'How Are You?' and Identity: A Case of a University Campus

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Abstract

This study investigated responses to 'How are you?' among students and lecturers of the University of Energy and Natural Resources, zooming in on the identity-marking variables of religion and age. In addition, the study sought to find out linguistic features as well as the literariness espoused in the responses. Employing a longitudinal study approach, data was collected over a one-year period. Findings show that responses have identified markedly the religious and age backgrounds of respondents; Christianity and Islam being two main religions of respondents while specific responses were used exclusively among the younger generation of students and the older generation of lecturers. Finally, linguistic processes such as amelioration, widening and narrowing and literary devices, namely, metaphor, hyperbole, irony and metonymy provided linguistic and literary niches to these responses.

Keywords: How are you? religion, age, identity, responses, greetings, University of Energy and Natural Resources, Ghana

Introduction

Language has attracted the attention of scholars who have focused on aspects of language study such as speeches, conversations, novels, lyrics, and many more. One major issue about the study of language is about the phenomenon of identity. Language itself is one major mark of identity. For example, almost all nations in the world are named after a major language. We can refer to countries such as England, France, Germany, Italy, Spain named after English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish respectively, making language an obvious mark of identity among peoples of the world.

Even within a language, we find identities further marked in terms of varieties such as a dialect, which is a variety of a language by a particular people within a main language. We can also refer to a sociolect, a variety of language among a social group, such as the youth. And we can mention an idiolect, a variety of language used by an individual. All these show the fact that language is unique and clearly identifies its users.

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One way we can tell the identity of a people by use of language is through greetings, which is the focus of this study. This study seeks to unearth the responses to 'How are you?' among undergraduate students and lecturers of the University of Energy and Natural Resources, Sunyani, Ghana, zooming in on the variables of religion and age as identity markers between the two groups of respondents. The study is sectioned under the following headings: research questions, method, discussions and conclusion.

Research Questions

1. What are the responses to 'How are you?' among students and lecturers of the University of Energy and Natural Resources?
2. Which responses identify the religion and age of respondents?
3. What linguistic and literary devices are employed in the responses?

Literature Review

The complexities of greetings as part of language use across the globe have been investigated from many angles over the years, particularly from the angle of anthropological linguistics which "views language through the prism of the core anthropological concept, culture, and as such seeks to uncover the meaning behind the use, misuse or non-use of language, its different forms, registers and styles. It is an interpretative discipline peeling away at language to find cultural understandings" (Foley, 1997:3). Foley (1997) mentions 'use of language' and 'cultural understandings'. Greetings are one definite way language is used and greetings and their responses have cultural or contextual interpretations and understandings. The present study's context is a university campus and its participants are students and lecturers. The focus of the study is to investigate responses to the question 'How are you?' among students and lecturers, zooming in on the linguistic variables of religion and age.

A few studies have investigated greetings across the globe, one of which is Agyekum (2008). Agyekum (2008) investigated the pragmatics of Akan greetings. He submits that "how a person is greeted and how s/he reciprocates are important in indexes of age, sex, social status, power, kinship and clan organisations… (p. 511). Agyekum (2008) shows that greetings and their responses have a link with identity in the forms of age, sex and status. We note that Agyekum's study focused on Akan. The present study's focus group is made up of students and lecturers from various ethnic groups in Ghana as well as other African countries. The language of investigation in the present study, unlike that of Agyekum's, which is Akan, is English. The focus for the present paper is just one aspect of greeting – responses to 'How are you?' The present study would determine whether or not such variables as religion and age would identify respondents in the socio-cultural domain of a university campus which is one brewing pot of many languages.

Ekanjune-Ilongo (2013) also investigated greetings in Akóóse using a sociolinguistic approach. Her findings are similar to Agyekum's (2008). She reports that the analysis

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'reveals that age factor, time, and context of situation determine the choice of greetings in Akóóse… (Ekanjune-Ilongo (2013:25). While one of the factors in consideration in the present paper is age, religion as a factor has not been considered either by Agyekum (2008) or Ekanjune-Ilongo (2008). This paper would determine whether religion also carries the same identity mark as age does in the investigation of responses to 'How are you?' among UENR students and lecturers.

Before Agyekum (2008) and Ekanjune-Ilongo (2013), Akindele (1990) conducted a sociolinguistic analysis of Yoruba greetings. He revealed that the system of greeting in Yoruba society is different from that of English society where a greeting typically performs the function of phatic communication. In the Yourba culture, greetings also pass on information. Agyekum (2008) and Akanjune-Ilongo (2013) both confirm Akindele's (1990) finding in the cases of Akan and Akóóse respectively. Akindele (1990) also emphasizes how age matters a lot in greetings among the Yoruba such as a younger one's responsibility to initiate greeting. The focus of this paper is different; the focus on the factor of age as an identity marker is to unearth whether or not either the older generation or the young generation has some responses exclusive with them and how this would mark their identity.

In all, we have seen from literature the attention greetings have received from linguists over the years. We have also noted the variables of age, sex, time, context and their important roles in greetings. In addition to age, the present study seeks to investigate the factor of religion and its role in the responses to 'How are you?' among students and lecturers of the University of Energy and Natural Resources (UENR), Sunyani, Ghana.

Methodology

This is a longitudinal study conducted between August 2017 and August 2018. The researcher in his normal exchange of greetings among students and colleague lecturers posed the simple question, 'How are you?' to as many students and lecturers of UENR as possible in their day-to-day school activities. In total, 726 responses were collected: 421 from students and 305 from lecturers. The responses were noted down and analysed considering the variables of religion and age. As regards age, all students were classified under the younger generation, while lecturers were classified under the older generation. The responses are categorized along these lines and discussed one after the other, making the study purely descriptive.

Discussion

This section presents the findings and discusses them with regard to the research questions. The first research question seeks to unearth the various responses to 'How are you?' among lecturers and students of UENR. In total, 726 responses were collected; 421 from students and 305 from lecturers. In all, 31 distinct responses were collected. Table 1 presents the distribution of the responses from both students and lecturers of the University of Energy and Natural Resources.

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Table 1: Responses from both lecturers and students of UENR

Single Lexical Items	Phrases	Short Sentences
Cool	His grace	I'm fit
Great	By his grace	I'm strong
Managing	By god's grace	I'm good
Management	By Jehovah's grace	I'm well
Terrific	Insha Allah	I'm doing well
Coping	Jesus' grace	I'm doing good
Brutal	Just ok	I'm alive
Good	Keeping bone and flesh together	I'm kicking
Blessed	No shaking	I dey
Wonderful	Can't complain	God dey
	Gun without bullet	I'm blessed
	Empty purse	
	Nothing give me	
	Rock solid	
	By the heavens	

We note that the responses are categorized into three, namely, those of single lexical items, phrases and short sentences. Among the single lexical item responses to 'How are you?' are *cool, great, managing, management, terrific, coping, brutal, good, blessed* and *wonderful*. Among the phrasal responses, we note *his grace, by his grace, by God's grace, by Jehovah's grace, insha Allah, Jesus' grace, just ok, keeping bone and flesh together, no shaking, can't complain gun without bullets, empty purse, nothing give me, rock solid* and *by the heavens*. Under short sentence responses, we have *I'm fit, I'm strong, I'm good, I'm well, I'm doing well, I'm doing good, I'm alive, I'm kicking, I dey, God dey* and *I'm blessed*.

The second research question focuses on how these responses mark identity as regards religion and age. Regarding religion, attention is given to those responses that express respondents' faith in a deity. As regards the variable age, attention is given to the responses that were given exclusively by the younger generation (students) and those also exclusively from the older generation (lecturers).

Religion

The responses to 'How are you?' among students and lecturers of UENR identify with two main religions that are practised among Ghanaians, namely, Christianity and Islam. Responses such as *inshallah* and *by Allah's help* clearly point to Islam as the religious background of some of the respondents, while *by Jehovah's grace* and *by Jesus' grace* point to Christianity. There are other general responses that express faith in a deity but are not clear as to their religious identity. These are *his grace, by his grace* and *by God's grace*. While

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these are general in nature and not specific to any religion, by observation and experience, I submit that these general references to God or by use of the pronoun *his* is very common among Christians on UENR campus. In essence, responses from respondents as regards religion have pointed to Christianity and Islam as two main religious groups on UENR campus. Just by these brief responses to 'How are you?' the religious identity of respondents is revealed, reiterating the identity-marking capacity of language.

Age

Age as a sociolinguistic variety has been one major identity marker in language studies as we have seen from Agyekum (2008), Akindele (1990) and Ekanjune-Ilongo (2013). The responses in the present study also clearly mark the younger generation (students) with responses used exclusively among them. Table 2 shows the distribution.

Table 2: Responses exclusively from students of UENR

SINGLE LEXICAL ITEMS	PHRASES	SHORT SENTENCES
Terrific Brutal	Can't complain No shaking Gun without bullets Empty purse Nothing give me Rock solid	I dey God dey

The responses that were exclusively used by students reveal some uniqueness, clearly marking the uniqueness that youth languages possess around the world (McCarty et al, 2009; Smith-Hefner, 2007). Under single lexical responses are *terrific* and *brutal*; under phrasal responses are *can't complain, no shaking, gun without bullets, empty purse, nothing gives me* and *rock solid*. Short sentence responses are *I dey* and *God dey*. We can note some sense of flamboyance in their choices of *terrific* and *brutal* as responses to 'How are you?' The adjective *terrific* has the sense of something tremendous, massive or gigantic. The intended meaning in this response is definitely not the archaic meaning of *terrific* which borders on something dreadful, terrible or horrible.

On the other hand, the adjective *brutal* denotes such negative understandings as *bloody*, *cruel*, *murderous* and *cold-blooded*. We can note the uniqueness as regards flamboyance that these responses carry and how they identify students as a younger generation who use language markedly different from the older generation of lecturers. This flamboyance would be further elaborated on under the heading *Literary Devices*.

The uniqueness of flamboyance and creativity is carried on to the phrasal responses to 'How are you?' In *can't complain*, we deduce a unique response that suggests that the respondent was neither fine nor unwell. In it we can see a resignation to carry on no matter

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the difficulties one faces, since complaining would not in itself make things better. While *can't complain* is rather largely undefined, the response *no shaking* has the sense of optimism in it. It serves as a motivation for the respondent not to give up even if things go wrong. In this regard, *shaking* is synonymous with giving up, hence *no shaking* means *no giving up*.

Of all the phrasal responses, the most novel to the researcher is *gun without bullets*. This response suggests that all is not well with the respondents. The responses *empty purse* and *rock solid* need no elaboration for they are self-explanatory. However, *nothing give me* is a common Ghanaian pidgin English which means *nothing for me* or *I have nothing*. It clearly shares the same sense of negativity as is espoused in *gun without bullets* and *empty purse*.

For the short sentence responses to 'How are you?' students have resorted to Ghanaian Pidgin English *I dey* (I exist, I'm alive) which shows the same sentiment of *can't complain*, while *God dey* (God exists) spells optimism as in the case of *no shaking*. In *I dey* we note respondents' expression of satisfaction that they are alive; in *God dey,* they express faith in God that he would take care of them.

Side by side the younger generation of students, lecturers have produced two responses used exclusively used among them, namely, *keeping bone and flesh together* and *by the heavens*. Asked for an elaboration on the former response, one lecturer said, "I'm just OK. When the bone and the flesh are together, we're alive, not dead yet." It is clear therefore that *keeping bone and flesh together* means one is doing well. The later response *by the heavens* shares similar grounds with *by God's grace*, *by Jesus' grace*, *his grace* and by *Jehovah's grace*.

Linguistic Features

The responses collected in this study are rich in linguistic features. Let us take the single lexical responses such as *terrific* and *brutal*. These adjectives have undergone some semantic shift or sense change. *Brutal* has undergone amelioration, defined by Sekyi-Baidoo (2002:317) as referring to "a situation in which a word now acquires a more positive or favourable meaning", inasmuch as it actually means in this context that the respondent is doing very well while *brutal* by itself carries a negative denotation; a clear case of contextual amelioration. *Terrific* which has such overlapping meanings as *tremendous* or *massive* has been narrowed or made specific (Sekyi-Baidoo, 2002) to mean *fine* in the context of a response to 'How are you?'

Moreover, we note the idiomatic use of *keeping bone and flesh together* to mean *fine* or *doing well.* It is general knowledge that the overall meaning of idiomatic expressions is not the sum of the meaning of the individual components of the expression. It is clear that the overall meaning of *keeping bone and flesh together* goes beyond the obvious flesh and bone. The same is true of other responses such as *no shaking*, *can't complain* and *gun without bullets*. We also note the semantic process of widening, an instance where the meaning of

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words is broadened, in the single lexical response *cool*. *Cool* by itself carries the idea of temperature. However, contrasted against *hot*, *cool* widens to mean *fine* in this context.

Finally, we see the employment of the cohesive device of ellipsis in all the responses but for the short sentence ones. Ellipsis is the deletion of some parts of a clause or sentence whose deleted part is recoverable from context (Amenorvi, 2015; Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004; Halliday and Hasan, 1976). The context of the responses in question is obviously that of greetings. It follows, therefore, that in the case of single-lexical and phrasal responses as we have noted earlier, ellipsis is employed. However, the deleted parts of these responses (*I'm*, *I am* or similar expressions) are recoverable from context and meaning is not affected. It is in this recoverability that the cohesion in the employment of ellipsis lies, binding the deleted and the undeleted parts of the responses together.

Literary Devices

Data has also revealed the employment of literary devices and how these have added a touch of sophistication as well as an aesthetic appeal to respondents' responses to 'How are you?' These responses may be simple words as we have seen. However, the use of literary devices in them reveal that even everyday simple conversations offer a lot to be investigated.

One major literary device employed in data is metaphor, which is the "use of language which serves as a condensed or elliptical simile, in that it involves an implicit comparison between two disparate things" (Abrams, 2011:154). An example is espoused in the single lexical item cool. This is likely a direct comparison between the respondents' state of wellbeing and something cool, more likely a glass of water. Except in unusual circumstances, people would normally prefer a glass of cold water to a warm or hot one. The significance of this metaphor is that it promotes easy understanding as the object of comparison, a cup of cold water or beer, is an easy reference to almost everybody. Moreover, this response is rather casual and easily breaks the ice of formality and stiffness between participants. It creates a levelling and builds up a symmetrical relationship or cordiality between participants.

Another use of metaphor in data is found in *gun without bullets*. In this elliptical response, we see a direct link of the respondent to a *gun without bullets*. This military metaphor is loaded with meaning as its thrust spells a feeling of *uselessness* on the part of respondents. Asked by the researcher to throw light on this response, one respondent asks, "What use is a healthy man without money?" From the foregoing, the comparison is obvious – the respondent is the gun, money is bullets. On the part of this respondent then *gun without bullets* does not mean that the respondent is unwell. It means that he or she is broke. In a nutshell, the respondent's conclusion is that much as a gun without bullets is useless or non-functional, so is a person without money.

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In addition, we note the employment of a hyperbole in *terrific* and *brutal*. It is in this hyperbole that the flamboyance displayed in student responses as mentioned earlier is found. We saw earlier the meaning of both words and for them to be applied to how a person feels is definitely an excessive exaggeration. As noted by Abrams (2011), hyperbole serves as emphasis on the reality of points under consideration. In the light of this, it is obvious that by terrific and brutal, respondents are saying that they are doing very well.

Moreover, in the response *brutal*, we see the employment of an irony which according to Cuddon (1999:431) has many functions: "it is often the witting or unwitting instrument of truth. It chides, purifies, refines, deflates, scorns and 'sends up'". The denotative meaning of *brutal* by itself is negative. However, as we have noted from Cuddon (1999), irony can purify, refine and deflate things that it is applied to. In the light of that, the brutality in *brutal* has been purified, refined or deflated, giving *brutal* a positive connotation of *fine* or *doing very well*.

Finally, there is the employment of metonymy in the phrasal response by the heavens. Metonymy embodies the presentation of something by referring to something else relating to it (Bierwiaczonek, 2013). By the response by the heavens, respondents are referring to God who occupies a central part of the religions of Christianity and Islam. It is popular knowledge that the two religions believe that God dwells in heaven. They also believe that God is a spirit and cannot be seen with human eyes. The significance of the metonymy is that by referring *heavens* instead of *God*, the respondents can see the evidences of the handiwork of God such as the clouds, stars, the moon and the sun. Beholding the presence of the physical heavens strengthens their faith and they see God through these physical elements. In effect, the thrust of *by the heavens* is *I am doing well by the power of God the creator*.

Conclusion

This study has investigated the responses to the simple question 'How are you?' among students of the University of University of Energy and Natural Resources, Sunyani, Ghana. The purpose was to unearth how the responses project identity among the respondents as regards religion and age, students being the younger generation and lecturers the older generation. The study also sought to find out linguistic features as well as the literariness espoused in the responses. Findings reveal that responses clearly show the religious and age identities of respondents. Linguistic processes of narrowing, widening and amelioration as well as the employment of figures of speech, namely, metaphor, hyperbole, irony and metonymy have contributed to the linguistic and literary sides of these responses.

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