

Impoliteness in Language Use: An Investigation into Cyber- Bullying in Nigeria.

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ABSTRACT

Impoliteness is considered as an act intentionally planned to attack other faces. It occurs when a speaker/writer intentionally uses language so as to have a face-attack on the listener/reader. Little research has been done in the area of impoliteness as it relates to language use. As the number of internet/cyber bullying is increasing daily, there is need to see how such could be curbed in our contemporary digital society. Cyber bullying is a relatively new area of research and little is known about it in Nigerian schools. The present research has therefore, come to fill this gap in knowledge. With the use of new technologies, so many people today, students inclusive, have expanded traditional bullying techniques such as those seen in schools into the digital environment. The present study examined impoliteness in the language use of interlocutors in the internet. It explored those linguistic usages which denote impoliteness and which consequently result in internet bullying. The study explicated usages that are considered polite and impolite. Some research questions that guided the study were: To what extent does cyber bullying manifest through the use of the English language? What are the linguistic features of cyber bullying in Nigeria? What are the ideologies that cyber-bullying denote? The study was limited to internet/cyber- bullying that manifest in Facebook, and WhatsApp and excerpts of speech events from such forms of internet bullying were analyzed using the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). In addition, the researcher conducted oral interviews on first and second year students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka to ascertain the extent to which they indulge in or experience cyber bullying. The research revealed that certain linguistic forms evidenced in the English language of internet users embody bullying. Again, cyber bullying manifests greatly at different levels of linguistic analysis such as grammatical, syntactical and semantic levels. In addition, there are power relations that are inherent in cyber-bullying. The researcher recommended certain measures that could be used to reduce cyber bullying to the barest minimum since it could result to chaos and anarchy in our digital society.

Keywords: Internet Bullying, Masquerading, Facebook, Critical Discourse Analysis, Impoliteness

INTRODUCTION

The power and social impact of the internet is indeed enormous and revolutionary. Aside physical bullying and torture, there is now a form of bullying which has become increasingly common especially among teenagers [1,2,3]. This form of bullying is regarded as online bullying and it is termed cyberbullying [4]. This type of bullying has emerged as a result of internet use. the role of internet in human society cannot be underestimated. [4,5,6] opines that 'its

influence in the contemporary world has been so monumental that hardly is there any who has not experienced its impact in one way or the other, directly or indirectly, actively or passively [7]. Cyberbullying is a form of internet bullying which involves the use of information and communication technologies, such as e-mail, cell phone and pager text messages, instant messaging, defamatory personal Web sites, and defamatory online personal

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polling Web sites, to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behavior by an individual or group that is intended to harm others [8]. Cyberbullying is a form of harassment using electronic means [9]. One of the ways through which internet bullying occurs is through the use of language. The English language therefore, is an indispensable tool for national unity, integration and global communication. In fact, Baldeh referred to it as “a window on the world” (7). It was [9] who opines that: all communication, to a greater or lesser extent, is an exercise in control, an attempt to assert one’s own

position and to persuade the other to accept it. When somebody says, or writes something, it is with the intention of getting the addressee, the second person party to think or feel or act in a certain way (67). The internet has been integrated into the human society as a major communication system globally. It offers a range of services such as the electronic mail (e-mail), internet relay chat, search engine, internet broadcasting, video-conferencing etc. The dominant language use in communication in the internet is mostly English [10].

Conceptual Framework

Cyberbullying

[4] defined cyberbullying as: the use of information and communication technologies such as e-mails, cell phone and pager text messages, instant messaging (IM), defamatory personal Web sites, and defamatory online personal polling Web sites, to support, deliberate, repeated, and hostile behavior by an individual or group, that is intended to harm others (8). Cyberbullying can be more devastating than traditional forms of bullying due to the much larger audience online (Strom & Strom, 2005) and because children now cannot even escape their bullies by going home to a safe environment. Cyberbullying is quite different from school bullying. This is because electronic communications allow cyberbullying perpetrators to maintain anonymity and

give them the capacity to post messages to a vast audience. Although the anonymity afforded to children by the Internet may be a very useful social crutch for those who are less sociable in person, it also opens up a door for the misuse of technology as children can say or do things that they would not normally do in person with little chance of having their identity revealed. While harmless in many occasions, this new method of technological interaction can lead children to experiment with aggressive behaviors. Cyberbullying is still a relatively new phenomenon, but the little data currently in existence indicate that the negative effects of cyberbullying are at least similar to those of more traditional forms of bullying [11].

Ideology

[12] defines hegemony as a complex body of ideas, beliefs or, values and insights we hold as individuals and groups that influence and direct our behavior and serve as a basis for our actions as individuals and as groups. However, Watson & Hill (2006) defined ideology as ‘a system of ideas and beliefs about human conduct which has normally been simplified and manipulated in order to

obtain popular support for certain actions and which is usually emotive in its reference to social action (129). Language is used to propagate dominant ideological positions such as the use of offensive language, discrimination against ingroup and outgroup, to show biased representation or misrepresentation and negative ‘self’ presentation and ‘other’ presentation[6].

Hegemony

Ideologies thrive and are sustained by hegemony; a concept credited to an Italian political thinker, Antonio Gramsci to mean ‘winning or manufacture of

consent (or consensus) in the exercise of power [8] as quoted in [5]. According to McGregor:

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our words are not neutral. They convey how we see ourselves as a profession, our identity, knowledge, values and beliefs and our truths. Our discourse permeates everything we do. McGregor suggested that hegemony has the capability of

making unbalanced power relations and portrayals of social groups to be commonsense, normal, and natural when in actual fact the reality is prejudice, injustice and inequities.

Politeness

Politeness can be defined as showing awareness and consideration of another person's face. We think of politeness in general terms as having to do with ideas like being tactful, modest and nice to other people. If we say something that represents a threat to another person's self-image, that is called a face-threatening

act [8]. If a person who has no social power threatens another person, then that person is performing a face-threatening act. However, when someone says something that lessens the possible threat to another's face, it can be described as a face-saving act. According to Yule, face can be negative or positive.

Theoretical framework

Critical discourse analysis

Critical Discourse analysis (CDA) sees power as a central condition in social life. According to Wodak, CDA means 'not taking things for granted', being skeptical about representations in texts and discourse, being self-reflective in deconstructing texts in order to make opaque ideological positions transparent, seeing through the hidden agenda represented in texts, diagnostic reading of texts to separate ideologies from official meaning of linguistic items. For instance, when two persons are involved in any form of casual conversation (as can be

seen in Facebook, WhatsApp, ordinary face to face conversation), each participant is concerned with how to make his/her viewpoint dominate the other. According to [11], language is entwined in social power in a number of ways: it indexes power, expresses power, is involved where there is contention over power and where power is challenged. Power does not derive from language, but language can be used to challenge power, to subvert it, to alter distribution of power in the short and long term (157).

Research questions

Cyberbullying has become particularly alarming because the perpetrators are able to permeate into areas where victims previously were able to escape torment, making adolescents feel as though they have no escape from the harassment [12]. To guide the study, the researcher provides answers to the following research questions:

- i. To what extent does cyber bullying manifest through the use of the English language?
- ii. What are the linguistic features of cyber bullying in Nigeria?
- iii. What are the ideologies that cyber-bullying denote?

Empirical framework

Few studies on cyberbullying have been conducted to date, consequently, the most appropriate means of dealing with this new phenomenon is yet to be discovered especially in Nigeria. However, previous studies on cyberbullying have been reviewed below: [6] researched on cyberbullying in high schools. He investigated high school students' beliefs and behaviours that are associated with cyberbullying. His study

was anchored on four perspectives which he enumerated as: (a) What happens after students are bullied? (b) What do students do when witnessing cyberbullying? (c) Why do victims not report the incidents? (d) What are students' opinions about cyberbullying? [8] investigated the positive attitudes toward cyberbullying and its facilitators, anonymity, strength differential and being a victim of cyber incivility. The

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research was conducted on 481 higher education students (53.4% females and 46.2% males; 56.8% working and 43.2% without any work experience). Results revealed that when one perceives that there is a difference in strength (either physical or in terms of status), he/she might be more inclined to develop attitudes for kidding or taking revenge for the past behaviors he had encountered in the past. They found out that being humiliated is found to increase the positive attitude toward kidding and being ignored in cyber environment is found to increase the positive attitude toward tit for tat. [6] carried out a study to ascertain the awareness of cyber laws among Singaporeans. Shari Kessel Schneider et al investigated 20 406 ninth-through twelfth-grade students in MetroWest Massachusetts completed surveys assessing their bullying victimization and psychological distress, including depressive symptoms, self-injury, and suicidality. Their results. A total of 15.8% of students reported cyberbullying and 25.9% reported school

bullying in the past 12 months. A majority (59.7%) of cyberbullying victims were also school bullying victims; 36.3% of school bullying victims were also cyberbullying victims. Victimization was higher among non-hetero sexually identified youths. Victims report lower school performance and school attachment. Controlled analyses indicated that distress was highest among victims of both cyberbullying and school bullying (adjusted odds ratios [AORs] were from 4.38 for depressive symptoms to 5.35 for suicide attempts requiring medical treatment). Victims of either form of bullying alone also reported elevated levels of distress [7]. Although not much has been done in the area of cyberbullying, out of the few studies conducted, none concentrated on the language of cyberbullying. Again, no work on cyberbullying (to the best of my knowledge) has been carried out in Nigeria. This is indeed the gap in knowledge which the present study has come to fill.

METHODOLOGY

The researcher randomly selects data from Facebook, and WhatsApp messages. the study was centred only on internet/cyber- bullying which manifests in Facebook and WhatsApp messages. Excerpts of speech events from such forms of social media use were analyzed

Data Analysis and Findings

In view of the research questions raised, the researcher analyzes excerpts of speech events from WhatsApp and Facebook. Words form the rudiments of every language. According [8]:

Not only words can be treated as 'containers' of meaning, or as fulfilling roles in events, they can also have 'relationships' with each other. In every day talk, we often explain the meanings of words in terms of their relationships... we are characterizing the meaning of each word, not in terms of its component features, but in terms of its relationship to other words. This

using the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). In addition, the researcher conducted oral interviews on first and second year students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka to ascertain the extent to which they indulge in or experience cyber bullying.

approach is eused in the semantic description of language and treated as the analysis of lexical relations (116-117).

The following are excerpts of speech events:

If I bite you now, people will say that I am wicked. This is a threatening act that has been used to bully someone. The word 'bite' is connotative as one doesn't actually know what the speaker intends to do to the victim. The main clause of the statement which is '*people will say that I am wicked*' shows that whatever the speaker would do to the listener will be frowned at.

To slap you dey hungry me

Here, the speaker had wished to slap the listener. However, this is not possible since this is an online discussion. It is believed that the listener might feel infuriated at the statement. Worthy of

mention here is the use of pidgin English. The speaker resorts to pidgin to drive home his point or maybe he is incapacitated in the use of standard English.

I go wound you ooo

This is another derogatory statement made to cajole the speaker. This is equally pidgin English.

Amadioha the hour has come!

The speaker invites 'Amadioha, the god of thunder' to strike the listener. This is an insult being meted out on the victim. *Lukadiswan*, this coinage refers to: 'look

at this one' and it literally means that the addressee is incapable of doing something.

Dis is why I use juju on people like you.

The above statement is intended to create fear and panic on the addressee. The speaker sees himself as someone that has magical powers and can easily inflict pain or sickness on people. Invariably, he

plays on the psyche of the addressee. This points to the fact that the victim of cyberbullying can be traumatized; cyberbullying can therefore, have psychological effect on the victim.

I'd slap you but that would be animal abuse.

The speaker refers to the addressee as an animal and for him to slap an animal is 'animal abuse'. The above negates politeness theory. It must be stressed that 'norms of politeness determine whether an utterance is pragmatically sound or not'. This is why people use more of the indirect speech act rather than the direct one which is considered impolite. Consider the following excerpts:

abbreviations, for instance, 'u' stands for 'you', 'iz' refers to 'is', while 'ur' refers to 'your'. These are some of the lexical features that are inherent in such usages. Politeness occupies a central place in social interaction as its absence may cause serious breakdown in communication. Cyberbullying negates politeness ethics. Speakers should also be mindful of what linguists refer to as 'verbal hygiene'. This is to avoid offending the sensibilities of the interlocutors who may be so affected [4]. The victim sometimes does not report to their parents or appropriate authorities for fear of being restrained from internet use. Sometimes, those who bully others face the danger of exposing their personal profile such as pictures and phone numbers on the internet. The victim faces psychological trauma which are consequential. Apart from the use of aggressive words, there is now the use of stickers in cyberbullying. Stickers in most cases contain pictures in addition to words or phrases signal acceptance, disagreement while some are derogatory words or statements. There are lexical items that denote bullying and there are also power relations that are inherent in

Iz doing me like exchanging you for 20 MB data

Is like you have pimples in your brain

I dey beat children oo

Ur condition no get hope

It looks like NEPA is controlling your destiny

Congratulations to you because you have graduated from a fool to an idiot!

I pray God will shine light in your empty head

Your brain seems to be leaking (This is derogatory as one's brain has no leakage)

You need brain service (one wonders how someone can go for brain service)

I thought u were normal

Are you on drugs?

From the above, one notices some usages that are un-English but still embody some meanings. There is also, the use of

Cyberbullying is quite similar to the traditional form of bullying except that cyber bullying can be seen by so many people because of internet use. The present study has examined some of the linguistic items that denote cyberbullying. The researcher found out that there are power relations that are inherent in cyberbullying. The personality

feels he is 'on top' [6].

CONCLUSION

and integrity of the victim are undermined and the victim could be psychological traumatized because of the way he has been addressed. It advised that speakers should be mindful of how they choose and use words to avoid bullying. There are also lexical features of cyberbullying which negate standard English usages.

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