

## Expressing Thoughts and Feelings on WhatsApp Status Through the use of Language

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### ABSTRACT

The advent of technology and the internet has revolutionized how people communicate with each other. Smartphones have further simplified communication between people as individuals can easily communicate with people far from them instantly and cheaply using language. In present paper, the focus is on the use of language used to communicate feelings and thoughts on WhatsApp status update, how they feature and whether it is an effective platform for communicating one's intended message to the target audience. A qualitative online interview approach was purposefully used to collect data from five respondents who wrote their status in Ewe and ten others who wrote theirs in English in selected Ghanaian communities were sampled. Data was analysed using qualitative content analysis. The findings revealed that the respondents used either texts or images in their updates in either English or Ewe. Messages were expressive, directive, commissive, or declarative. The respondents also perceived the WhatsApp status platform to be effective in passing their messages to the intended parties.

### Introduction

Social media includes web-based and mobile technologies, which transform communication into interactive dialogue. There are different forms of social media such as internet forums, weblogs, podcasts, microblogging, pictures, wikis, and social blogs etc. Therefore, with the world being amid social media revolution, some of the most common platforms used for extensive communication include Facebook, Myspace, Skype, twitter, Instagram Orkut, TikTok and WhatsApp among others. In these

platforms, the form of communication can be with one-on-one with a single individual or with a group of persons. Most of these online platforms serve as primary settings for the formation and curation of routine identity constructions through textual and multimodal expression (Thorne, Sauro & Smith, 2015). Most of the farmers use mobile phone, internet, video calling, and social media for production purpose (Panda *et al*, 2019). Most people in today's world, especially the young people, are hooked to social media platforms to keep in contact with their peers (Baruah, 2012). However, social media platforms can serve

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purposes beyond social communication and has its pros and cons. One of the key advantages of social media platforms is on the sharing of knowledge and information and sometimes reported to create the knowledge (Nain *et al.*, 2019). Social media also promotes increased communication skills among people. Social media, however, has a flip side which stems from interference of one's privacy.

The focus of this paper is on WhatsApp status as a communication platform. WhatsApp has changed the way people communicate and interact with one another. It is less expensive than traditional SMS, but it also introduces new forms of mobile communication, such as group chat and status updates. WhatsApp currently has over 1.5 billion active users (Resende *et al.*, 2019). WhatsApp is used by nearly everyone with a smartphone to communicate with family and friends, while others use it to conduct business and read the news. WhatsApp is unique in that all communication within the platform is end-to-end encrypted, meaning that the information shared is only visible to those who are involved in the conversation (Resende *et al.*, 2019). Apart from sending text messages, WhatsApp allows people to communicate using instant messaging, and it provides a wide range of comfort and reliability in sharing information. Emoticons, images/pictures, voice notes, web links, videos, and much more can be used by individuals (Sanchez & Cruz, 2015). Users can also provide personal information and create their own digital profiles on WhatsApp. A picture, a nickname, and a status can all be included. Apart from that, it also allows users to upload video clips, photos, or type a message for their status, which is visible to anyone who has saved their contact information for the past twenty-four hours. As a result, WhatsApp discourse contains elements derived from both written and spoken varieties of language; as a result, oral written texts are thought to be the realization of digital discourse (Sanchez and Cruz, 2015). The transfer of orally oriented discourse to written form is responsible for most of the characteristics of digital discourse. WhatsApp is a multimodal medium of communication because it combines verbal realizations with visual and acoustic ones. Various scholars have focused on the characteristics of instant messaging due to its significant impact as a form of communication. According to Lamptey *et al.* (2019), the importance of WhatsApp as an effective and inexpensive means of communication has grown with the advent of smartphones, with users using posts, activities, quotes, images, and writing as valuable avenues for assessing their emotions and thoughts. Self-presentation, in which people communicate their thoughts and images of themselves, can be predicted in WhatsApp status updates, according to Mansur *et al.* (2016a). Back, et al (2010) found that the observer rating was consistent with the real-life

hypothesis and not idealized virtual identity. The ideal-self ratings did not predict the impressions of observers on the personality of those posting things on social media. Ali and Kootbodien (2017) established that WhatsApp is part of the student's everyday life where they check their WhatsApp every hour. The messages and status updates posted on social media platforms are often reflection of the actual personality of the individuals rather than self-idealized promotion (Manago *et al.*, 2008). This is because communication means a lot of things and can be done through symbols, expression, or body language (Austin, 1962). Scholars like Sanchez and Cruz (2015) investigated the discourse of WhatsApp's 139-character blank for users to update their statuses. However, little attention has been paid to the choice of language used in posting the status update, the reason for using the language and the impact of the language used on the intended users as well as the other people on one's contact list who are bound to read their status update. It is important to point out that the status update in WhatsApp can be limited to the people chosen by the number originating the message. However, without limiting those who can see it, the status updates are public to anyone who has saved the message. Therefore, as a platform which allows people to view the status, sometimes, it is hard to tell whether the person whom the message was intended to receive the intended message. The main aim of this research is to establish language used in updating the WhatsApp status and whether the status expresses the thoughts and feelings and whether those sending the messages think that the intended audience have read and understood the message as was passed in the status.

## Methodology

A qualitative exploratory online interview was designed. In a qualitative interview, the researcher is the instrument for the collection of data (Salmons, 2014). Conscious efforts were made to insert valid and ideally objective approach to the interviews. The interviews also rely on direct and immediate interactions between the participants and the researcher; hence the researcher drew on the trust, thoughtful questioning, reflective listening, and perspective probing to get the participants to reveal their thoughts and motives for posting their statuses. The researcher purposefully targeted 5 respondents for Ewe status and 10 for English who had posted status updates. These respondents were sufficient for the study as the researcher's aim was not on generalizing the findings to a wider population, but on exploring a new phenomenon (Higginbottom, 2004). Purposive sampling was used to ensure that the sampled participants had the best knowledge on the topic under study. The respondents targeted were above the age of

18 years and were from selected Ewe Communities in Ghana. The informed consent to take part in the online interview was sought. Data collection was performed over WhatsApp due to the emergency remote situation currently prevailing globally (COVID-19) and also for the fact that the study is focused basically on WhatsApp. Text-based communication was done where typed instant messages or words were used which were secured because the post and responses to the questions and answers were done on devices. Ethical, respectful and accurate data collection was adhered to by limiting the questions to only those that were relevant to the purpose and questions of the research study.

The collection of data began with a screen shot of the different WhatsApp Status updates. The researcher then replied to the status updates by asking the respondents why they posted those messages, for which the messages were meant for and whether or not they thought the targeted individual or persons read or understood the intended messages. In some cases, the respondents seemed hesitant to provide their responses, but further probing enabled the researcher to get response where the researcher asked them 'why' or 'am still waiting for your response.' All the targeted respondents were able to respond to the interview questions. The study used qualitative content analysis approach to describe and explore the phenomenon. An abstraction process characterized the analysis of data as concepts were created through the researcher's insight and intuitive action (Elo et al, 2014). The organization of concepts was loosely based on the speech act theory where different motives for speech in computer messaging communications were used (Faizal et al., 2014). One limitation of the study was on the limitation of computer-mediated communication where the human qualities inherent to interviews are differently experienced as technology delimits the form of communication.

## Results and Discussion

A total of 15 WhatsApp status updates were obtained from the respondents. The first major categorization of these messages was based on the language of communication used by the speaker. The presentation of results will be done based on first the language used by the senders and then the type and motive for sending the message.

### English status updates

Out of the fifteen status updates, ten were posted in English and five were posted in Ewe language. The researcher also observed that the senders of the messages which they had typed themselves tended to use shortened versions of some words such as 'u' instead of 'you' and 'tank' instead of 'thank' as in the status in figure 1 below posted by respondents 1.

On asking the respondent the motivation for posting this status in this writing, he first laughed before explaining, "So a lady wanted a favour which I declined, and she decided to embark on an emotional blackmail. That I wouldn't find a kind cos she treats me best in bed per her judgment. I sent her this message and decided to put it on my status. Dasooooorrr' overall, he claimed that the lady wanted to suck his dick in return for a favour and he refused, and he used his status to target her. On asking about his view of using language to communicate their feelings to others he argued 'The importance of communication in all aspects of life cannot be over emphasized. The choice of language does the magic.'

This is an expressive status where the sender was expressing his thoughts or feelings; hence the researcher

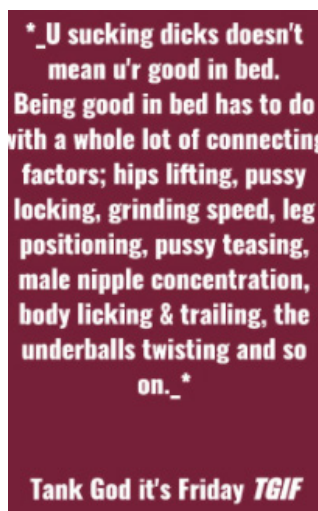


Fig. 1. Respondent 1

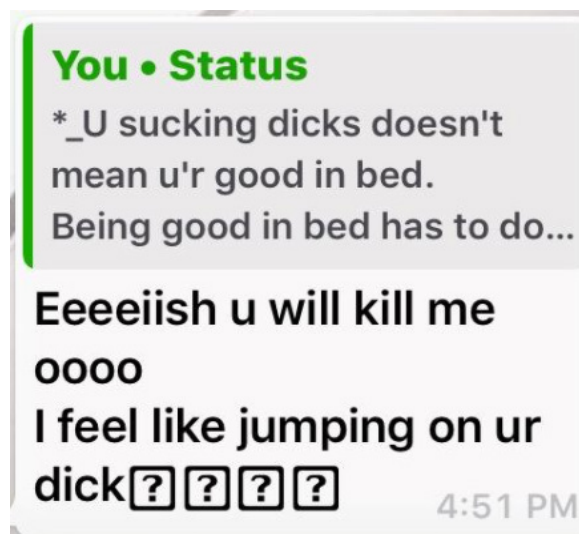


Fig. 1A. Reaction of targeted audience to figure 1

further sought to determine whether the targeted individual saw or read the text as expected. The respondent argued that ‘She may not take it seriously because she knows me to be very sarcastic.’ This was reflected in her reply to the status as in figure 1A.

In another status, the respondent type of her status in English chiding one of her contacts whom she claimed was targeting her status. She used emoji to support her status update. The respondent claimed that the status update was about a certain guy who was always posting things. She claimed ‘I know it’s all mine.’ She explained that they had a little disagreement in the past and she knew that it was hers because ‘I was dating his friend before we broke up and he is blaming me that I am the cause of everything.’ When asked whether he read it, she claimed ‘He read it paa’ even though the message was not intended for only him as he was the second person. She argued that she was happy that her intention for posting the message was read though she also called him as well to tell him.

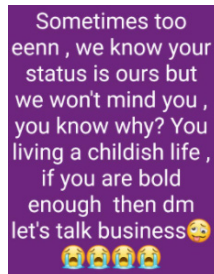


Fig. 2. Respondents 2

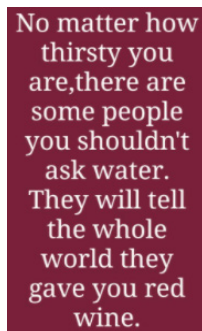


Fig. 3. Respondent 2

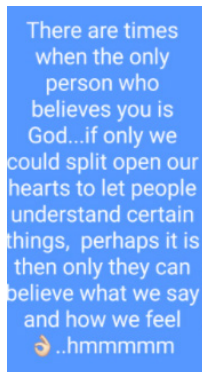


Fig. 4. Respondent 2



Fig. 5. Respondent 2

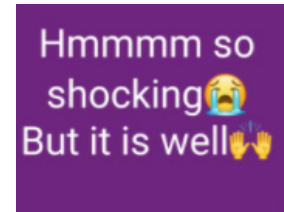


Fig. 6. respondent 2

She further posted other status such as the one in figure 3 where she seemed to be following up on the previous update claiming that some people will only give you a glass of water but will tell the world they gave you red wine. In figure 3, the respondent used good grammar in expressing her warning to others on the ‘malicious’ nature of some people. The same tone was used in her text in figure 4. Respondent 2 also used the platform to post complaining and vowing texts in her status update. In one, she vows to never disappoint herself despite many people disappointing her. Similarly, she complains that it is shocking, but declares that all is well. In her texts, she uses emoji such as the one where she uses an emoji to represent her strength or resolution to never disappoint herself.

In some cases, the respondents got the message posted from other sources such as the web or Instagram, Pinterest, other individuals’ status updates or other sources. These reflected a more sophisticated use of lexical and syntactic choices. This was the case in the status with the second respondent. The third respondent intended to post inspirational and declarative posts as she also posted one which stated that ‘life is a continuous process of learning from experiences both the good and the bad.’ The other one is a cautionary or declarative message.

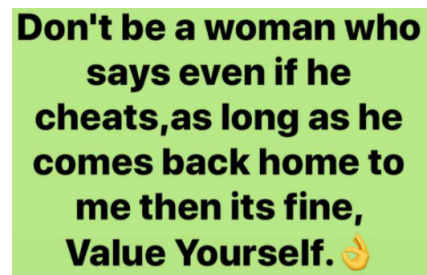


Fig. 7. Respondent 3



Fig. 8. Respondent 3

According to this respondent, the respondent was asked what motivated them to update their status in this writing and she replied ‘Sir a woman have to value herself, a woman who make sure her husband is being treated in a good way do not need that husband to cheat on her, sometimes the woman need to talk aloud’ she was asked whom the message was meant for, either men or women and the lessons learned from it. She replied that it was for men and women both and that ‘A woman normally does not cheat on her husband, so I don’t see any need for a man to cheat on her’. The cautionary tone of respondent 3’s messages continued in her other status update where she posted figure 8. She explained that her post was cautioning young people who need to realize that peace is crucial in homes they build. She argued that young people are not cautious on who they fall in love with and marry and later live to regret their decisions. Therefore, she felt the need to put it out there that one should get to truly know the person they want to marry.

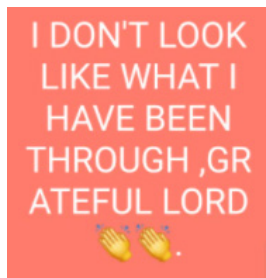


Fig. 9. Respondent 5



Fig. 10. Respondent 4

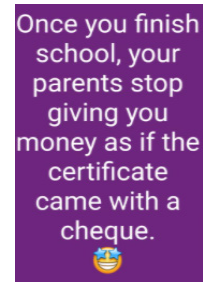


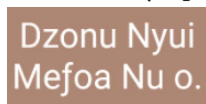
Fig. 11. Respondent 5

In her status update in figure 9, respondent 5 wrote an appreciative message where she praised and thanked the Lord for getting her through what she has been. She also used emoji with two joined hands to reflect her emotional state. Similarly, another respondent used images with texts in English in an expressive message. The image is depicted in figure 10. According to this respondent, the motive for posting this status was “I have a brother whom I always helped in doing some petty things like cleaning and washing his clothes because he was not married by then. I would leave my comfort zone just to go and sleep in his uncompleted building just to monitor the workers in a new area in Accra where there was no light whenever he travelled.... after some few years, a lady whom he had 2 kids with left him. I have decided to take the 2 kids and take care of them. By then he has so many people that he was helping financially but they were not ready to help him. When he heard that I have done my diploma, he asked who sponsored me and I told him I did everything myself. He felt bad but was happy for me. So he told me he would like to sponsor me do my degree. And he helped me. He now helps me financially any time am in need. One day, when I rejected a gift from him, he told me that there were certain things that I have done for him that he has asked people he was helping financially to do for him, but they only give excuses”. Generally, he felt that the little help you rendered before pays today. This was a note of appreciation to her brother, and she was sure that the one she was appreciating read the text and the text could have a positive impact on someone else. Respondent 4 explored a funny approach in their WhatsApp status update as depicted in figure 11 where the respondent used the platform to make fun of the unemployment status in the country where once one finishes school, it is expected that the parents will continue supporting them, but this is not the case as the parents immediately stop funding the child’s life when school is over yet the youth lack a means of supporting themselves.

### Ewe language status update

The researcher also found that the respondents tend to use their local dialect to post their WhatsApp status updates.

For instance, respondent one posted the text in figure 12. The text in figure 12 means “A Quality Bead Doesn’t Make Noise”. This was posted as a follow-up to the chiding message to the woman he explained was trying to emotionally blackmail him. This is an Ewe saying which means that something that is of high quality does not go around praising or boasting about its skills or quality. The respondent argued that ‘Sometimes, sayings in local dialect are best presented in its original form rather than translating it as it may lose its intended meaning and may not be understood in the intended context. In this case, I knew that the person I was targeting understands Ewe language and this saying in particular; hence the impact would be even greater’. When asked whether the message was read and understood by the target audience, the respondent was adamant that the intended target audience had indeed read and understood that she was the main reason why I posted the text.

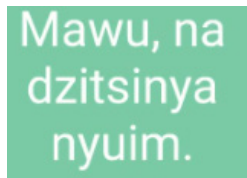


Dzonu Nyui  
Mefoa Nu o.

Fig. 12. Respondent 1

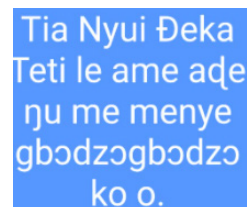


Fig. 13. Respondent 5



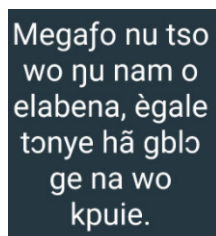
Mawu, na  
dzitsinya  
nyuim.

Fig. 14. Respondent 2



Tia Nyui ðeka  
Teti le ame aɔe  
ŋu me menye  
gbodzogbodzo  
ko o.

Fig. 15. Respondent 4



Megafo nu tso  
wo ŋu nam o  
elabena, ègale  
tonye hã gblo  
ge na wo  
kpuie.

Fig. 16. Respondent 2

Respondent 5 also posted their status update in Ewe language where she was mostly grateful to God. This translates to ‘Lord, I thank you for this bright day you have once again given me. Lord, help me to end it well.’ Respondent 5 explained that her message was an appreciative note to God who they felt had given them good health and enabled them to experience a new day. The message was directed to God. This translates to “Give me a good conscience Lord”. In figure 14, the second respondent is appealing to the Lord to give her a good conscience. She claims that she felt overwhelmed with all the things in her life and the challenges she was facing in addition to the negative feelings she perceived from some of her acquaintances. The message was not targeting anyone, but was a plea to God. The respondent was also asked why they chose Ewe language in posting their status and she argued that she felt that using Ewe best reflected her feeling at the time and wanted the same to be conveyed to the target audience.

The status in figure 15 translates to “See a single good in someone but not always weaknesses”. Where respondent 4 was appealing or declaring to others to see the good in others and not only their weaknesses. The respondent claimed that this message targeted those who always see the worse in others. She felt that the message was passed through and that those who read the message understood her intentions. This translates to “Do not talk to me about them because from here, you are going to talk to them about me”. The respondent claimed that the message was for those who love gossiping to her about others as she felt that once they were done, they will go out and do the same to others about her. This was a warning message to people.

The main aim of the research was to establish whether the status expresses the thoughts and feelings and whether those sending the messages think that the intended audience have read and understood the message as was passed in the status update. The findings revealed that the WhatsApp status updates were done in mainly two languages: Ewe and English. Most status updates were in English with only a few using Ewe language. The main reason for selecting a specific language was associated with the best approach where the messages being communicated could be best understood by the target audience. It is also evident that the respondents’ choice of language to communicate their intended message was not based on the perception and understanding of the other people who may view the status, but only those whom the messages were being communicated across to. Therefore, the choice of language to use in communicating such texts and emotions was intentional.

The study also found that the respondents posted different types of texts or images on their status updates.

Previously, literature had revealed that there are different intentions by the users of social media when posting status (Faizal, et al., 2014). In this study, assertive texts where individuals were complaining by expressing their inner thoughts and turmoil were the most common ones. As seen in one case, the respondent posted a graphic and detailed complaint venting his frustrations. Similarly, others also used the platform to blame others while others used their status updates to give thanks to either God or a loved one who had done something for them. For example, one respondent used the platform to chide an acquaintance who she claimed was making remarks targeted at her using his WhatsApp status. She called him out to have a direct conversation with her. Directive updates were also prevalent in the status updates as some of the respondents were commanding or requesting, advising, and making recommendations to their contacts on different issues. For instance, one of the respondents gave advice to women and young people on issues of marriage cautioning them to be keen when deciding whom to get married to. Updates where the respondents were committing themselves to something were also evident where they made declarations and vows for themselves as one respondent indicated that she would never disappoint herself as others have. Others also used their status updates to make fun of situations such as unemployment.

With regards to whether the updates communicated the intended messages to the recipients or the target audience, majority of the respondents believed that their messages were received as intended. They argued that those reading the messages would understand the message and decode it accordingly. In some cases, however, the respondents may not have taken the message with the seriousness it deserved especially where the target perceived the sender to be a sarcastic person who makes jokes about different issues. In this case, WhatsApp status updates did not serve as an effective platform for passing the intended message. However, one respondent felt the need to follow up on the status update with a phone call to the intended recipient to emphasize her message. This implies that in some cases, the targeted recipient may not understand that the message was meant for them or what the sender intended to say; hence decoding of the message may be done wrongly distorting the meaning of the sentence especially when personal messages are delivered through a public platform such as WhatsApp status.

## Conclusion

The study concludes that the WhatsApp status updates served different purposes for different individuals. For

some, it is a platform where they can express their gratitude to God and to their friends and relatives, complain about issues facing them in their social life or directly caution others by giving out pieces of advice.

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