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A Speech Act Analysis of Status Updates on Facebook: The Case of Ghanaian University Students

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Abstract

In the last half a decade, social network sites (SNSs) have wrought a tremendous impact on interpersonal communication across the world to the extent that it can be postulated, arguably, that such sites/platforms represent the commonest new media in Ghana (Coker, 2012). However, the communicative significance of this new media as a means of articulating varying views and communicating differing intentions is relatively unknown in Ghana.

In this paper, I examine, *ipso facto*, the various categories of speech acts that manifest in the messages used by Ghanaian university students to update their status on Facebook as well as

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the pragmatic underpinnings of these messages. Based on a combined framework of Austin and Searle's speech act theory and Warschauer and Herring's notion of computer-mediated communication, the analysis on a corpus of 60 online messages indicated that Facebook status updates of Ghanaian university students are characterized by five speech acts, prominent among which are directives and assertives.

The study also revealed that the messages are informed and conditioned by multiple pragmatic notions, and reflect the socio-cultural variation and culture-specificity of language use in SNSs. These findings bear theoretical implications and hold implications for further research in computer-mediated communication and communication studies.

Key words: *Social network site, computer-mediated communication, facebook, status update*

Introduction

With the emergence of new media technologies, the means by which people interact or communicate has undergone drastic transformation, with communication becoming more virtual in recent times. As noted by Boyd & Ellison (2008), one of such new media technologies which has captured the attention and interest of the society is the Social Network Site (SNS). The current situation is not alarming given that as Herring & Martinson (2004) and Duthler (2006) intimate, computer-mediated communication (CMC) or the language used online relieves people of the gendered roles assigned them since participants are able to use language to suit their preferences. In this wise, mobile telephony and computer-mediated communication have been studied from multiple perspectives in a variety of disciplines, including behavioral psychology, communication studies, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, social network analysis, and sociology (Sotillo, 2012). Baron (2008) has, for instance, shown how electronically-mediated technologies are changing the way we communicate and relate to one another.

Unarguably, one of the common means by which one could communicate and express oneself freely using the CMC method is through the popular SNS – Facebook, as it survives as one of the most utilized SNSs (Sotillo, 2012). According to Blattner & Fiori (2009) and Perez-Sabater (2012), students, especially university students, are the most frequent users of Facebook. On this social network community (SNC), the students are able to access a great variety of online

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genres (either synchronous or asynchronous), update their statuses or profiles and engage in myriad interactions. In all these communicative events, language plays a quintessential role. It is, therefore, not surprising that the language employed on SNSs including Facebook, in recent times, has engendered scholarly interest among modern researchers.

In this regard, a number of studies have attempted to investigate the language of SNS (for example, Nastri et al., 2006; Carr et al., 2009; Zhang et al., 2011 and Ilyas & Khushi, 2012). While such studies may have been prolific in Asian, American and European settings, there is a dearth of such studies within the African context. Given this gap, the present study ventures into a research setting unexplored in the literature to examine the status updates of students of the University of Cape Coast (UCC) on “UCC GOSSIPZ”, an online group page created on Facebook by UCC students. First, the study sets out to establish the types of speech acts UCC students employ on “UCC GOSSIPZ”. Second, and more crucially, the paper seeks to tease out the intended meanings of these speech acts.

In what follows, I first sketch a vignette of the extant literature in order to provide a conceptual context for the study. Next, I discuss the theoretical framework underpinning the study and the methodology adopted. This will be followed by a detailed analysis and discussion of the data, whereupon I will conclude with a summary and implications for future research.

Review of Previous Scholarship on Computer-mediated Communication

As new media technologies emerge, it is important to look at the commonalities and differences in traits and usages of these communication tools. One emergent technology becoming a societal staple is the social network site (Boyd & Ellison, 2008), of which Facebook is an emblematic example. With millions of active users on SNSs engaging in both self-representation and inter-personal communication, SNSs afford a new lens through which to examine interaction. In this light, I present in the two sub-sections below how some previous studies have shed light on computer-mediated communication, drawing, first, on a speech act approach and subsequently on other approaches.

Speech Act Approach and Computer-mediated Communication

Some previous studies have made forays into CMC, using speech act as a theoretical basis. Notably, one of the earliest of such studies is Hassel & Christensen's (1996) paper on the use of indirect speech act in three channels of communication – email, face-to-face and telephone. Their study found that of the three communicative channels, assertives were the most prevalent. The results also pointed to the view that directives, commissives, expressives and declaratives occurred more frequently in indirect channel(s) of communication, and that there were more expressives in email (a channel for CMC) than face-to-face communications.

Still on CMC and speech act analysis, Nastri et al. (2006) investigated the extent to which the communicative goals of “away messages” were reflected in their language structure. The results showed that the messages were constructed, primarily, with assertives, followed by expressives and commissives but rarely with directives. Like Dourish (2001) and other previous studies, this finding confirms that away messages tend to reflect both informational and entertainment goals.

Focusing specifically on SNSs, Carr et al. (2009) examined how individuals used the status messages of social network sites like Facebook and MySpace socially to communicate and construct their identity. The analysis revealed that status messages were, basically, constructed with expressives (60%), followed by assertives (39%), directives (6%) and commissives (3%). In a follow-up study, Carr et al. (2012), using Facebook, sought to ascertain how humor was used in status messages in SNSs, and how often SNS users modified such messages. Drawing heavily on Nastri et al.'s (2006) study, Carr et al. (2012) attempted to establish whether language used in asynchronous media was similar to and/or different from language used in traditionally-synchronous application of Instant Messaging (IM). Largely, the findings corroborated their earlier study in 2009 and were also consistent with Ilyas and Khushi's (2012) study, given that expressives, followed by assertives, directives and commissives were identified.

Unlike the studies reviewed so far, Qadir & Riloff (2011) investigated a different kind of asynchronous online communication – message board posts. The study focused on classifying sentences as speech acts, and to distinguish between expository sentences in message board

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posts. The results indicated that not all the sentences in the message board posts contained speech acts. The study also found that while representative and commissive speech acts were very difficult to identify, identifying directives and expressives were much easier. Examining a different kind of asynchronous online communication besides Facebook, Zhang et al.'s (2011) explored speech acts recognition in Twitter and found that speech act cue words and phrases were relevant to understanding tweets' content.

In a more recent study, Ilyas and Khushi (2012) explored the communicative functions of status updates on Facebook, drawing on Searle's speech act taxonomy. The results, confirming Carr et al.'s (ibid) studies, revealed that status messages were most frequently constructed with expressives, followed by assertives and directives. In another recent study on illocutionary acts of short message service (SMS) texting in SMS social networks, Sotillo (2012) identified that assertives and expressives, followed by directives and commissives constituted the vast majority of the illocutionary acts in the SMS texting.

Chiluwa's (2012) study brings an African perspective to bear on the previous studies on CMC rooted in Searle's (1969) speech act theory. The paper discussed the pragmatics of hoax email business proposals, focusing on the discourse strategies and functions of these proposals. Analysis of the corpus of 52 individual email samples showed that the speech acts evident in the hoax business proposals were representatives (since the proposals were structured as narratives), followed by expressives (used to politely address the receiver in order to his/her interest), commissives (used as a persuasive strategy in making unrealistic and suspicious promises to the receiver) and directives (used to urge the receiver to act promptly).

Computer-mediated Communication and other Approaches

Aside speech act analysis, other previous studies have explored language use in CMC from different foci such as personal and social connections/relationships (Awl, 2011), linguistic conventions (Baron, 2008), virtual community norms (Crystal, 2001) and discursive styles (Herring, 2010). In this section, I look at two of such studies.

In their study, Bazarova et al. (2012) examined self-presentational and relational concerns through the analysis of language styles on Facebook. The study demonstrated that the messages varied in certain characteristics of language style, revealing differences in underlying self-presentational and relational concerns based on the ‘publicness’ and directedness of the interaction. The study also found that positive emotion words correlated with self-reported self-presentational concerns in status updates, while verbal immediacy correlated with partner familiarity in wall posts, but not in private messages.

In his paper, Perez-Sabater (2012) attempted to establish whether posting comments on Facebook is a conventionalized genre of computer-mediated communication, despite its relative novelty, and whether a writer’s first language impinges upon the register and style of the comment. The results, first, showed that Facebook is still in the process of becoming conventionalized, and second, that non native speakers of English use more formal style than native writers.

Point of Departure

In brief, the literature perceptibly shows that, first, a study among university students is lacking (despite the fact that university students, largely, are active members of social network sites), and second, that the African setting remains under-researched. The present paper is, thus, useful because as people become more aware of the communicative potential of social network sites, especially Facebook, the range of specialized uses is likely to grow (Crystal, 2008). Additionally, the study provides useful insights on the socio-cultural variation and culture-specificity of language use in SNSs.

Theoretical Framework

I draw on Austin (1962) and Searle’s (1969) Speech Act Theory (SAT) and Warscauer (2001) and Herring’s (2010) notion of online communication. Speech act theory was chosen because it is a practical taxonomy that has been used in studies of natural language processing and computer-mediated communication (Nastri et al., 2006; Sotillo, 2012). Further, SAT allows researchers to explain intended meaning of messages identified and coded as illocutionary acts.

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Having classified utterances into performatives and constatives and subdivided speech acts into locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts, Austin (1962) proceeded to present five classes of illocutionary acts or conventional force of utterances (verdictives, exercitives, commissives, behabitives and expositives). His concepts and taxonomy were extended by Searle (1969), who proposed constitutive rules and broadened Austin's notion of uptake by asserting that performance of illocutionary acts involves the securing of uptake (Sotillo, 2012). By expanding Austin's work, Searle introduced a distinction between literal word or sentence meaning and speaker's utterance meaning. For Searle, thus, the production of a word or sentence in the performance of a speech act constitutes the basic unit of linguistic information (Searle 1969: 136).

The next key notion relevant to the present study is online communication. In the words of Warschauer (2001: 207), online communication refers to "reading, writing and communication via networked computers". He also distinguishes asynchronous online communication (where participants participate simultaneously in a chat) from asynchronous online communication (when participants log in at different times to chat). In this regard, "UCC GOSSIPZ" belongs to the latter category. More importantly, Warschauer maintains that online communication is useful in second language learning and beneficial to the second language learner. Unlike Warschauer (2001), Herring (2010) categorizes online communication into four textual exchanges: email, instant messaging (IM), online chat or chat channel and web discussion forum or board, and she explains that emails and web forum, for instance, are asynchronous whilst IMs are synchronous.

Given Herring's categorization, "UCC GOSSIPZ" belongs to the web discussion forum. In spite of the divergence in the taxonomy of online communication put forward by Warschauer and Herring, a common trajectory that can be seen palpably is that Facebook updates are asynchronous.

Methodology

This section discusses the methodological procedures of the study. Specifically, it discusses the research site, data collection procedure, sampling method and method of data analysis.

Research Site

As already noted, the research site for this study is the University of Cape Coast (UCC), an English-medium public university in Ghana. The university, one of the six public universities in Ghana, conducts its teaching, learning and research through Faculties and Schools such as Arts, Education, Sciences, Agriculture, Law, Social Science and Medical School. As a social unit, there are three identifiable groups in UCC: students, academic and non-academic staff. This study, however, focuses on the students, especially the regular undergraduate students, who form the dominant group. The social interaction of students occurs both in academic and non-academic domains. Students, for instance, engage in academic discourse during lectures, group studies, seminars, etc. and non-academic discourse in taxis, hostels, churches, etc. Additionally, UCC students make use of Social Network Sites (SNSs) like Facebook, when interacting for academic or non-academic purposes. Against the backdrop that this research is based on computer-mediated communication (CMC), the actual setting of the research is the Facebook page "UCC GOSSIPZ" created by UCC students. On this platform, students of UCC discuss virtually everything that pertains to campus life, and it also provides students with a feasible alternative means of staying in touch with one another, especially during vacation.

The choice of this research site was informed by the researcher's affiliation to UCC (having recently graduated from the institution), which made it easy to access the data.

Data Collection Procedure and Sampling Method

Regular undergraduate students of UCC served as the primary source of data for the study, and they were purposively sampled in order to ensure that only regular students who were able to update their status during the period designated for the research were used for the study.

The data were status updates gathered from 60 regular undergraduate students of UCC who were active members of "UCC GOSSIPZ".

The participants' status updates were collected between the hours of 9:00 and 10:00 a.m., 2:00 and 3:00 p.m., and 6:00 and 7:00 p.m. daily, for three consecutive days from March 27 to March 29, 2013. The times and dates were chosen for convenience. It is noteworthy that unlike the males, the female participants did not update their status regularly during the period designated for the collection of the data. Hence, I collected the data of the females as and when they updated their status between the hours of 9:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. for the three days. Also, since the males updated their status frequently, only the first four updates (if any) were collected for each of the hours stated. Further, I realized that some of the male participants updated their status more than once; therefore, in order to obtain different responses from all the male participants, only their first updates were collected during the 3 consecutive days.

Method of Data Analysis

The study is essentially a qualitative content analysis. An analytical description, the study is not supported by rigorous statistical material (although some minimal quantitative techniques were used) but by details and illustrations drawn from the data. Content analysis is a key methodological apparatus that enables researchers to understand the process and character of social life and to arrive at a meaning, and it facilitates the understanding of the types, characteristics and organizational aspects of documents as social products in their own right as well as what they claim. According to Herring (2004), a rigorous content analysis “is well suited to analyzing new and as yet relatively undescribed forms of CMC, in that it allows the researcher to remain open to the possibility of discovering novel phenomena, rather than making the assumption in advance that certain categories of phenomena will be found”

At the heart of this approach is coding. Such codes as tags, lines and labels were assigned against the pieces of data in a bid to attach or assign meaning to these pieces of data. Specifically, I employed open coding to summarize the data by teasing out identifiable patterns in order to find conceptual categories in the data. The main function of open coding, in the words of Punch (1998: 210), is “to expose theoretical possibilities in the data”. The open coding was

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followed by axial coding in order that I may find the relationships among the categories. Though this method of analysis was not rigidly pursued step by step since the analysis of data usually tends to be cyclical, the process was, particularly, useful as it enabled me to painstakingly examine the data in order to arrive at valid conclusions rather than skew findings or think of them a priori.

It must be mentioned that in order to ensure the validity of findings, I engaged a colleague graduate student in independent coding using the available coding system with the aim of achieving internal reliability of the findings such that conflictual observations were collaboratively resolved. It was useful to establish the inter-coder reliability (75.9 per cent) of this work, given that qualitative research design is often “a very personal processes because two researchers analyzing a transcript will, probably, come up with different results” (Dawson, 2002: 128). The data analysis was also amply supported by Austin (1962) and Searle’s (1969) speech act theory.

Findings and Discussion

In this section, I provide a qualitative analysis of the various types of speech acts (together with their frequency of occurrence) employed in the status updates of “UCC GOSSIPZ”, as well as their intended meanings. At the outset, it is important to stress that the messages remain unedited and are presented as originally as posted by the participants themselves as obtains in functional discourse analysis (Brown & Yule, 1983; Chiluba, 2008).

The analysis yielded five speech acts (in varying proportions) employed by university students to update their status on Facebook: directives, assertives, expressive, commissives and quotations. They are discussed below.

Directives

Although *directives* are not extensively used in the literature with respect to status updates (Nastri et al., 2006; Carr et al., 2009, 20012), the present study found otherwise – that UCC students, preponderantly, use *directive speech acts* in their status updates on “UCC GOSSIPZ”. Basically, *directives* impress upon the addressee to carry out an action, although the

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addresser might not necessarily comply with the directive issued. According to Searle (1969), the illocutionary point of *directives* is to try to get the hearer to behave in such a way as to make his behavior match the propositional content of the directive. *Directives* are, normally, issued with the desire that the hearer should do what is proposed. As a result, "directives could be obeyed, disobeyed, complied with, granted, denied, etc" (Searle, 1999:149). Premised on this explanation of directive given by Searle, the data analyzed showed that in updating their status on Facebook, students tacitly issue directives and give some covert instructions to their addressees. Captured mainly in declaratives and interrogatives, the directives were used by the students to request information from other colleagues or to inadvertently demand or order colleagues to do one thing or the other. Illustrative examples from the data are presented below:

1. *wen is the src election*
2. *Fellows...to those still on campus, remember Jesus is being burried. Dont try anything that would wake Him before Sunday!*
3. *this TIME, good for the grabbers to act now and both the grabbed and the grabbee's (engaged) to enjoy!!!!!!*

In example (1), the speaker tacitly instructs the addressee to provide information with respect to when the SRC election at UCC was going to take place. In example (2), although the speaker uses a commanding tone, it can be inferred explicitly that his actual intention is to advise the hearer to stay out of trouble during the Easter holidays. In the third example, the speaker palpably suggests to his network members to enjoy themselves during an occasion (probably Easter). In this example, the use of 'grabbers' and 'grabbees' by the speaker is enlightening. These student jargons connote male-female relationships on campus – the 'grabbers' being the male wooers, and the 'grabbees', being the conned females. This makes the directive quite explicit to a target group. Since the examples above call the addressees to take specific actions, the addressee in example (1) could respond to or ignore the question, whereas the addressees in examples (2) and (3) could choose to comply with, disobey or ignore the utterances made by their respective speakers.

Assertives

The use of *assertives* on social network sites is pervasive in the extant literature (Nastri et al., 2006; Chiluya, 2012; Sotillo, 2012). It can, therefore, be surmised that the participants of these previous studies made several propositions in their daily activities. Like these studies, students of UCC quite frequently also made use of *assertives* in their status updates. Searle (1969) identifies *assertives* as speech acts that commit a speaker to a proposition. Searle (1999) also maintains that despite the truth conditions, *assertives* do not depend on the sincerity of the speaker as it is the belief of the hearer that is the marker of whether the act is taken as true or false, regardless of the actual truth. Expectedly, the assertives were captured in declarative linguistic forms and were, largely, used to convey some function to one's addressee. Depending on the context of the assertion, a student's address could be interpreted as true or false. It was also found that it appeared the students were aware of the fact that their assertions had propositional content and were, therefore, truth-conditional. In view of that, some assertions were accompanied by various markers that sought to demonstrate the amount of credibility or veracity the speaker invested in the proposition. Presented below are some examples of *assertive speech acts* analyzed in the data:

4. *I hear UTAG is going on strike dis tuesday, dont ask me qns itsjst*

a rumour on campuz.

5. *"My phone battery lasts
longer than most
relationships nowadays." (0_0)*

6. *From a reliable source, the UTAG strike is not true ooooo.*

With recourse to the examples above, it can be intimated that in example (4), the speaker informs the addressee(s) of an impending strike action by UTAG (an association of University lecturers in Ghana), albeit she admits that she is not privy to any "insider" information. Thus, from the utterance, it can be adduced that the truth conditions behind the speaker's utterance is weak as a result of the use of the expression *its jst a rumour on campuz*. In example (5), the

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speaker seems to have a strong belief, and for that matter, a conviction in the proposition he makes about *relationships*, although the actual truth of the proposition would have to be determined by the hearer. The proposition expressed in example (6) stands in juxtaposition with that of example (4). This is because in example (6), the truth condition behind the proposition made by the speaker can be judged to be very strong as a result of the use of the expression *from a reliable source*.

Expressives

The aim of *expressive speech act* is to conspicuously depict the psychological state (that is, the emotions and feelings) of the speaker (Searle, 1969). It is, therefore, not surprising that the use of *expressive speech act* was evident in the status updates of the university students. Since *expressives* could only be performed by expressing one's inner feelings, they hinge on the speaker's state of sadness, boredom, excitement, anger, euphoria, etc. From individual lexical items, to phrases and full sentences, these expressives, explicitly and implicitly, portray the speaker's attitude towards the addressee, and present a situation where the addressee is able to identify with, relate to and engage the speaker's state of mind, internal desires and inward sentiments. Some examples of expressive evident in the data are discussed below:

7. *I HAVE BEEN GIVING TEN GUINEA FOWLS BY THE SADA BOSS FOR EASTER. #SADA GUINEA FOWL, EDEY BEEE KEKE*

8. *watsup*

9. *aabhaah, two quizzes again? Hmmmmmm. I tire for ucc compus oooooo.*

It can be deduced from the examples above that in example (7), the speaker expresses to the hearer his ecstasy, excitement and delight about the gift (*TEN GUINEA FOWLS*) he had received from the SADA (a non profit-making organization in Ghana) boss. The expression *EDEY BEEE KEKE* (meaning, "It is just too good"- an expression of happiness and/or joy) used by the speaker is indicative of the level of excitement or the degree of satisfaction he feels. Example (8) is a form of greeting adopted by most Ghanaian youth, especially students. Through this 'special' kind of greeting, the speaker establishes a connection and reinforces a

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bond of friendship and camaraderie with her network members. The expression, it can be argued, denotes warmth and a sense of conviviality, which is likely to be expressed in an emotional state of cheerfulness. Contrary to the two previous examples, in example (9), the speaker expresses his dislike/resentment and, perhaps, hatred and disgust for *quizzes* in the University of Cape Coast by using interjections like *aabhaah*, *Hmmmmmm* and *oooooo* as well as the epithet *tire*. More importantly, in examples (7) and (9), we see evidence of the expression of situational and socio-cultural meaning in Facebook status updates. It is noteworthy that although the present results of *expressives* are inconsistent with previous studies, for example Nastri et al. (2006) and Chilwa (2012), with respect to the frequency of occurrence (see Table 1), one thing is clear - that *expressives* are used extensively in all these studies, thereby indicating their importance.

Commissives

A performative has a *commissive* force when a speaker's utterance commits him or her to undertake a course of action in the future (Searle, 1969). Thus, any *commissive* utterance is, essentially, an expression of an intention to do something. Unlike an assertive, a *commissive* is not subject to truth condition assessment since a commitment is neither true nor false; rather, it is kept, broken or carried out. In the present study, analysis of the data showed that *commissives* were rarely used by UCC students in their status updates. The examples below from the data highlight *commissives* speech acts on “UCC GOSSIPZ”:

10. APRIL 15-21....., OGUAH HALL @ 51 WEEK CELEBRATION.....
stamped, signed and sealed

11. SRC PRESIDENTIAL ASPIRANTS BATTLE IN A DEBATEAT

UCC HOUSE OF PARLIAMENT TODAY STARTING 9.30am.

COME CHEER YOUR CANDIDATE UP. BE THERE!!!

According to Ilyas, et al. (2012), a *commissive* could be a simple statement which commits a person to an action in the statement. Example (10), although a statement, the use of the action verbs *signed*, *sealed* and *delivered* commits the speaker to what is to happen on April

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15-21: the celebration of *OGUAA @ 51*. In example (11), on the other hand, the speaker invites his network members to an *SRC PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE* which is to take place at 9.30am. In both examples, thus, it is assumed that the speaker who makes the proposition by informing his addressee about an impending program indirectly commits herself to the force of the utterance, and indeed to the futuristic program in that she would be expected by the listener to attend the function as well. That commissives were sparsely used by the students in updating their statuses could be attributed to the notion that commissives are, invariably, accompanied by certain expectations, and there was no need for one to carry on oneself such responsibility, especially on a social platform. Besides, it can be argued that the context of situation did influence the messages posted. That is, the two impending events (the SRC Presidential Debate and the Oguaa Hall Week Celebration) did inform the nature of the post.

Quotations

Although clearly spelt out in the methodology that the analysis of the data would be based on Austin (1962) and Searle's (1969) taxonomy, in the course of the data analysis, I found a speech act (*quotations*), though not captured by Austin and Searle, which I surmise is worth discussing. Comprising jokes and quotes, this speech act was extensively realized in the data analysis and, therefore, needs to be addressed.

In the literature, Nastri et al. (2006) and Ilyas et al. (2012) explain in their respective studies that *quotations* refer to the speech acts which the addressor had not originally produced. These could be motivational, inspirational, life quotes as well as jokes and epigrams. It must be noted that these quotations were captured verbatim, and where necessary appended by the name of the original author, indicating the students' awareness of certain academic conventions even on a social platform such as Facebook. Crucially, I argue that appending the names of original authors to the quotes was also used as a persuasive strategy to covertly underscore the credibility and/or authenticity of the quote. Examples of *quotations* as a speech act in status updates include the following:

12. *Leadership consists not in degrees of technique but in traits of character; it requires moral rather than athletic or intellectual effort,*

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and it imposes on both leader and follower alike the burdens of self-restraint.

- Lewis H. Lapham

13. *Three pastors met & agreed to sincerely tell each other their problems which must be kept a secret between the three of them. The first pastor said; my problem is that whenever I see the church offertory I want to steal it. The second pastor also said that as for me I have been sleeping with the women in my church. The last pastor then said, well, my problem is that I can't keep secrets so I might even go and tell people about your secrets as soon as we leave here.*

In example (12), the speaker shares a quote on *Leadership*, from *Lewis H. Lapham* (a motivational speaker) with his network members. This example is given, probably, in relation to the SRC elections that was being held at the time of the data collection. It, thus, appear that implicit in this quotation is a covert advice supposedly the aspiring SRC presidential candidates. In example (13) also, the speaker shares a joke he may have read or heard with his network members. Although this example may qualify as an expressive as a result of the excitement with which the speaker presents the joke, I, nonetheless, classify it as a quotation, premised on the assumption that the joke did not originally belong to the speaker. Indeed, the joke is quite a common one in Ghana.

It must be stated that it is not alarming that *declaratives* were entirely absent in the status updates on Facebook analyzed. This is because as Searle (1969) explains the illocutionary force of a *declarative* is to bring about a change in the world as a result of an utterance made. He adds that a declaration uttered or made under all proper conditions creates a state of affair in the world that did not exist before. Thus, the students of UCC did not make utterances that could bring about changes in their lives, although previous studies like Carr et al. (2009 & 2012) and Ilyas et al. (2012) found some rare cases of *declaratives*.

The reason why declaratives were not employed by UCC students, it can be argued, stemmed from the fact that declarative utterances – as Searle expounds- are normally made by people with institutional power (for example, pastors, lawyers and judges). Obviously, UCC students do not belong to such categories given that there is only a symmetrical relationship between the participants, which causes them to communicate in casual and friendly ways, and not to be concerned with making utterances that would change the state of affairs in the world.

Frequency of Occurrence of Speech Acts in Facebook Status Updates

This section of the analysis and discussion of the data presents a table that gives a quantitative account of the speech acts identified in the status updates of “UCC GOSSIPZ”. The table displays the total number of occurrences of speech acts in order of frequency, followed by their percentage distribution.

Table 1: Frequency of Speech Acts Forms in Facebook Status Updates

Type of Speech Act	Frequency	Percentage
Directives	21	35
Assertives	14	23.3
Expressives	13	21.7
Quotations	7	11.7
Commissives	5	8.3
Total	60	100

It can be interpreted from Table 1 that directives are the most frequent speech act, followed by assertives, expressives, quotations and commissives.

Directives have a total of 21 occurrences, representing 35 % of the total status updates analyzed. This finding repudiates those of earlier studies since none of the studies (for example, Nastri et al., 2006; Ilyas et al., 2012; Chiluya, 2012) had directives as the most frequently used speech act (instead, *directives* occupied either the third or fourth places in the literature, in terms

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of frequency). This inconsistency in finding is, probably, because the felicity conditions available for *directives* to be realized were not highly present for the participants of previous studies. Nevertheless, students of UCC used *directives* extensively because the participants made several utterances which called upon their network members to react to, comply or perform certain actions.

Following the directives in terms of frequency of occurrence is *assertives*, which occurred 14 (23.3 per cent) times. Interestingly, this finding corroborates Carr et al. (2009 & 2012) and Ilyas et al.'s (2012) studies where *assertives* happen to be the second most preferred type of speech act. Although this finding did not align with other studies like Nastri et al. (2006), Chilwa (2012) and Sotillo (2012), their statistics still indicated that *assertives* are pervasive in the language used on social network sites (*assertives* had the highest frequency in these studies). The use of *assertives* as the second most preferred speech act in the present study indicates that UCC students, usually, produce status updates that make their network members to form an impression or a belief consistent with the self-presentation role of SNSs.

Expressives were the third most frequently used type of speech act. With a total of 13 status updates, it constituted 21 per cent of the total number of speech acts used by the students. *Expressive speech acts*, basically, project the inner feelings of a speaker. Therefore, although the current finding is inconsistent with the literature given that each of the previous studies reviewed had expressives occurring either in the first or second position, it is not out of place that this type of speech act was the third most preferred speech act. To the extent that it was identified, it suggests that students of UCC, like all gregarious individuals and social beings, do undergo certain experiences that urge them to update their status, expressing their current psychological states.

The data analysis also showed that the participants made use of *quotations* 7 times, out of the total 60 status updates analyzed, representing a percentage of 11.7. This finding occurred as the fourth most frequent type of speech act, indicating that UCC students encounter motivational messages and jokes in their readings and they tend to share them with their friends and network members. Being the least used speech act type, *commissives* occurred 5 times, representing 9.43

per cent. This result is consistent with previous works like Carr et al. (2009), Qadir and Riloff (2011) and Sotillo (2012) who also had *commissives* occurring as one of the least used types of speech act. The reason for commissives being the least identified speech act in the present study is that students of UCC, perhaps, do not find much urgency in *commissive acts* since such acts do not have an immediate relevance.

Evidently from Table 1, *declaratives* were not used by UCC students in their status updates. The absence of *declaratives*, as explained earlier, is not surprising and is in tandem with the findings of virtually all the previous studies reviewed for this study (for example; Carr et al., 2009 & 2012 and Sotillo, 2012). This is probably why Zhang et al. (2011), for instance, classify *declaratives* as miscellaneous. In order to understand why studies assessing speech acts in CMC and status updates usually find almost no *declaratives* - normally divided into *effectives* and *verdictives* in new media -, Clark (1996) offers a potential explanation, noting that declaratives are typically made within institutional or organizational settings. This reason given by Clark (1996), most likely, explains why students of UCC do not usually make utterances or provide status updates using *declaratives*, since they do not exhibit power relations but familial and friendly ones.

Pragmatic Meanings of Status Updates

This phase of the analysis teases out the pragmatic meanings or illocutionary functions of the messages. In doing this, I took into consideration the co-text and the context of situation within which the messages were posted. The intended meanings identified include making requests, asking questions, giving advice and suggestions, making confessions, thanking, showing excitement, good wishes, greetings, complaints, reminiscence, teasing/making mockery and expressing disappointment. I, however, focus on the first five pragmatic meanings on the basis of prominence, besides the constraint of space.

Requests

Request as an example of directives consists of an illocutionary act (Austin, 1962) in which the speaker asks the hearer to perform an action which is for the benefit of the speaker

(Trosborg, 1995). Trosborg adds that speakers, normally, use pragmalinguistic formulae like "Could you...", "Would you...", "I need...", "please...", etc. to express *request*. The data analyzed showed that the students used pragmalinguistic formulae and other courtesy markers were deployed by the students in their Facebook status updates to request information, items and other things from their addressee (s). Presented below are some examples:

14. *need vampire dairies 2 and 3 chaps. in box if u can do me this favor, thanks*

15. *De person to be on de hot seat dis morning is de beautiful Maame Gyamfua. Lets goooo*

As can be seen, in example (14), the speaker requests the hearer to provide him with *vampire dairies 2 and 3* (an American TV series), perhaps, upon watching season 1 and developing much interest. This he does by employing one of the pragmalinguistic formulae, *need*. The use of the rather loose form *need* for *I need* reinforces the solidarity relationship that is expected to exist among students on a social platform like Facebook- even in the performance of a face-threatening act such as a request. In example (15), the speaker, by her utterance, indirectly requests the hearers to ask *Maame Gyamfua* questions about her life since she is on the *hot seat* (a platform which is created by the network members of UCC GOSSIPZ, where members are asked questions about their private lives). The use of *let's go* by the speaker suggests that the barrage of question meant for *Maame Gyamfua* could begin. The addressees in example (15) adhere to the request by asking a question like *maame how old r u?* Such a question is rather private because within the Ghanaian context, unlike in some other cultures, people are very sensitive to mentioning their age in public.

Asking Questions

One of the illocutionary forces or intended meanings behind directive speech acts is *asking questions* (Searle, 1969). It requires the hearer to perform an action by responding to or providing an answer to the question asked. This speech act is found in Zhang et al.'s (2011) study, where they made *asking questions* one of the representations of directives. In the present study, the students used questions to seek answers and clarification from their network members.

Questions, normally, appeared in the form of "wh-" and "Yes-No" interrogatives. Some examples from the data analyzed are as follows:

16. *Abena who iz on de hot seat today!!*

17. *Whch src prez cn solve da prblm of furniture at felt [Faculty of Education Lecture Theatre, FELT].*

In example (16), the speaker asks the addressee, *Abena*, to furnish her with information on the person to be on the hot seat (explained in example 15 above) for the day, by using the wh-item *who*. This question asked by the speaker made the addressee respond *I am*. In example (17) also, the speaker asks the addressee to provide an answer as to which SRC president could *solve da prblm of furniture at FELT*, probably after the speaker may have had an unpleasant encounter concerning the furniture at FELT.

Advice

According to Austin (1962), *advice* is an illocutionary act whose intention is to cause the hearer to react in a way (that is, to either obey, comply with, disobey, etc.). Due to the kind of impact an *advice* has on the hearer, it is also termed as a directive. The study found that since students, largely, have a familial bond or relationship with one another, they tend to advise each other on certain issues concerning their religious, academic, economic as well as social lives. Examples are given below:

18. *Think less, Feel more. Frown less, Smile more. Talk less, Do more. Complain less, Appreciate more. Fear less, Love more.*

19. *A woman is to be loved, not to be understood. Never try to understand her, you will miss the point. Just love her and all shall be well!!*

In example (18), although the utterance the speaker makes seems to be a command as a result of the use of the imperative verbs *think, feel, frown, smile*, etc, the intended meaning is that of an *advice*, since the speaker suggests one thing or the other to the addressee which when followed, would avert an action or some other thing usually unpleasant. Thus, the speaker

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advises the addressee on what to do and what not to do. With the exception of *think* which is a cognitive verb, the remaining verbs are all emotive. Hence, the speaker strategically appeals to the emotions of his listeners, thereby making his advice more forceful. Similarly, in example (19), the speaker advises her network members on their social and love lives. Since the addressee seemed confused with the advice, he asks the question *how can i love u when i dont understand u?* The speaker then responds with another advice, saying: *women can nev be undastood just love us simpleeeee*. A further latent ideological position in relation to the unpredictability women is suggested by this advice.

Suggestions

Suggestions are illocutionary acts which belong to the group of directives. According to Searle (1975), suggestions normally use indirect strategies, where the speaker indirectly tells the hearer to do something. Although suggestions are made in the best interest of the hearer (that is, the hearer benefits from what the speaker suggests), Brown & Levinson (1987) argue that this kind of speech act is regarded as a face-threatening act (FTA). This is because the speaker is in some way intruding into the hearer's world by performing an act that concerns what the latter should do. The examples provided below illustrate how suggestion as an intended speech act manifests in the status updates of university students:

20. *I m not saying I'm smarter than mark zuck. buh I would have added other buttons 2 Facebook aside pokee.g punch, kiss, slap.....*

21. *so i was rollin on ma skatin shoes wen i fell down due 2 d hi ramp @ nec [New Examination Centre, NEC] junction. a taxi was passin by n a passanger tried talkin crap 2 me. #i gues he dasnt kno who i am*am wonderin if d skul s waitin 4 me 2 fall n loose a tooth b4 dey standardize dos ramps.*

Example (20) is an indirect speech act (Searle, 1975) where the speaker indirectly suggests that *mark zach* (the founder and owner of Facebook) should add other buttons like *punch, kiss, slap* to *poke*. Since, according to Brown & Levinson (1987) *suggestions* as explained above are FTAs, the addressee reacts to the speaker's indirect suggestion by saying (and also

providing another suggestion) that *that will be quite harsh to members. give nd take will be fun*. The speaker's attempt to mitigate the face-threatening nature of his utterance is heightened by the utterance *I'm not saying I'm smarter than mark zuck buh* In example (21) also, the speaker indirectly suggests to the university authorities to standardize road ramps. This suggestion follows the bad encounter the former had @ *nec [New Examination Centre] junction*.

Confessions

The act of confessing is made evident when one reveals one's inner thoughts, previous actions, feelings, etc. The analysis revealed that given that confessions are almost always an admission or acceptance of something, forms that represented such an intended meaning were directly or indirectly personalized. I categorized such expressions as an expressive speech act as a result of the emotions and feelings associated with the act of confessing. The data revealed that students of UCC do express their inner feelings to their network members through their status updates, using mainly epithets and/or adjectives that sought to vividly describe their personal feelings and inward emotions. The examples below are drawn from the data:

22. *..... *Am Missing Him*

23. *lonely*#

In example (22), it can be explicitly seen that the writer expresses her inner thoughts and feelings to the reader by confessing that she misses a loved one (probably, her boyfriend) while in example (23), the writer blatantly confesses her loneliness or state of solitude to the reader. The addressee, upon reading the writer's confession, tries to provide a solution by asking: *Do u need sm company, fucking or sex tlk, den inbox me ur no*. It is, thus, patent that in the two examples, the progressive verb *missing* and the attributive adjective *lonely* graphically illustrate to the addressee the actual inward feeling of the speaker, thereby making picturesque the actual psychological state of the speaker. It can also be inferred that, though not physically present, there is an underlying personal pronoun 'I' which can be retrieved in both examples, reinforcing the fact that what is put forward by the speaker is a personal overt confession.

In general, the analysis above establishes that the kind of language deployed by university students in updating their status on Facebook is neither arbitrary nor haphazard. Instead, such language is governed by reason of a system or a plan, and is used purposefully and skillfully in order that a communicative intent would be achieved or fulfilled.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper sought to examine the various categories of speech acts that manifest in the Facebook status updates of university students in Ghana as well as to identify the differing intended meanings of these updates. The study showed that four of Searle's (1969) speech act taxonomy were found in the status updates, occurring with varying levels of preponderance. The study also found that many intended meanings conditioned the messages that were used by the students to update their status. First, these findings characterize Facebook status updates as a unique discourse type. Second, the findings reveal the nature of public and social discourse on SNSs in Ghana, especially among students. Thus, these findings bear theoretical implications as well as contribute usefully to the scholarship on computer-mediated communication. By studying one online genre, drawing on a speech act theorem, in a setting under-researched in the literature, this study extends the research domain of studies on CMC, in general, and Facebook, in particular.

Theoretically, this work serves a useful lens for understanding human behavior. Through the study of online messages, discourse analysts and other researchers will be able to identify the functions and intentions SNS users in Ghana attach to messages posted on SNSs. The research, therefore, contributes significantly to the understanding of such theoretical concepts as 'identity' and 'community'. As Herrings (2007) notes, discourse involves speaker (in our case Facebook user) choices which are conditioned not only by purely linguistic considerations, but also by cognitive and social factors. Therefore, an analysis of messages posted on SNSs will help researchers to understand public discourse in so far as "the (social) media are consequential in social life" (Altheide, 1996:69).

From the discussion above coupled with the fact that there is very little amount of extant literature on SNSs, in general, and Facebook, in particular, in Africa, there is the need for further

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research. First, it would prove useful if future studies - using different online genres or sources – investigate language use on SNSs in order to ascertain the extent to which the present findings are corroborated or repudiated. Also, gender-based identity constructions and the gendered use of language in status updates should prove to be very viable areas of research. Finally, it should be possible to find out whether the findings of this study are consistent or otherwise with Facebook group pages in other Ghanaian tertiary institutions of learning.

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