Examining the Social Media Discourse: Towards a Linguistic Study of Facebook Posts Among a Selected Group of Kenyan Internet Users

Florence Muthoni Mwithi
Department of Literary and Communication Studies, Laikipia University, Kenya

Abstract
The sheer online ubiquity of Facebook is astounding. Facebook is changing the way billions of people in the world relate to one another and share information. A rapidly growing body of research has accompanied the meteoric rise of Facebook as researchers from diverse fields carry out studies on the site. This paper recognises the utility of FB as a novel tool to examine and interpret linguistic features for a selected group of Kenyan FB users. The article discusses and analyses the linguistic features in Facebook posts. Herring's (2004) Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) theoretical framework is applied to analyse the linguistic features. Online questionnaires were used to obtain data.

Keywords: CMDA, Facebook, FB, Kenya, linguistic features

Introduction

In general, Facebook (FB), and indeed, Social Network Sites have come under attack as the cause of linguistic deterioration. This paper examines what linguistic features are standard among Kenyan FB users, what identities these FB users present and what motivates them to use FB. The article, therefore, provides many new opportunities for studying human behaviour that previously had to rely on behaviours that were difficult to assess (for example, making friends, chatting). The behavioural residue left on Facebook provides a compelling source of measurable behaviour traces (Graham et al. 2011). It is helpful to think of Facebook as an ongoing social activity database with added information in real-time.

This discussion begins with linguistic features common among Kenyan FB users then proceeds to analyse the marked linguistics features of eight respondents. The sample consists of 8 purposively selected FB friends who are assigned the symbols F and M to indicate female and male Facebook respondent or participant and the numbers 1, 2, 3, 4 indicates the first, second, third respondent and so on. Therefore, for instance, F1 means first female FB respondent/ participant, and M1 means first male FB respondent.

Linguistic Features of Facebook in Kenya

One approach to analysing internet content that extends the traditional notion of what Content Analysis (CA) is and how it should be applied is Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA). The basic methodology of CMDA is described by Herring (2004) as language-focused content analysis supplemented by a toolkit of discourse analysis methods adapted from the study of spoken conversation and written text analysis. Regarding the implementation of the 'coding and counting' approach to CMDA, Herring (2004) lays out a five-step process that resembles that for classical CA:

1. Articulate research question(s);
2. Select computer-mediated data sample;

3. Operationalize key concept(s) in terms of discourse features;
4. Apply method(s) of analysis to data sample; and
5. Interpret results

The third procedure by Herring (2004) will be applied to analyse the linguistic features. Herring proposes that the researcher ought to operationalise critical concepts in terms of discourse features. To this end, the researcher ended up with the specific features (see table 1), which emerged from the data itself and assisted in the 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 operationalised, 413 words, including 19 emoticons, made up the notable features that the researcher was looking for and aptly called 'linguistic features'. The term 'linguistic features' in this study refers to the marked forms/deviations from the standard forms and not the sum of all the features (standard and variations) as is the norm. The unmarked features (standard forms) do not warrant analysis for the study's intents and purposes. The study's concern is the marked forms; therefore, they will form the basis of research. Table 1 represents the occurrence of the linguistic features in the FB posts.

Table 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
	1. Phonetic spellings	Hapi, gal	58	10.78
	2. Colloquial spelling			
	i. The 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 acronym/ abbreviation	LOL,NKT	18	4.35
	3. Prosodic spellings			
	i. Lengthening practice	Hahaha,greet	30	7.26
	ii. Error in capitalisation	NEED HELP	23	5.56
	4. Homophone spelling	4 U, I another	29	7.02
2	Code-switching: Either: 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 shown in Table 1, non-standard orthographies carry the chunk of the marked linguistic usage on Facebook at 72.88 percent. Non-standard spellings are commonly used and accepted in such a space as social media compared to regulated spaces where standard forms are the norm and highly valued, such as academic and business discourses. Social media has the limitation of 'space' if you consider connecting online via mobile phones or even the computer.

Code-switching has a total of 93 occurrences which amounts to 22.51 percent 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 position of English in Kenya. The last category of the notable linguistic features included the use of smileys and emoticons. As can be seen, the total percentage of this feature is 4.6 percent. This is a tiny percentage when compared to the other components. This particular feature of smileys is available on the FB application. It can be said that most FB users 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 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.

Non-Standard Orthography

The term 'non-standard orthography' is used in this study as a general term for spellings that deviates 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 proper 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 by combining letters and number homophone, reducing initial consonant (initial or final), reducing vowels in spelling, or using of one letter that represents a word.

The analysis of these non-standard orthography reveals some essential points about spelling choices as a communicative resource used to suit different purposes according to each 'social and cultural context of orthographic practices' (Sebba, 1998, p.36). Non-standard spellings are commonly used and accepted in such a space as social media in contrast to regulated spaces where standard forms become the norm and 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 to surmount the said limitations. On the other hand, the recipient of the posts and comments do not enjoy the luxury of time and space and would instead 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 various graphemic resources at their disposal, 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-phonic relations; phonetic spellings, colloquial spellings, prosodic spellings and homophone spellings.

Phonetic Spellings

This term is restricted to standard pronunciation representations not covered by standard orthography, as in English 'wuz' for was (Balhorn, 1998, p.60). Other examples include 'gud' for good, 'gal' for girl and 'thx' for thanks. This category of features consists of words that are spelt 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 that Kiswahili language does not make use of *q* and *x*. Each of the alphabet letters has a pronounceable sound 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 prevalent in CMC texts. The following posts exemplify this first feature.

Text 1

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

In the first post, the word *'hapi'* represents the word 'happy' and spelling it that way represents the word's standard pronunciation. This is also the case with the word *'dei'* for 'day'. Additionally, there is English-Kiswahili codeswitching and also capitalisation to emphasise the wish. This enacts orality. *'Lazania'* is a phonetic representation of how the word 'lasagna' is pronounced. Lasagna is not very common in Kenyan cuisine, and hence it can be expected that spelling the word would be problematic. However, **M1** has created on his profile an identity of a sophisticated elite man. Dining at the Panari hotel denotes affluence. We would therefore expect this participant to at least know the spelling of the foods he orders and eats! Therefore, it is safe to assume that spelling *'Lazania'* is intentional rather than erroneous. 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 popularised 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 about their sound. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the word's relationship to the sound presented is not exactly but an approximation in many cases. Examples of these are in Text 1 *'hapi'* for 'happy' and *'lazania'* for 'lasagna'.

A point to note is that words are written using the phonological spelling without reflecting any shortening in some cases. This shows that although phonological spelling may have been exclusively used in the least effort and mode limitation contexts, it is currently a 'standard' CMC style. The use of phonological spelling is common and is registered in previous researchers like Bodomo (2009: 70) who group it under shortening approaches. Frehner (2008: 104) refers to it as a phonological approximation. From the findings of this study, the English phonological spelling in Kenyan FB posts is advanced by 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 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 seen in the data through the phonological spelling. It is important to reiterate that Sheng and English codes are unavoidable when dealing with Kenya's youth and communication. However, their manifestation has mainly been in speech (verbal) form. It is notable that currently with CMC, emergence such as FB, Sheng and English 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., have fun..!!*>

(I have just started my leave, until February next year (expression of agreement) it is now at my pleasure, happy birthday brother, have fun)

Text 2 has several CMC features; *'feb, sass, mmmh, broz, bro, hav'*. Here, I propose that the recurrent features under discussion may have been influenced by how the words are pronounced in English. Several posts contain words that use /z/ at the suffix position. Some of the words have the /z/ suffix solely as an English marker from a linguistic view. This conclusion is arrived at, based on the observation that the /z/ suffix does not hold any linguistic function in many such words. It acts as a filler to mark the word as being English. Despite this, there are many other cases 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 to not only replace the suffix *s* but also to mark the word as English. 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 note is that some English words 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: s*hagz* (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 2.

Table 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	Have no money

Source: FB Wall Posts of the eight Participants

Colloquial Spellings

Colloquial spellings are used as a cover term to represent 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 the work of Tagliamonte and Denis (2008) on Instant Messaging. Some of the colloquial spellings observed include: *lol* (laugh out loud), *nkt* (expression of clicking to show disgust), *haha* (expression of laughter). 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 a consonant (initial or final) or reduction or deletion of vowels in spellings and conventional SNSs spellings like abbreviations and acronyms as *'nkt, omg'* and *'LOL'* . These types of spelling can further be divided into three subtypes that are discussed hereafter.

a) Omission of Consonant at Word-Initial or Word-Final

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

Text 3

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

In 'happy.day' the consonants 'rth' are omitted. The compound word 'birthday' has been written in non-standard orthography several times. 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 conventionalised.

Text 4

M2: <*It ticks me when u enjoy me 4 watchin anime do I enjoy u for watching 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)

M2*: <Live ur life>* (live your life)
F4: *< I'll be there. Niko job kesho Hadi kedoo 1.30pm. Then we'll Kuja watch out great team take those madmen 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 tale those madmen 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 (2006) as cited in Barasa (2010) findings of reducing consonant at word-initial or final as a standard feature of spelling in online language. The other colloquial spellings are *'anime'* for 'animation' and *'ur'* for 'your'. *'Nytnyt'* is one of the variations of the word goodnight used by the participants. More colloquial spellings include *'omg' for 'oh my god', 'lol' for 'laugh out loud.* F4's post in this text has omitted letters in spelling.

The following is a classic use of FB language. There is codeswitching 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 to differentiate themselves from being seen as 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 fashionable, and this comes off through her language choice. Her choice also sees this young, sophisticated trait 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 humour. The capital letters emphasise as well as foregrounds the gravity of the consequences of bleaching one's skin.

b) Reduction or Omission of a Vowel in Spelling

The next sub-feature under colloquial spellings supports findings from other researchers (Ross, 2006; Baron, 2008) would be the reductions or omissions of vowel in spelling. Some of the examples are as follows:

Text 5

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 (people) too.

In the post made by **M1**, the word *'people'* is shortened to *'pple'*. Similarly, there is a reduction in spelling for the words *'Kenya shillings'* to *'kshs'* a conventional short form for the same word. However, the dollar currency lacks a conventional shortened form because it is not an everyday word in use and therefore not easy to recognise 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 recognise. 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 a lot of money. Not all words can have their vowels omitted, only the ones which will be recognisable 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 others' opinions (see Ross, 2006; Baron, 2008,) who believe that the needs for speed and to be precise are some factors that lead to the varieties of short forms emerging in online communication. With limited space and urgency for spontaneous feedback (Hassan & Hashim, 2009), many online users resorted to this online writing behaviour, which did not meet standard writing form and structure requirements. Findings also demonstrate that most of these words with vowels omitted are among common words that people use in their daily conversations.

The first visual used is a picture of a wastebasket with bundles of 1000 Kenyan Shillings. (see visual 1). **M1** posts that he wishes God would bless him with such money, then he would be able to tithe and give some of the money to other people. From the visual, what is interesting is the storage of the money; a waste paper basket. The graphic is contradictory, as Janks (2010) observed of all visuals. On the one hand, rich men store their money in safes, not in the open and certainly not in cheap storage like waste paper baskets. Could it be that **M1** does not have a rich man's imagination to think of a sophisticated safe to keep his newly acquired money, or is it a case of having too much money until it seems as if you are disposing of some it in a wastepaper basket? These are some of the contradictions that visual 1 draws and leaves the interpretation open to the audience.

Visual 1

c) Conventional SNS acronym/ abbreviation

These spelling types are spellings that have been used in SNSs so often until they have been conventionalized and seem to be used by majority users and are easy to recognize when used.

Text 6

F3: *< LOl wabbz, uliniona kitambo sana!>*

(laugh out wabbz loud, you saw me a long time ago, exclamation mark)

M3: *<* *feeling inspired. Another first from KDF...Pongezi rtd MG Gordon Kihalangwa...head of immigration>*

(emoticon for feeling awed, feeling inspires. Aother first from Kenya Defence Forces…congratulations Retired Major Gordon Kihalangwa)

'LOL' or *'lols'* is a conventional spelling synonymous with SNSs, not just for the contraction of the words 'laugh out loud' but more for the meaning of the expression. It carries with it the action of laughter that the user wishes to convey. Whenever that particular spelling occurs, laughter is evoked. '*KDF'* –Kenya Defence Forces and *'rtd'*- retired are common acronyms used with regard to the uniformed personnel in Kenya. However, the acronym *'MG'* for the rank of major is not common but can be understood from the context. The most popular acronyms found in the current research are *LOL*-'Laugh out loud' (8 units), '*ASAP'*-'As soon as possible' (1 unit) and '*RIP'*- 'Rest in peace' (3 units) (2) '*NKT'* (4 units). This is very much similar with online language acronyms found by many early researchers such as Squires (2010) who found some popular acronyms such as *'LOL'* (laugh out loud) *'brb'* (be right back), 'omg' (Oh my God) and '*wtf' (*what the f**k).

Tagliamonte and Denis (2008) in studying the patterns of online language also found only two prominent acronyms in the entire corpus which are the *'LOL* and *OMG'*, but very few instances of other stereotyped forms, including '*BRB* and *WTF'* (swear words). One interesting finding regarding the features of acronyms and abbreviations in this research is that the total number of them (eighteen) is relatively small compared to the corpus involved

in this study (7680 words). This shows a similar pattern with the other findings from various online communication settings employed by English native speakers (see among others, Baron, 2004, 2006; Tagliamonte and Denis, 2008; Squires, 2010). Baron (2004), for instance, found a very small number of acronyms i.e., 90 acronyms in 12,000 words of online conversations among a group of American students where most of the features occurred only once in the entire conversation. With only thirty-one abbreviations altogether.

Therefore, it is significantly proven that acronyms might be a common feature in online communicative language but the use is actually not preferred by most English speakers in various online communication settings. As findings of this research also show, the same results and tendency, the conclusion is that acronyms and abbreviations are not a prominent feature of online communicative language among young Kenyan Facebook users. It supports Squires (2010) as he concludes that the patterns of online communicative language are basically not related to certain group of users or influenced by the features of the internet itself. 'The construct of internet language glosses over many different patterns of variation in an extremely large sphere of discourse with many different types of speakers, the heterogeneity of which is typically erased' (Squires, 2010, p. 483).

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 7

M1:<*Poa headn hm nw*>
(okay heading home now)
M1:<*Sawa,drive safe, nietele kiveti*> (okay, drive safe, I am waiting for my wife)

In the first post, **M1** begins in Kiswahili then switches to English. In his second post, he also begins in Kiswahili then English, then finally switches to Kamba, which is a vernacular in Kenya. As mentioned earlier, there are several languages available for the Kenyan FB user to communicate with. Therefore, the user picks from the vast repertoire of languages to fit into his purposes. Familiarity with English in the spoken medium often incurs a more frequent use of the language in the written medium, where a good knowledge of English, particularly of the informal variety and the spelling norms becomes much more essential. The latter aspect of the written medium may discourage people from resorting to this variety, yet, when in a reasonably safe environment (non-threatening and informal like CMD), non-native users of English as an international language apply this language more readily.

The electronic media, which are relatively informal, or at best semi-formal (Crystal, 2006; Baron 2008), certainly encourages 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 on Facebook, where the users used code-switching less as compared to the use of English. Further, the same 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 be a

(subconscious) adjustment to the Facebook context and a community of practice type of behaviour.

Facebook, as a social network, whose primary purpose is to connect people rather than separate them, would prompt strategies that bring people closer together. Therefore, codeswitching 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. In general, English is a language of international communication and the most frequent language used in the CMC (cf. Crystal, 2006; Graddol, 2006) as a community of practice marker (cf. Trousdale, 2010). English just like Kiswahili and vernacular, as the discussed posts demonstrate, also bring together those who already speak the same language, thereby acting 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 for the following reasons. Firstly, due to familiarity with the language; secondly, the enormous roles it plays; thirdly, the sense of safety and acceptance; and lastly, it is a CMD marker. Kiswahili is similarly very familiar to most Kenyans who know it and use it. The language situation in Kenya is such that although English and English share a co-official status, English plays more roles than Kiswahili or even vernacular. English has a covert prestige and is a marker for social class, education, technology, style and sophistication. The FB group chosen for the study consists of literate professionals and as such, their language of choice is mostly English, signalling their high educational, social and economic status.

In as much as the FB group in the study choose to use English as their first language choice, the members seem to also be contesting and mediating this hegemony through codeswitching and use of Sheng. In the current study, the participants contest this linguistic hegemony by asserting vernacular and appropriation of both English and Kiswahili to their circumstances. This is in agreement with Nabea (2009) who opines that the masses have mediated and contested this hegemony through abrogation of assertions in the English and African language. This has been through the appropriation of both English and Kiswahili to the people's circumstances and patois evolution like Sheng and English. Consider the posts that follow:

Text 8

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..)

Text 8 exemplifies the kind of appropriation of English and Kiswahili made by the FB participants. **F2** Kiswahili-English codeswitching post reads as if she is 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 the English translation *'it is being a mother.*

Text 9

M1:*<Kadrink kau ongele itweke madrink Ngaema ukaaathima muilea kwituua……. Nuenda nithingitye mutwee!!>*

(translation from Kikamba) add on to that drink, so that they become many drinks. If I do not bless it, you will have diarrhea, do you want me to shake my head?)

M1*: <Ndumei mbeu....tumai vaa kwakwa mpesa.....ngatwaa>*

(translation from Kikamba)send me your seed….send to my mpesa…. Iwill take it>

M1*:< English was Kamba xxx >*
M1*:ENTER THE FEVER*
(capitalisation for emphasis)

MI in text 9, by choosing to code-switch (Kikamba-English) becomes very expressive and humorous. Kikamba is one of the forty-seven indigenous languages of Kenya spoken mostly by people in lower eastern Kenya. The cultural nuances come by when communicating in Kikamba rather than if the post was written in 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 (1995 p. 302-305):

1. Least effort and mode limitation: A significant reason for codeswitching 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.
2. Rapidity: A major characteristic of code-switching is that the switched word is the first one that the user thinks of.
3. Search for accuracy: Some words or phrases are challenging 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.

The Use of Various Symbols and Emoticons
Emoticons are also seen as a feature in online conversations among young Facebook users in Kenya, although it is not popular. With a total number of 19 units of emoticons being recorded in total, it is assumed that emoticons carry some functions that convey particular messages and hidden meaning in online conversations.

Text 10
M4: *<do I consider myself single: NO am I in a relationship: NO*
have I ever been in a serious relationship for more than two weeks:
NO WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH ME?
:-( ]
F2: *< Thank you, Lord, for the permit! I am a conqueror through Christ Jesus who strengthens me :) >*

Text 10 above shows how the use of emoticon **:-(** helps to show a sad emotion. M4 is not happy with his love life and therefore to best capture his emotion, since FB is not face to face communication, he uses an emoticon. On the contrary, **F2** feels like a conqueror, is happy, and shows the same by using a smiley. Of interest is that there are already in-built smileys and emoticons that FB affords its users, but the users have chosen to draw them independently in the two instances. The Kenyan users prefer the self-generating type. This captures Kenyan FB users' innovative nature and desire to be uniquely expressive rather than mechanical by choosing what (custom built emoticon) is already there.

Emoticons help users have more control of the tone of message they would like to convey. Emoticons are also seen as a complement to a message as they appeared in some

sentences being produced online. The traditional smiley (:-) was used twice and the sad face (:-) was used once. The use of emoticons somehow signifies Kenyan youths' creativity in playing with the symbols displayed on the keyboard in expressing their feelings and emotions. The emoticons are used to strengthen the message, while others represent a specific tone of voice such as happiness and sadness. Derks et al. (2008) believe that online users have clear intentions or reasons for using certain emoticons in their conversations in synchronous and asynchronous online conversations. Some of the reasons or what they describe as 'motives' would be 'expressing emotion, strengthening the message, regulating the interaction, and putting into perspective' (Derks et al., 2008, p.386).

The reason for Smileys and Emoticons' popularity in IM and SNS is that users feel obligated to post their emotional reactions graphically just as if they were physically present. The use of Emoticons and Smileys is one of the most creative practices among CMC users. They were introduced to CMC as a necessity immediately after it became clear that text messages were challenged in communicating emotions and body movements to make the communication as real as possible. This enables the messages to be creatively loaded with all the real-time graphic information that is very vivid to the message recipient. Consider the post below:

Text 11

F3: <*Just to encourage anyone going through a hard/rough time, someone feeling like they have reached the very end. ..... My/Our God is faithful, and His delay does not mean denial.He has done it for me & my family & He will surely do it for you. Be encouraged!!* >

F3: < —  *feeling content.* >

M2: <  *who is in bomet. holla at me?* >

(Smiley emoticon, who is in Bomet, call me)

F3 uses the smiley emoticon to register her contentment. The emoticon follows the previous post where she notes God's faithfulness to her and her family; that is why she is happy and content, and she shows this through the choice of the smiley. **M2** is in a region in Kenya called Bomet and is registering his joy at being there through the smiley and would like for his friends in that region to call him up and hook up with him.

Conclusion

Language evolution is seen as an ongoing process. 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. It was found that the online language of FB users in Kenya could be summarized as consisting of marked linguistic features which includes non-standard orthography, code switching and emoticons. The nature of online language of FB in Kenya conforms with the ordinary online language patterns given by early researchers although some of these features are localised to the Kenyan situation, a case in point is the code-switching from English to Kiswahili, English to vernacular and the use of vernacular in whole posts. Of contrast also is that Kenyan FB language use utilises very few emoticons and acronyms.

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