

FACEBOOK STATUS UPDATES: A SPEECH ACT ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed at exploring the communicative functions of status updates on Facebook. Moreover, how identities were established and represented through language were also examined. For this purpose the status updates were analyzed through Searle's Speech Act framework. The sample comprised 60 males and females in the age group of 18-24 years. A total of 171 status updates were collected for 5 consecutive days and then the data were categorized according to the devised coding. The results revealed that status messages were most frequently constructed with expressive speech acts, followed by assertives and directives. In addition, a new category of poetic verses was also found in the data. The findings also showed that various socialization patterns emerge through the sharing of feelings, information and ideas.

Keywords: Facebook; Speech Acts; Status Updates; social media; identity construction

INTRODUCTION

Facebook is a very popular social networking website. There are about 600 million people on Facebook and more people are joining it every day. Pakistan is also not far behind in the Facebook race with the rest of the world. Currently there are 6million Pakistanis on Facebook but according to the latest researches this number is bound to increase*. The popularity of Facebook can be attributed to the fact that according to the latest research more than one million Pakistani users signed up for the social media website during the period of six months from August 2011 to January 2012.

Language and its dynamics on the internet is an area of great interest to many scholars from the field of linguistics, media sciences, psychology and sociology. Crystal (2001) contends that as the focus shifts from technology to people and purpose, the role of language becomes central. 'If the internet is a revolution then there is likely to be a linguistic revolution'.

Social media is interactive in the sense of giving people power to choose what they do- what information they want to communicate and how they would do it (Matheson, 2005). Analysis of media content has an important bearing on our understanding of media technology once we accept that 'media is the message.' Examining media content helps in understanding what and why of communicative mediums. So in the current research the 'medium' that will be explored is the Facebook status updates. Through status updates people achieve a variety of functions. They can serve as a personal journal in which people record their everyday activities, events and experience (Awl, 2011). The way of expression depends on the person as to how they want to express themselves it can be through jokes, quotations or poetry.

Purpose of the Study

The current research will explore the use of language in a context, which in this case is the social networking website Facebook. The researchers aim at studying the communicative functions that emerge from analysis of the status updates. How identities are established and represented through language would also be examined.

* Pakistan Facebook Statistics. Social Bakers from <http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/pakistan> accessed on 9th April, 2012

LITERATURE REVIEW

Clark (1996) asserts that previous research about language took on an 'individualistic perspective', which meant that language production and comprehension was looked on as an isolated event. He further argues that even though there is a single individual who produces the sentence but there has to be someone who is listening to it and acts upon it and there is also the context in which that sentence is produced, so an action performed through language is not produced and comprehended in a vacuum. The very fundamentals of language use are intertwined with social concerns; an understanding of how language is both produced and comprehended is related to the social dimension. So any action performed with language is a social action.

On Facebook mostly people have peer group relations among people they know, or sometimes there are friends who are made online, on that forum people share different interests. Sharing status updates is a way of letting other people know how one feels or what is going on in one's life (Gunter, 2010). So the context for the status updates is the social networking forum and the updates would be the social action which employs language for performing an action (Holtgraves, 2002).

Speech Act Theory

When people speak, they use language to achieve a variety of functions like expressing different emotions, start an argument or even insult someone. All of the 'things' described before can be said to be speech acts: 'acts done in the process of speaking' (Sadock, 2009). For the study of speech acts three things have to be considered (i) language use, (ii) intention of the speaker and (iii) interaction in a social context.

Das (2005: p172) explains that in the framework of Speech act theory there have to be two or more participants speaking the language and making their intentions known. One is the addressor and the other is the addressee. 'Addressor' is the source of the message, examination of this message will make people understand the 'intention or the implication' of the addressor. The 'addressee' is the receiver of the message. They would interpret the message and perform actions accordingly.

According to Sadock (2009), when people communicate, the basic communication framework 'simultaneously' consists of three types of speech acts.

- a. Locutionary act: It means that certain sounds are produced that comprise identifiable words, arranged on the basis of a particular grammar and has a certain sense and reference.
- b. Illocutionary act: 'This is the conventional force associated with the uttering of the words in a particular context.'
- c. Perlocutionary act: This refers to the effects the utterance has on the hearer.

(Holtgraves, 2002: 10-11)

Searle categorizes speech acts according to their illocutionary purpose (i.e) what the speaker is doing with the utterance, how they fit in the world, their expressed psychological state, and their propositional content (ibid). For the current research the taxonomy presented by Searle (1969) will be used because it is comprehensive. According to Searle, there are five categories of speech acts.

Assertive acts

An assertive act counts as an attempt to explain the actual state of affairs comprising phrases used to address a specific idea, proposition or belief. These acts include asserting, concluding, informing, predicting and reporting.

Directive acts

These are employed to get the addressee to do something. For instance, commands, orders, requests and suggestions. (Holtgraves, 2002).

Commissive Acts

In these acts the speakers commit themselves to future actions. The act can be a promise, a simple statement but the function is that the person is committed to the statement s/he has given. The

intention behind commissive acts is that of offering, promising, refusing, vowing and volunteering (Cutting, 2002)

Expressive Acts

These speech acts state what the speaker feels, his/her psychological state. These can be statements of pleasure, pain, likes, dislikes, joy or sorrow.

Declarative

Declarative acts[†] are statements or expressions that change the world by their utterance, for example a minister saying now I pronounce you husband and wife and the judge saying, the court sentences you to ten years imprisonment (Cutting, 2002).

Quotations

These statements refer to the speech acts which the addressor has not originally produced. These could be motivational, inspirational, life quotes.

Poetic verses

This speech act is not a part of the taxonomy given beforehand and is included because it is the need of data categorizations. These express a variety of emotions from joy to sadness, love, loneliness.

Population sample

For the current research 60 participants were chosen in the age group of 18-24 years. Their status updates were collected for 5 days and then categorized according to the devised coding.

Research Approach

The Quantitative approach would be employed in the collection and the categorization of the data. The qualitative approach would be used to compute the percentages and statistics of the categories which will in turn define the communicative functions of FB status updates.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

This section deals with the categorization of the data into the taxonomy given in section 1.3.1. This will help in examining the different communicative and socializing patterns which develop through them. Apart from the categorization, how language employed as a social action will also be studied. The examples will be discussed based on the themes found in the specific category. As Facebook's version used in Pakistan is in English, the dominant language examined is English.

A total of 171 updates were collected and categorized according to their communicative content. Some of them had to be broken into two or more parts because of the difference of the communicative function of the update. Following Nastri *et al.*, (2006), the researchers have also broken up the speech acts into individual parts considering their communicative function and then categorized them into the taxonomy discussed in section 1.4.1. For example,

thanks to all....kal sub sa ho ge mulaqat..same tym same place.....love to being with you guys... take goood care ALLAH sohnayyyyyy da hawaly

Here update is broken according to their communicative intent,

thanks to all **Expressive Speech act**

kal ap sub sa hoga mulaqat..same tym same place **Commissive Speech act.**

love to being with you guys **Expressive speech act.**

take goood care **Directive speech act**

ALLAH sohnayyyyyy da hawaly **Quotation.**

[†] Did not find any data in the collected Status updates which fell in this category.

Some of the status updates will be classified for their individual communicative function and some of these would be considered as one whole. For instance,

A: Siachin giari sector me barfaani toda girne se 150 fouji dab gae..... unki salamti k lye zaroor dua kijye..... ALLAH un sbko apne hifz-o-amaan me rkhe.... Ameen....Sum Ameen..... **Assertive act.**

Here the purpose of the status update is to show support through stating facts.

Expressives

This category deals with what the speaker feels about his/her psychological state. These acts can be statements of pleasure, pain, likes, dislikes, joy or sorrow. 33.33 % of the updates belong to this category, which shows that the expression of emotions is an integral part of self expression through updates. This category present a variety of emotions from joy, love, sorrow and borderom.

Had a great weekend at -----[‡] and -----mad house thanks for all the food , fun , port and laughter

This status expresses the person's appreciation and the joy they felt at the get together.

THANXXXXXX EVERYONEE FORRRRRR WISHING MEEEEE....REALLY APPRECIATE UR WISHESSSS.....THNXXX ALOTTT...:p:p

The analysis reveals that apart from expressing emotions, these types of messages reinforce the bonds of friendship or familial ties in the network.

hate quizzes and making assignments.....just hate,hate, hateeeeeeeeeee..... :(

Annoyed ..

These updates show participants expressing their frustrations, either related to study or due to the new timeline given by Facebook. The data reveals that through status updates people can express a variety of emotions and they know that they are heard among their members. It also seems there is a social presence felt among the members which helps in the self expression process. In the previous researches (Nastri *et al.*, 2006) the percentages for the expressive speech acts was not so high but for the present study this category encompasses the highest categorized updates.

Assertive

These acts include phrases used to address a specific idea, proposition or belief. Speakers commit themselves to something that is true. 28.07 % of the updates belonged to this category. For example

Name a place where dead reporter is called "SHAHEED"
and soldiers on border who sacrifice their lives for this country are called "JAN BAHAQ"
Yes its MEDIA of Pakistan.....

Here the participant is criticizing the media for an idea which goes against their belief. According to Searle (1969), speaker in the assertive speech act puts forward a hypothesis and it can be either true or false. The writer here believes and expresses through criticism of a negative media practice.

class.....

gym today :p

It appears that the participants through status updates are letting their network members know of their activities. This may show availability/unavailability of the participant or just information for other network members. This shows that online Social Networks are an extension of real life identity and people constantly feel the urge to let people know what they are up to.

Directives

The theme of the status updates categorized in this category is commands, orders, requests and suggestions. 18.12% of the updates belonged to this category.

[‡] Names have been removed by the researchers due to privacy.

CAN SOMEONE TELL ME EXACTLY WHEN IS THEEEEE FAREWELLLLLL.....

Here the update is classified as a command as the participant wants the network member to answer his question. The function of status updates can be used to ask questions from the network members as lots of people can be reached through the publishing of a statement which is not the case with SMS (short messaging system) as the same message has to be sent to many people to get the answer. Graphologically the participant has used capitalized words to state his question. When the words are all capitalized in the statement it means that the writer is shouting.

What are some things that you have lost at an event...I lost my tie yesterday.

Whats happening over the weekend? Anyone hiring out a tux? (just curious)

In these updates the writer has shared his experience and wants to know if someone else also has went though the same experience. One other purpose would be that some interesting stories do come up in the experience sharing process. In the second update the participant wants to know what his/her network members are planning over the weekends. Asking questions is also a way of staying connected with people.

dear sickness please go away!

The writer is indirectly addressing the members letting them know that s/he is not feeling well. Here the dynamic of language use on status updates that comes forth is that on the Facebook people can perform a variety of tasks though language. They can complain, share joy and express sadness. This personalization of the forum though language use is an important facet of modern communication technologies today.

Commissives

These are the status updates in which the writers commit themselves to future actions. The updates can be a promise, a simple statement but the function is that the person is committed to the statement s/he has given. The intention behind commissive acts is that of offering, promising, refusing and volunteering. 2.32% of the updates belonged to this category.

..see you

see all u guyz tomorrow

The updates categorized for this category were low as compared to assertive and expressive category. In the above updates the writer is reinforcing the friendship or familial bonds by committing to meeting their network members. This meeting could be physical with class fellows or colleagues meeting up or virtual which mean connecting on the internet or through Facebook.

We will never forget you

You Will Always Be Remembered.

The above updates were related to the Siachin incident and people updated their status to show their support for the families of the victims. The analysis shows that support or commitment is shown not only to network members but in a broad sense at the national level to other people and institutions. Facebook here is being used as a democratic forum where people express their thoughts and opinions. People know that they do not need to go to a newspaper or to a television channel to make their voice heard; they can express themselves through Facebook status updates.

Quotations

Quotations are the updates which the participant has not written. These include quotations, jokes, epigrams etc. 15.21 % of the updates belonged to this category.

at some point you have to realize that some people can stay in your heart, but not in your LIFE.

The mOst painful goodbyes are the Ones that are neva said and neva expLained!!!

The status updates like these are just a way of making other network members feel the participant's presence. It can also be that the writer has read something which s/he feels like sharing it with the members. Quotes shared like these deal with themes like love, relationship, success, inspiration, etc.

Cousins are usually first friends we have as children. No one will ever understand your crazy families like your cousins do even if you haven't talked to them lately.

The example given above is of a forwarded message nature. Here what the network members have to do is that if they agree with their friend they will also share the message as their status update. This is also a way to reinforcing the network bonds.

اللَّهُمَّ رَحْمَتَكَ أَرْجُو فَلَا تَكِلْنِي إِلَى نَفْسِي طَرْفَةَ عَيْنٍ وَأَصْلِحْ شَأْنِي كُلَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا أَنْتَ

and (duration)duration of an eye blink do not leave me for even the ,I hope for Your mercy ,O Allah"
".worship Besides You there is none worthy of .correct my total condition

These updates are a way of asserting and promoting the religious identity of the person. The participant may have read the ayah from the Quran on the internet or from some other source and wants to share the religious experience with their network members.

By the river Piedra I sat down and wept. There is a legend that everything that falls into the waters of this river -- leaves, insects, the feathers of birds -- is transformed into the rocks that make the riverbed. If only I could tear out my heart and hurl it into the current, then my pain and longing would be over, and I could finally forget.....

By The River Piedra
Paulo Coelho

Another variation in the quotes can be quotations from the novels or some other reading material that the participant has read and wants to share it with the network member. The updates in this category not only express ideas but are one of the ways of sharing thoughts and making presence felt on the network.

Poetic Verses

This category was not a part of the categories devised in the previous researches. The researchers had to add the category according to the needs of the current research. This category includes complete poems or some verses from a poem. Only 2.9 % of the updates collected were from this category. The themes can vary from expression of love, sadness, joy and inspiration or support.

Ab Koi Aarzoo Nahi Baki...!
Justuju Meri Aakhri Tum Ho...!

Koi Khwahish Nahi Rahi 'Hasretai'n Bhi Mit Gayi'n...!
Zindagi Tu Ne Mujhe Be-Misaal Kar Dia...!

Here, the participant has shared the poem that s/he had read somewhere and wanted other members to enjoy the poem that s/he has read. People through status updates also share their own written materials which others would enjoy.

Identity Representation on Facebook

The data analyzed in this section shows that Facebook is used as a forum not only for communicating and connecting with people but also as a place where one is being listened to. Here the interesting aspect that comes to light is that online social networking websites work as 'micro blogging' tools which help people express themselves in a variety of ways. So this self expression helps define that virtual forum like Facebook through their participatory and interactive culture are an extension of real life identities. The different examples that have been shared and analyzed beforehand show that people are using the status updates for self expression: to let people in their network know about themselves. 'The personalization, or cultural process of individualization, suggests that digital culture ...is powerfully linked to forms of self-identity, self-expression and self-display (Hills, 2009: p115)'.

This 'self-expression' on Facebook in one way is reinforced through the publishing of status updates. Hence the speech act analysis in one way shows the communicative function of the status and on the other hand the language tells how identities are constructed and represented through them. Hill (2009) asserts that 'attention needs to be paid in the ways in which individuals present, construct, their identities (online)'. The aspect of language analysis being undertaken in the current research reinforces Hill's idea that the different ways in which online identities are constructed have to be studied in order to understand the consumer culture.

In the present study different identities were constructed through the status updates. For example, in the days in which the data was collected the 'Siachin' incident happened. Some people expressed themselves through the updates like:

Siachin sector me barfaani toda girne se 150 fouji dab gae..... unki salamti k lye dua kijye.....
ALLAH un sbko apne hifz-o-amaan me rkhe.... Ameen..

"In the valleys of fire, in the thunder of bombs, there are a few who just do not stop, knowing that they are surrounded by death, knowing that they could leave their wives widows and children orphans .But they just keep on moving because of honour, devotion and death over surrender. Pakistan Army Zindabad.

Here the identity represented is a national identity in which people are showing support for the Army. Not only are they seen praying but supporting the families. Another identity representation is that of a Muslim is highlighted in the first update shared. This identity is constructed through the phrase,

"..... ALLAH un sbko apne hifz-o-amaan me rkhe.... Ameen...."

اللَّهُمَّ رَحْمَتَكَ أَرْجُو فَلَا تُكَلِّبْنِي إِلَى نَفْسِي طَرْفَةَ عَيْنٍ وَأَصْلِحْ شَأْنِي كُلَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا أَنْتَ

Not only people express their thoughts but they also reinforce different identities through language. Here we see people defining themselves on Facebook through language. Facebook offers the possibility of identity play for one's visibility to others; it emerges not only as a social networking website but as a participatory culture through which people define themselves.

In this section the multi-dimensionality of language was examined. Language is not an abstract idea but it has to be studied on the basis of its communicative function. Speech acts analysis of the status updates examined not only the communicative function of language but also how language is being employed as form of social action. The variety of the updates found in the collected data show that people use language for different expressions. Not only are they expressing themselves but people are also defining their identities. This definition and representation of identity defines the group boundaries for the people, like identification with the Muslim identity.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the different communicative aspects that emerged through the categorization of the updates varied from expressing what one was feeling to sharing quotes and poetry. Through status updates people not only expressed their emotions but also shared details about their daily life activities as to what they were doing or what was going on in their lives at that moment. This shows how socialization patterns emerge through the sharing of feelings, information and ideas. Status updates is just one of the ways in which people let other network members feel their presence. This aspect in a way not only helps people stay connected to each other but reinforces the bonds of friendship between members.

Identities construction and representation was also examined through status updates. The interactivity that Facebook provides makes it a medium through which people define themselves by sharing what is going on in their lives or how they are feeling, so this makes this forum an extension of a person's real life identity. How people construct their identities and what do they express through them was looked at to understand another facet of communicative function of status updates. Group identities like that of particular university students, national identities and cultural identities were defined through the language used in the status updates. Language in this aspect played a major role, as it was

through the analysis of language of status updates that the different aspects of what updates communicate emerged.

Examining status updates was only one very small part of Facebook, other areas like people's comments on different issues can be studied. Gender based identity constructions and the gendered use of language in status updates are also viable area for researches.

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