis’ for females. ‘Brethren’ is used for a group comprising males and females while ‘pastor’ indicates roles. The ‘bro’ and ‘sis’ address forms however are more frequently used among people of the same age-groups with similar religious/church roles. Older men and women are often addressed by their titles, indicating their roles, e.g. ‘pastor’, ‘reverend’, ‘deacon’/‘deaconess,’ etc. In religious circles, gender questions though often avoided, are actually taken seriously. Men indeed have their places and roles in the church/mosque, while the females have theirs and keep to them without interfering with those of the males. The above forms of opening and address establish the Christian tradition and prepare the grounds for the message. Some of the messages are purely Christian messages such as warning, prayers, well-wishing, homily and celebration. The following (Tables 7 and 8) are a few examples:

Because of the nature of the messages, the above mails do not contain any form of greeting/opening or closing. Email (38) simply signs off with her name. But most of the mails in this category end with formal closing remarks such as:

- (i) Long life and prosperity is yours in JESUS Name. Shalom! (3)
- (ii) Peace (4)
- (iii) God bless you. (6, 65)
- (iv) Remain blessed (7, 89)
- (v) peace of the Lord be with you (9)
- (vi) stay blessed (59)
- (vii) May God bless you richly? Amen!(66)
- (viii) Remain blessed IN HIM(81)
- (ix) Yours in HIM!(82)
- (x) Be blessed till then (88) etc.

Most of the writers of the above closings, still sign off with their names. As we can see, the closings are actually prayers and this has become a culture in the Christian circle to end a message on this note.

Personal Names as Identity and Cultural Heritage

One major element of identity and culture that marks of email by Nigerians is the names of the people that write them. Nigerian names and indeed the whole of Africa are unique in themselves. To an African his name is his cultural identity. Going by the spirit of pan-Africanism which became

Table 7.

(11) Wednesday, July 30, 2008 8:52 PM From: "Addsu Alabz" <du_adbu@hotmail.com> To: fole@hotmail.com, Dearly beloved, JESUS is COMING AGAIN SOON!!! WE MUST BE READY. (38) Congratulations to Wuraola and Lola, the Lord will increase your strength and provide all you need to bring up these lovely ones in the way of the Lord. Happy New Year to everyone! Skan Nee Asna

Table 8.

(43) Flag this message Tuesday, December 23, 2008 3:15 AM From: "bret" <rmytop@yahoo.co.uk> To: pubsi@yahoo.com God bless our celebration of his joy, our families, our heart. May this time bring glory to his holy name in all that he imparts. may u have the gladness of xmas which is hope, the spirit of xmas which peace and the heart of xmas which is love.
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prominent in the 1960's many African scholars dropped their seeming European names in order to assert their socio-cultural heritage. Though this study is not an extensive onomastic research, it is worth mentioning here that over 80% of emails in the data carry Nigerian names, which like in other African contexts generally mirror royalty (or chieftaincy), occupation, ancestry and religion including reincarnation. Male names in the data such as Ogbulogo, Ohiagu, Okoroji, Ikedieze, Chukwukadibia, Okechukwu, Chinedum etc. (Igbo), Keshinro, Ajisafe, Rotimi, Adekeye, Gbadebo, Olusola, Amodu, Oyero, Segun, Ad-elaja, Salawu, Daramola, Fadeyi, etc. (Yoruba); Ipieh, Egbe, Asakitikpi, Ekaete, Odili, Ashi, Ogah etc (other ethnic groups); generally reflect warfare, chieftaincy, occupation, ancestry and traditional religion, female names commonly re-echo virtue/moral qualities, religion (Christian), reincarnation and socio-cultural experiences (Ajileye, 2000; Ogunbodede, 2006). Generally however both male and female names capture Africa's high regard for values, communalism and expression of socio-cultural experiences. In the data, email writers, especially adults and the elderly sign off with their names often in a formal letter style as in the following examples:

(i) I remain, Truly yours,

Ajppfe Tiyz (1)

(ii) Shalom,

Fmi Kinro (3)

(iii) Special greetings to your family.

Rtim Trrwo (13)

(iv) Sincerely from,

Bro. Beb Chukti (18)

(v) Warmest regards,

Gdrbo DULRU (53)

(vi) Have a great day.

Yom (57)

(vii) Stay blessed.

Ollup Amdv (59)

Nigerian English in the Emails

While CMC is dynamic and progressive, email messages interestingly reveal samples of varieties of English especially emails written and sent by Nigerians. One of the features of Nigerian English evident in the corpus written by the adults and the elderly is the bookish nature of expressions that often lacks the flow that corresponds with the various social contexts (Egbe, 1984). While emails by the youth are flexible and include the style of English comparable to the native speaker, those by adults and the elderly are rather formal and bookish. The tone and style of opening and closing as we have observed in the above examples are rather too formal. While most youth emails begin with, 'hello,' 'hi,' or 'hey' those of the adults begin with 'dear sir', 'dear brother', 'dearly beloved,' dear Dr. Atbac etc. The same style follows in the contents and closings. The flexibility in the Nigerian youth English is the direct influence of contacts with the first language communities as some of them are born abroad and had their preschool and primary education there. Another factor is the influences of the mass media and that of highly educated parents. The Standard Nigerian English which is close to the native speaker is also evident in the emails.

Adult emails are sometimes written like narratives following the introduction, body and conclusion pattern. While some contain heart-felt private messages which give the mails their length, the mails begin and end the way the average Nigerian English tutor would insist on at the

foundation classes. Interestingly some Nigerians leaving abroad write in this style. Below are a few examples (Tables 9-11).

In describing features of Nigerian English, it is quite clear that two distinct usages of the same variety exist, i.e. standard and non-standard which vary on the basis of education, status and social exposure of the user (Okoro, 2004). The non-

standard variety is characterised by grammatical inconsistencies, transliteration, and a mixture of English and the Nigerian pidgin. There are also breaches of the code, redundancies, omission articles/determiners and reduplications (Okoro, 2004). Email (91) above is an example, with clear evidence of transliteration ('help me say hallo to them') and a violation of selectional rules ('here'

Table 9.

<p>From: ZJMT BUKN <talk2n@yahoo.com> Subject: Apoti Eri ni eni to gbe laptop yin gbe To: abjac@yahoo.com Date: Tuesday, September 9, 2008, 3:36 PM Good evening sir, How is mummy and the children? I believe that they are fine. Thanks so much sir for the text msg and the e mail. Oga, e ma worry about the laptop blc the person has carried apoti-eri that will make him restless until he returns it. God will scare the person whether his asleep or awake. Lets thank God for its recovery. I am very sorry that I couldn't communicate with you for quite some times. All is well. We have not reach conclusion with regards to my master yet blc my sister plan was towards late next year for the master's programme after my youth service. For now, her plan was that I should apply for job when we get back to Nigeria depending the time she will be able to raise money for the programme. My strong believe in God is that He will make all things to work out together for my good. I really appreciate your effort regarding the exemption letter and your concern about my plan. God will perfect everything that concerns you and your family in Jesus name (Amen). Mi o gbagbe iwe yin sir, we have not bought it but by God's grace I will get it as soon as my sister is able to go to the bkshop with me. Have a wonderful night rest sir. (102) Yom</p>
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Table 10.

<p>(106) Thursday, January 8, 2009 12:59 PM From: "pastor@go.org" <pastor@gsy.org> View contact details To: olutomiade@yahoo.com Dear Adba, Blessings in the name of Jesus! Thank you for writing. I appreciate your encouraging and uplifting words! Thank you also for your prayers and support for the situation in Ukraine. This is what we believe in and stand on: "Maintain justice and do what is right, for my salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will soon be revealed." Isa. 56: 1. Let this year bring you joy, and the fulfilment of God's perfect plan – for the sake of His name! Yours in HIM! Pastor Suy dela (82)</p>
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Table 11.

<p>Tuesday, April 20, 2004 3:44 PM From: "Fi Esr" <oson2001@yahoo.com> Add sender to Contacts To: "Adba Admt" <olde@yahoo.com> Hallo Byi, How his Mama and ur wife? help me say hallo to them. did you see all my messages try to reply all.. how his people from ILARE ? did u here from them..Things is not OK For me that is why I cannot come down to IBADAN..When I have some changes I will give u a call and i will try to come to IBADAN before i will come i will give u a call i,m sill on the same no..009229-954834.COTONOU...bye till i read from u...BYE Best Regds. YAPA (91)</p>

for 'hear'). It is arguable however, that even in 'standard Nigerian English,' features that may be ascribed as the usual CMC language, e.g. sensational spelling, omission of articles, lack capitalisation etc. is evident.

Features of Nigerian English (standard and non-standard) include regular use of loan words, coinages, local idioms/code switching, category/semantic shifts and pragmatic use of some normal English expressions. Native speaker idioms are also often modified in order to communicate certain culture-bound meanings. In the data however, features such as local usages e.g. *Oga*, *Igwe*, etc; 'Ndewo' (Igbo form of greeting) (15); a mixture of English with the Nigerian pidgin e.g. *Wetin dey nah Sola* (58); *Na wa ooo* (60), etc. and code-mixing abound. Email (102) above contains a number of code-switching. The subject of the mail itself is in Yoruba – 'Apoti Eri ni eni to gbe laptop yin gbe,' (Whoever stole your laptop has stolen the ark of covenant). A lot of this kind of discourse strategies enable the writer convey the aesthetic of the native language and express meaning satisfactorily and with a sense of originality. Nigerian English carries the Nigerian thought pattern, not only to communicate information but to actually perform social actions. Certain expressions immediately lose their colour and density if translated into the foreign language. To avoid this, the writer expresses it the local way though in English, or says it as it is in the local language, hence transliteration or code-mixing – the two most frequently used discourse strategies in the emails.

CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to describe the forms and functions of personal emails by Nigerian email users, demonstrating the compatibility of CMC with the study of discourse and social practice. In every culture, language (a part of culture itself) always communicates that culture as well as social

practice. With the growing and dominating interest in communication via the internet; it is obvious that there are a lot of different cultures competing for attention. Culture and social practice are recognisable and people always carry their national/cultural identities wherever they find themselves. The Nigerian identity, revealed by socio-cultural practices on the internet only shows that language is sensitive to every context it finds itself.

In the personal email messages studied, Nigerians encode forms of address in the openings (and sometimes in the closings), reflecting the age, social status and roles of the sender and that of the receiver. This is similar to the Malaysian cultural practice according to Abdulla (2005), noting that forms of address are sensitive to the status of the addressee. While mails from teenagers and youths to the elderly reflect status and social roles of the addressee, mails from adults to teenagers and those from the elderly to either the adults or teenagers begin with either the receivers' first name or no opening at all. Unlike in Jordanian society (Khatib, 2008) where sex and religious considerations are so important in greeting forms, Nigerian email writers pay no particular attention to gender issues. However, the Nigerian society is highly sensitive to titles and social ranks. As a matter of social practice, the average Nigerian, male or female prefers to be recognised and addressed by whatever social heights he/she has attained either as 'professor', 'doctor,' 'reverend,' 'chief' etc. This is reflected in the openings and closing of the mails in the corpus. Again this is different from what we see in many European cultures, especially among the Swedes and Finns where salutations are common with only the first names of addressees, (Kankaanranta 2005). In the closing of email messages, findings coincide with Waldvogel, (2007) which concludes that greetings and closings encode social information such as status, social distance and gender. In the Nigerian context, however closings do not often encode the same information regarding social distance. Adult to adult (and the elderly) emails in the data, close

on a formal note although the content of the mails are informal messages. Whether in the opening or closing, personal emails written by Nigerians make particular references to the family, where 'family' (in the traditional sense) represents the nuclear and the extended family, the ancestors and the children yet unborn.

In Nigeria like in many other countries in Africa, religious practices are discursive, and reflected in email messages. The study reveals that in the opening and closing of email messages, religious undertones have been quite clear, ending as prayers, well-wishing and messages that reinforce religious practices. Similarly, indigenous personal names are major cultural marks of identity in the emails. Names that mirror royalty, occupation, ancestry, religion and virtue are typically Nigerian, indeed the whole of Africa.

This study has also shown that email samples are capable of revealing English regional varieties. The emails in the corpus reveal evidences of Standard and non-standard Nigerian English, for instance its bookishness, especially in emails written by adults and the elderly where informal messages retain features of formal letters. This variety is also characterized by regular use of loan words, coinages, local idioms/code switching, category/semantic shifts and pragmatic use of some normal English expressions.

On the whole, it is believed that the internet especially emailing, has become an indispensable medium in particular, where Nigerians communicate messages that are not all 'bullshits' (Frankfurt, 2005) but a venue to enjoy, and transmit their culture, identity, religion and language resources.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Computer-Mediated Communication

(CMC): Any form of computer-based communication, text-based and transferable to one or more persons at different locations, such as email, discussion groups, real-time chats, SMS, instant messaging etc.

Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis

(CMDA): Different levels of analysis of online discourse which include structure, meaning, interaction management and social practice.

Culture: A people's way of life, consisting of habits and tendencies to act in certain ways. This comprises their language patterns, values, beliefs, customs and world view.

Discursive Practice: Expression of social practice through discourse, i.e. how discourse is involved in the construction of social practice including beliefs, knowledge, religion, norms and values.

Electronic Mail (Email): A method of exchanging digital messages, from person to person

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or group of persons. It provides an opportunity for online communication between people from different locations and time zones at the same time. Messages are typed on a computer screen and sent through digital technology to recipient addresses.

Identity: A characteristic/feature that defines a person's or group uniqueness, distinctiveness or personality, often expressed through their name, racial differences or cultural traits.

Personal Email: An email message from an individual to another on a subject that is informal

and private. This kind of mail is common between friends, relations, and acquaintances.

Politeness: A show of respect and recognition to someone expressed through language and other cultural norms of behaviour. This is often determined by the person's age, social roles, status and sometimes sex. In personal emails, politeness is expressed in the openings and closings of the messages.