

## **The Role of Facebook, Digital Language and Communication in Social Development**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper explores the role of Facebook, digital language and communication partnership in social development. Internet offers us the chance to not only create and publish content but also to access and consume media information, therefore fostering a space of full participation, engagement and self-expression. With the development of social networks like face book and twitter, people can participate in cyberspace in a variety of ways ranging from keeping in touch with friends and developing new contacts to sharing content and exploring self expression. In sharing content, people have posted on face book, articles that have shaped the political, social and economic life of Kenyans both positively and negatively. Positively because companies, both national and multinational, have turned to the face book and other social media in order to reach millions of face book users. Individuals and the civil society have also used the social media, not only to enhance political awareness and campaign against political malpractices, but also to keep the political class regularly evaluated. Politicians too have used the face book as an avenue of reaching out to supporters and potential supporters during electoral campaigns. In performing these roles, face book does not work in isolation. It works in collaboration with language and communication. This paper unravels collaboration between Facebook, digital language and communication in enhancing social development. The paper argues that Facebook as a social technological too relies on language for successful communication to take place. It argues that Facebook communication can not take place without language, a fact that makes Facebook and language partners in communication. It is this communication that brings about social development. It argues that this partnership plays an important role in bringing about change in education, health and information dissemination.*

**Key Words:** Development, Facebook, Digital Language, Communication

### **INTRODUCTION**

Facebook is a social network whose headquarters are in Menlo Park, California in USA (BBC Website Team, 10<sup>th</sup> Oct. 2012). It is a web 2.0 application serving a large online community in Kenya and around the world. Web 2.0 technology allows interactional communication as opposed to one way communication offered by web 1.0 (Wasrchauer & Grimes, 2007; Dieu & Stevens, 2007; Terantino & Graf, 2011; Chartrand, 2012). This technology is a set of internet services and practices that offer users a great opportunity to participate in various communities of knowledge building and knowledge sharing (Crook *et al.*, 2008; Suthiwartnarueput & Wasanasomsithi, 2012). Facebook is one of the most popular social networking which allows users to post information, chat with others and collaborate within the system (Stelter, 2008).

This indicates the importance of this technology in social development. Development seeks to improve human life in every aspect.

However, this is difficult goal to achieve in the absence of language. Development aims to achieve overall improvement of human life, an effort that requires that human creativity plays a cardinal role. Due to this, knowledge and ideas are put together creatively with the aim of realizing development that will benefit human beings. However, as Mwita (2001) argues, the accumulated knowledge and ideas can only be disseminated through the medium of language so as to achieve development. The reason is that human activity begins within the mind, a fact that makes language central to every human thinking and activity. For this reason, every human development (whose origin is usually the mind) requires language. Human beings are social beings who share ideas, thoughts and innovations in their effort to achieve development. The act of disseminating these mental resources requires the existence of communication. It is through this communication that people can benefit from each others creativity towards development. As it were, development is a shared activity. Human communication, however, relies on language. In other words, there is a thin line separating human communication and language. In fact, they are almost inseparable.

About the role of Facebook, Sandberg(2010) has the following to say:

At Facebook, everything we do is about making the world more social and creating more personalized experiences. On Facebook, people do everything, from remembering their friends' birthdays to reuniting with old classmates to even finding people willing to donate their organs to save their lives. We think making the world more personal and social is having a profound impact on the way we relate to people, communities and institutions around us.

It is evident from Sandberg's explanation that the role of Facebook is to facilitate communication between individuals, groups, communities, organizations and institutions. It allows us to communicate our thoughts, connect with people across the globe and often know them better than our next-door neighbor (Laad & Lewis, 2012). To this end, Facebook technology requires language. In this case, digital language which is specifically used in social networks plays an important role. As we have argued earlier, language is a facilitator of human communication. From the foregoing, Facebook, language and communication are inseparable entities which play a cardinal role in social, political and economic development. As it will be demonstrated in this paper, Facebook technology has completely revolutionized human communication.

However, this technology is highly dependent on language in the effort to perform its roles. Therefore, as the discourse about the communication revolution brought about by Facebook continues, it is important to recognize the significance of language and communication as cardinal tools of facilitating Facebook technology. It is important to note that Facebook as a technological device is complete. However, its functions as a communication device require that the technology partners with language and communication in order to serve its roles. The ensuing communication is indeed a

product of partnership between Facebook and language. English as the world's dominant language plays a major role in this partnership. However, many other languages, including African languages also play important roles in Facebook communication. In this paper, the relationship between Facebook, language and communication; and their role in development has been demonstrated.

Studies have been carried out by various scholars about Facebook as a social media tool which has a great role to play in development. Manrique and Mikail (2011) discuss the role of Facebook in bringing about political change in Egypt and other Arab countries. He argues that Facebook and other social media like Twitter played an important role in the overthrow of dictatorial regimes in the Arab world, thus playing an important role in socio-political change. Fairclough (1995), Yates (1996), Crystal (2001 and 2006), Jahnova (2004), Berman (2006), Squires (2010) and Stapa and Shaari (2012) have discussed features of Facebook language. They argue that there is a new language emerging on Facebook with unique features which Fairclough (1995) refers to as —Informalisation while Stapa and Shaari refer to it as —Digital language. They however, have not discussed the role of Facebook and language in social change.

Some of the studies and discussions have centred on Facebook as a tool for communication without reference to digital language. Such studies include Manrique and Mikail (2011), Sofranek (2012), Hoffman (2013), Eaton (2013) Gerbado (2013), Mousa (2013), Jones (2013), Harkin (2013) and Ghren (2013). These studies have discussed in detail the role played by Facebook as a social media tool in social and political development without reference to language. Sawyer (2011) for example, discusses the role of Facebook in enhancing learning in U.S.A. However, his study does not discuss the role of language in Facebook communication. Terantino and Graf (2011), Nadiz (2011), Ivanovic (2012), Hiew (2012) and Suthiwartnarueput and Wasanasomsithi (2012) have discussed the role of Facebook as a social media tool in language learning.

Terantino and Graf (2011) and Nadiz (2011) argue that Facebook can be effectively used by teachers to share information and language resources and questions in schools. They argue that this can help to promote language learning among students. Ivanovic (2012) discusses the role of the social media in language learning. He argues that social media tools such as Facebook are popular among the youth and can therefore be used to attract them to learn English language. He argues that Facebook can be used to encourage students to learn languages by sharing the experiences of their favourite singers and actors. He argues that English teachers can also use video clips on Facebook as a tool to motivate students to learn languages. From this discussion, it is evident that the available literature is about Facebook technology, social development or language in communication. There has been no discussion about collaboration between language, Facebook technology and communication in aiding social development. This is the reason this paper sets out to discuss the relationship between Facebook technology, language and their role in communication and social development.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The functional theory of language by Halliday (1973) and explained by Reagan (1992) was used as the theoretical framework of this study. In this theory, Halliday elaborates several functions of language that were relevant and therefore were used in this study. These functions include: the evaluative function through which language exercises the power to pass judgment; the descriptive function through which language exercises the power to give orders; the informative function through which language gives information to readers and listeners; and the emotive function of language through which language expresses emotions.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The purpose of this study was to find out the relationship between Facebook, language and communication, and their role in development. This research was based on Facebook postings from our friends. —Our friends in this case refers to people who sent friendly requests to us or to whom we sent requests and therefore became our Facebook pals. This research was limited to postings which we received on Facebook from such friends, from their walls and messages we received through the inbox service. Some of the friends were known to us whereas others were anonymous or had changed their names, so they could not be identified easily. We surveyed the postings from their walls and carried out purposeful sampling of postings that were relevant to this study. We sampled 90 postings: 30 that had political message 30 that had economic information and 30 that had social message and recorded the conversations. Participant observation research method was used. We carried out content analysis of the postings by our friends and liked pages. These postings included messages and opinion from individuals and groups, television and radio broadcasts, newspapers and magazines, articles from scholars, researchers and universities, programmes, videos, still pictures and advertisements from companies. We recorded the postings and dialogue that ensued in response to the postings.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Language Situation on Facebook**

This research aimed at assessing the role played by language in development. It emerged during this research that several languages, are commonly used in Facebook communication. The languages included: English, Kiswahili, Luluyia, Gikuyu, Dholuo, Kamba and Sheng

English emerged as the most widely used language among the Facebook users. This is because it is the world's dominant language, and Kenya's co-official language with Kiswahili. It is also the medium of instruction in teaching in primary, secondary and tertiary institutions. This has made the language a popular choice in Facebook communication. In the following section, we look at the role played by language in Facebook communication and development.

## Facebook, Digital Language and Social Development

Social development is about improvement in the well being of the society. Education, good health, peace and safety, advanced communication and entertainment are some of the indicators of social growth. As a social site, Facebook is a critical tool of social development. However, in fulfilling this responsibility, Facebook requires language for effective communication. In a word, language is an important aspect of a community's culture, and is a significant way of reflecting people's culture and identity (Shitemi, 2001.)

**Facebook, digital language and communication.** Facebook plays a key role in facilitating communication which leads to more social inclusion. Kenya has a population of 40 million people with more than 42 communities (Webb & Kembo-Sure, 2000). So, as we talk about unity of these communities in diversity, communication emerges as a key factor in fostering this unity. It is true that language plays a major role in the ensuring successful communication (Wright, 2002; Wolff, 2006; Koul, 2006; Chiswick, 2008; Casale & Posel, 2010; Shitemi, 2001). As a social media, Facebook has a fundamental role to play in achieving this end. Facebook creates an avenue through which people from diverse ethnic backgrounds create communication networks which lead to cyber families without regard to ethnic orientation. There are indeed many cyber families on Facebook which refer to each other as pals or friends. Although many of them have never met physically, they have strong bonds between them which make them feel like members of one family. This is strengthened through regular Facebook communication. Whenever one member of the family posts a message, video, photograph or shares a story on her/his Facebook page, other members of the family respond by appending their opinion. Other communication is through short text messages.

There are political families on the face book too. Politicians, especially presidential candidates during the March 2013 general election, governors, senators and members of the national assembly have created Facebook pages through which they communicate with their fans. Some of the pages are used by leaders to issue policy and political statements to which their followers and opponents react. This indeed creates a feeling of more inclusion and has the possible effect of defusing post election tension. The following example shows a Facebook post and ensuing responses from Facebook friends or fans.

### Example 1:

#### (Political leader's Facebook name)

...I have pledged to pay the boy's fees up to the  
**Responses:** university. (A) You are now my (Leader's title). (B)  
Thank you Mr. (Leader's title)

The first response indicates that the respondent had not accepted the author as his leader, but the Facebook post made him to realize that it was important to recognize the leader due to his generosity. It is possible that the respondent felt attached to the author due to the accessibility of the leader through his Facebook page and the

language and communication avenue created by Facebook. In achieving this role of creating cyber families, it is difficult to avoid language.

Besides the families, there are many Facebook pages with thousands of fans who keep communicating through the common page. For example, KTN Kenya has over 1.3 million fans, NTV Kenya has over 1.2 million, Ghetto radio has over 424,000 and Citizen Kenya has over 600,000 fans that like and communicate through the page (These numbers keep growing by the day.) Although the media was blamed for fanning the 2007 post election violence, it was lauded for helping to contain the situation during the 2013 general election. In the effort to contain the volatile situation during the elections, the media houses used these Facebook pages to post peace messages and communicate with their fans.

This is evidence that Facebook plays an important role in communication and therefore, social development. To this end, language has an important role to play. It is difficult for Facebook to achieve its role as a tool of communication without language. Essentially, Facebook provides the means through which language achieves communication. Example 1, in fact, testifies to this fact. Communication between the leader and his audience is achieved through language, and for this matter, the English language. It is this language that facilitated communication between the leader and respondents (A) and (B). It is important to note here that the role of Facebook is to provide the vehicle which language utilizes to deliver the intended message from the writer to the fans. Essentially, the message is delivered by language. Therefore when, eventually, communication takes place between the author of the message and the recipients, it is Facebook and language that are credited with this success.

***Facebook and digital language as tools for education administration and e-learning.*** Many universities around the world have Facebook pages through which they disseminate research findings and other academic information besides sharing information about e-books and literature. This includes Kenyan universities. Look at the following example.

**Example 2:** (MM University)

How to read literature by Eagleton.

In this example, the university posted an article educating —friends! about how to successfully read works written by Terry Eagleton. This article is of utmost importance to students and readers of Eagleton's literary works. Many universities have also used Facebook to advertise their courses to prospective students and other face book users. University alumni associations have also utilized Facebook to organize fund raising for education institutions thus playing a fundamental role in education development. Some of the universities have also used Facebook for administrative purpose such as issuing instructions and advice to students. Take a look.

**Example 3:** (SS University)

The open days are here. People are already arriving. If you can't make it, this video will provide you with an insight into life as an SS University student.

This post testifies to the fact that Facebook has indeed become an indispensable tool for communication between universities and their students and other stake holders. In the case above, the university has posted a video clip sharing life as it is at the university. In this case, Facebook is used as a tool of advertisement. Universities are institutions of higher learning and issues of education can not do without language. This is due to the fact that various languages are used all over the world as a medium of instruction at all levels of education. In Kenya, English is used for instruction at all levels in all subjects and courses except in lower primary school and in Kiswahili and foreign languages.

**Facebook and digital language as tools for making friendship.** Facebook is an important media through which people find a chance to meet new friends, discover old ones, exchange ideas, messages and life experiences. It is a place where people who lost contact of each other can meet again and re-establish their relationship. For example, during this research we met many friends with whom we had lost contact during several years ago. We also established new friendship with people whom we had never met before. In the effort to create these relationships, language became an important tool. In a word, it is difficult to communicate with people through cyber technology and create friendship unless language is involved. Importantly, language is an essential tool in exerting influence, seeking and disseminating information, initiating, building and terminating interpersonal relationships (Mwita, 2001).

**Facebook and language as tools for psychological healing and solace.** Individuals have also used the Facebook to share their challenges by posting them on their walls so as to seek advice and comments from Facebook friends. Under these circumstances, Facebook acts as a tool of facilitating communication in search of solace in times of sickness, sorrow, stress and depression. In this undertaking, language plays an important complementary role. Look at the following example:

**Example 4:** (Name of author)

It is now one week since you departed from me Dad. I dearly miss you my dear Dad. R.I.P dear Dad.

Responses: (A) Pole sana my dear. God give you strength. (Take heart my dear.)

(B) R.I.P.

(C) Be strong.

In this conversation, Facebook has played a fundamental role of providing a vehicle through which the author of this message passed information to friends about the death of the father. It also provided an avenue through which the author publicly mourned the father. Similarly, it provided a means through which friends responded to the message by appending messages of condolences. This testifies that the argument that Facebook and language play a complementary role in achieving communication between the author and the friends.

**Facebook and language as tools for news dissemination.** It has provided a means through which the mainstream media houses access their readers and listeners and further their objectives of disseminating news to the public. In this research, we received news from both electronic and print media which included KTN Kenya, NTV Kenya, Daily Nation, Citizen TV Kenya and MulembeFm, Ghetto radio, BBC Africa, Capital FM Kenya, Hope FM and Nation Fm. The languages used by these media in disseminating news are English (which was the dominant language) Kiswahili and Luluyia dialects. This further testifies to the important role played by language, not only English, but also African languages in Facebook communication. Look at the example:

**Example 5:** (Media House Name)

Police in Mombasa yesterday stormed a house in Mombasa and arrested eleven girls and a foreigner who were recording a movie in which the girls were suspected to involve in sex with a dog.

Responses: (A) What! A dog!

(B) Sasa madoggy wanatupatia compe! Can't believe. (Dogs are now our competitors!)

In this posting, it is evident that Facebook and language have played a complementary role in facilitating communication between the media house and the readers. Evidence of communication is seen in the responses by the readers which indicate that the readers not only understood the message but also reacted to it. In this case, the languages involved are English and Kiswahili. However, it is not only Kiswahili language which is the only African language involved. Other African languages are involved as well as it is seen in the following conversation.

**Example 6:** (Name of Media House)

Akeshtere, does a clan matter in marriage? OmumaramaanyalaokhuteshiaOmumarama? (Good afternoon? Does a clan matter in marriage? Can a person from Marama marry a fellow Marama?)

Responses: (A) Akeshitere. It matters. (Good afternoon. It matters.)

(B) I clan imatangasana. (Clan issues matter.)

In this conversation, Olumarama dialect of the Oluluyia language is used by the author and the respondents. The writer has used code switching between Olumarama and English. In this case, the two languages have played a joint role in facilitating communication between the media house and its fans.

**Facebook and digital language as tools for entertainment.** Through Facebook, one can access movies, music and still pictures from You Tube, electronic media and other sites that offer entertainment. In all these except still pictures, language is needed. Movies and music use language to achieve their objectives. Many still pictures are also accompanied by titles and explanations that can not do without language. In this research, we accessed entertainment videos from media houses such as KTN Kenya, NTV Kenya and Citizen Kenya, and other sites like You Tube. There are also many jokes on Facebook which are posted by friends with intention to amuse

pals and cause comic relief. As it were, jokes as an element of art, is a product of language and communication.

**Facebook and digital language as tools for religious development.** Religion is an aspect of social development. That is why Kamaara (2001) opines that religion and culture are so heavily interrelated that at times it is difficult to distinguish one from the other. Culture is a way of life of a society and therefore, a social issue. In this research we realized that preachers are also increasingly turning to the social media in their effort to reach a wider audience. This is the reason we came across many pages run by preachers. We also received many religious messages from various preachers on our Facebook account. There are reports that a quarter of Kenya's population has Facebook accounts. This means that over 10 million Kenyans are Facebook users. For this reason, many preachers, especially televangelists, view Facebook as a new forum for accessing both Christians and non Christians. In this online evangelization effort, language and Facebook are not easy to separate. As Kamaara (2001) adds, language is not just for communicating, it is for thinking. In other words, online evangelization depends on language to achieve success in communication. Look at the following example:

**Example 7:** (Name of preacher)

All of you days have already been written in Gods book. Stay the course. Keep believing; don't give up on your future. God is faithful.

Responses: (A) Amen. I need your prayer.

(B) I am seeking prayers, please pray for me.

This post received 3, 654 responses from fans. This indicates that the preacher managed to access many people, both fans and non fans. Although it was not easy to tell fans from non fans from the comments, it was evident that the fans who appended their comments came from different nations. The fact that we received this post through sharing by our friends, yet we are not members of the preacher's church means that many other Facebook users who are not fans also received and commented on the post. If this is the case then the preacher achieved his objective.

**Facebook and digital language as tools for health awareness.** Health is an important indicator of social development. During this research, we received health tips from friends that included universities and electronic and print media such as NTV Kenya, KTN Kenya and Citizen Kenya. Facebook is used by medical staff such as doctors too keep in touch with patients thus playing a critical role in e-Medicare. And as Toboso (2012) argues, language has a central role to play in the provision of Medicare services because of the role it plays in facilitating communication between patients and medical and paramedical staff. Example:

**Example 8:** (Name of media House)

Pregnant and feeling icky? Here is why. Barbara started keeping a bottle of water with her during the day and several times every hour, she would take just one sip. Within just a few days, she was getting through a litre daily. As if by magic, the constipation started to ease and the

headaches disappeared, her skin stopped being so greasy and haemorrhoids no longer caused her pain.

This was a post by a media house that had published the article in its daily newspaper. This indicates that although the media involved had published the article in the newspaper, it also found it necessary to post the article on face book. In this article, fans are given a health tip about how to avoid constipation, headache, greasy skin and haemorrhoids. In doing this, the media used English language, which shows how significant the language is in fulfilling its objective of creating health awareness among its fans. Other health issues discussed included healthy diet and reproductive health.

***Facebook and digital language as tools for theatre development.*** Theatre refers to plays, dances, narrations, poems and other literature genres, acted on stage and cinema. This research established that Facebook is used by theatre lovers to share theatre products like movies and plays. For example, during the 2013 Kenya Schools and Colleges national drama festivals, some plays like —Shackles of Dooml by Butere Girls High School, were posted on You Tube and viewed by theatre lovers through Facebook. Sharing of such pieces of art is a way of enhancing theatre development. This sharing, however, highly depends on language and communication. It should also be remembered that theatre as an art is a creation of language. This therefore puts language at the centre of theatre development.

***Facebook, language and sports.*** On face book, one can find video clips of matches played in various soccer leagues around the world. We accessed these clips on face book through You Tube and Airtel Football. These clips were accompanied by comments from commentators, a demonstration that language is still a critical tool in the development of sports. Such clips can be used by soccer players to enhance their talents.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of this research was to unearth the role played by language, Facebook and communication in development. It emerged from this research that Facebook has revolutionized, not only social interaction but communication as a whole. It also emerged that Facebook plays a key role in enhancing social development through postings by individuals, groups and companies. However, in so doing, it emerged that Facebook requires language to carry out its functions. The reason is that Facebook is a vehicle through which language carries out the function of communication between individuals, groups and companies. This means that language is central to Facebook communication, and the absence of language will hamper the intended communication. This, in fact, proves that Facebook, language and communication are partners in enhancing development realized through Facebook. It also emerged through this research that various languages are used on Facebook during interaction. These languages include English and African languages such as Kiswahili, Dholuo, Luyia, Kikuyu, Kamba and Sheng.

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## BIO-DATA

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