

Evidence-Based Investigation of the Phonology of Nigerian Instant Messaging

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Abstract : Orthographic engineering is no longer the preserve of the Short Messaging Service (SMS), which is characterised by limited space. Such stylistic creativity or deviation is fast creeping into real-time messaging, popularly known as Instant Messaging (IM), despite the large number of characters allowed. This occurs at various linguistic levels: phonology, morphology, syntax, etc. Nigerians are not immune to this linguistic stylisation. This study investigates the phonological and meta-phonological conventions of the messages sent and received via WhatsApp by Nigerian graduates. This is ontological study of 250 instant messages collected from 98 graduates from different ethnic groups in Nigeria. The selection and analysis of the messages are based on figure and ground principle. The results reveal the use of accent stylisation, phoneme substitution, blending, consonantisation (a specialised form of deletion targeting vowels), numerophony (using a figure/number, usually 1-10, to represent a word or syllable that has the same sound) and phonetic respelling in the IMs sent by Nigerians. The study confirms the existence of linguistic creativity.

Keywords : figure and ground principle, instant messaging, linguistic stylisation, meta-phonology

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