

A Discursive and Pragmatic Analysis of WhatsApp Text-based Status Notifications

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Abstract

WhatsApp has significantly penetrated the various spheres of peoples' lives all over the world. The purpose of this study is to look at two aspects of WhatsApp text-based status notifications; namely, the most common discursive realizations and the major pragmatic themes. A sample of 846 status notifications for WhatsApp users' profiles was analyzed. Data, which were gathered between January and March 2017, were from three sets of male and female users. The status notifications were qualitatively analysed in terms of both the most common discursive realizations and pragmatic themes. The major findings of the study showed a variety in the discursive realizations, including self-generated statuses, which marked 82%, and auto-generated statuses, which made 18%. Data revealed also that the most used type of the self-generated was the pure text, which marked 53%. In terms of the major pragmatic themes employed by the users, data showed four main categories: religious, social, personal and national. The findings were then discussed, justified, and compared with results from previous research. The paper concludes with the limitations and future research recommendations.

Keywords: Discourse, language and technology, pragmatics, statuses, WhatsApp

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1. Introduction

Technology has influenced various aspects of our life. Indeed, the advent of technology has “reorganised how we live, how we communicate and how we learn” (Siemens, 2005, p. 3). With new technologies, people have found new prospects that made their lives different. Certainly, the wealth of resources and information that the Internet provides has also created new opportunities for society to make connections with each other and share knowledge and experiences which contribute to personal learning (Siemens, 2005).

Along with the Internet, mobile phones have contributed a great deal to this change. Mobiles, with the various applications that we install, have become indispensable parts of our everyday life (Sultan, 2014). As we all practice it, much of our time is spent examining the various applications and platforms installed in our mobiles. This involves numerous activities such as text messaging, which has become the most popular means of communication in social networks (Sultan, 2014).

Communication with friends, relatives, and other contacts has dominated users’ activities. Some of these activities provide spaces for expressing one’s self on different applications. Every individual can now expose whatever he/she wants and make available it to as many audiences as possible. Mobile users now have numerous platforms both to send messages about their personalities and to reflect on issues inside their community, or even outside.

WhatsApp has become one of the most mobile applications used worldwide. This application was created by Brian Acton and Jan Koum in 2009 (Yeboah & Ewur, 2014). The developers intended to create a free of charge SMS platform to make communication easier and faster (Yeboah & Ewur, 2014). This application has become the most popular in the Arabian Peninsula (Camp et al., 2019). It is connecting over one billion users every day, with about 55 billion messages sent by one billion users per day. In addition to communicating through WhatsApp messaging, status notifications provide a significant forum for expressing one’s self with their feelings and reflections on issues and events around them. Using these texts, users can openly share their thoughts and feelings with friends and contacts (Al-Khawaldeh et al., 2016).

To complete their profiles, WhatsApp users are required to fill up a 139-digit status notification to communicate with friends and contacts with different purposes. Studying the language used in these forms of expression would provide useful insights in how the forms of language are employed by these users to share with their contacts. This study, therefore, aims to contribute to that field by focusing on the status notifications employed by WhatsApp users.

Thus, the discursive realizations of WhatsApp status notifications, along with the various pragmatic themes employed by users in these texts, can provide loaded resources for researchers in applied linguistics. This study, therefore, intends to investigate a sample of status notifications to find out about the themes and purposes that WhatsApp users utilize to communicate with others. In particular, the present study aims at exploring the discursive realizations of the status notifications and identifying the major pragmatic themes conveyed by the users. This study is designed to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What are the common discursive realizations of WhatsApp status notifications?
- 2) What are the major pragmatic themes that these notifications are meant to convey by the users.

This investigation may contribute to our knowledge on how users deal with the forms of statuses offered by this technology, and how they do to depict their images in the digital space provided by this Application.

2. Theoretical framework

This section reviews the theoretical aspects concerning WhatsApp, pragmatics and discourse, and relevant studies in the literature.

2.1 WhatsApp, pragmatics and discourse

WhatsApp Messenger is a rather-new, highly popular means of communication that employs instant messaging (Sanchez-Moya & Cruz-Moya, 2015). Up to February 2016, WhatsApp total users reached one billion, whereas, in July 2017, 55 billion messages were sent by one billion users per day in 60 languages. In addition to the text messages, this application allows its users to use real-time texting or communication, which can allow them to exchange information and media content (Ahad & Lim, 2014). These include emoticons, images, pictures, voice notes, videos, weblinks and so on. WhatsApp users also have the privilege of creating their own digital profiles with their personal information. The users are encouraged to attach a photo, along with a status with a 139-character status, where they can describe their online persona (Sanchez-Moya & Cruz-Moya, 2015).

From a pragmatic perspective, WhatsApp users produce a meaningful linguistic expression, which is known as the *locutionary act*. This expression is produced with a purpose, the *illocutionary act*. Any expression of this kind is intended to have an effect on the reader or hearer, which is termed as the *perlocutionary act* (Yule, 1996). The features in WhatsApp, therefore, can provide some pragmatic functions that lead us to new insights. In addition, the texts used in WhatsApp are believed to share elements from both written and spoken varieties of the language (Sanchez-Moya & Cruz-Moya, 2015). Yus (2011) lists some of the most frequent strategies that users do to oralise written text, including phonetic, colloquial, and prosodic spellings. This indeed gives hybrid flavour which is neither written nor spoken, but something with its own characteristics (Maizarevalo, 2015). All this is vital for users to reshape themselves, and to create the effect they intend to have on their contacts (readers).

On the other hand, the discursive, communicative and other forms of interaction are monitored by social cognition which “mediates between micro- and macro- levels of society, between discourse and action and between the individual and the group” (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 257). The micro aspects concern the linguistic choices, whereas the macro levels involve global meanings (the schematic representations). The analysis of themes can also be grounded on Fairclough’s conventions that “ideologies reside in texts”, that “it is not possible to ‘read off’ ideologies from texts” and that “texts are open to diverse interpretations” (Fairclough, 1995, p.71). WhatsApp users, therefore, righteously exploit the space given in these notifications to expose their own beliefs and ideologies to others. These texts, therefore, can be an excellent resource for researchers to disclose the hidden messages expressed within.

2.2 Previous studies

WhatsApp has undergone a decent bulk of research in various disciplines. Some studies were undertaken in relation to WhatsApp as a popular SMS text messaging platform (e.g., Church, & de Oliveira, 2013; O'Hara et al., 2014). Other studies were concerned with studying the users' purposes of using WhatsApp as a social media technology (e.g., Robin et al., 2017). Much more attention has been given to the use of WhatsApp messenger in the teaching and learning of language (e.g., Amry, 2014; Lam, 2015; Al Shekaili, 2016; Binti Mistar & Embi, 2016; Sayan, 2016; Marçal, et al., 2016; So, 2016; and Hassan Taj et al., 2017; Ali et al., 2019). Some studies also were conducted with respect to the pragmatic aspects of WhatsApp messages (e.g., Otemuyiwa, 2017; Ueberwasser & Stark, 2017; Yus, 2017; Lestari, 2019). In terms of studying the language in WhatsApp status notification; however, the amount of research is still in its infancy (Sanchez-Moya & Cruz-Moya, 2015). In quest for research work related to this area, three studies have been found, and thus reviewed below.

One chief relevant study regarding WhatsApp status notifications was conducted by Sanchez-Moya & Cruz-Moya (2015). The study is intended to identify the most recurrent pragmatic uses of the discursive realizations of a corpus of WhatsApp notifications by looking at the multimodality that these statuses give. The study used a corpus of 400 WhatsApp statuses for users of different ages. The findings outlined a five-label taxonomy for the recurrent realizations of the statuses. The first two are self-generated and automatic-generated statuses. The self-generated types were also found to come under four categories: purely-verbal, hybrid, purely-iconic and blank.

Al-Khawaldeh et al. (2016) is another research work that deals with WhatsApp status notifications. The focus of the study was the discursive and thematic analysis of the WhatsApp statuses. The study was intended to find out both the major characteristics and purposes of the notifications and the gender differences in this regard. To achieve these goals, a corpus of 300 statuses by users from Jordan was examined. Analyzing the data qualitatively, the study found the major characteristics to run under five streams: personal, social, religious and political. The most recurrent type was personal, social and cultural, whereas the last one was religious.

Al-Smadi (2017) investigated the WhatsApp statuses from a sociolinguistic point of view by looking at the differences according to the age of the users as well as the gender. Using a qualitative method, the study investigated 400 statuses for two groups of participants: those under 30 years old, and those above 30 years old. The results of the study showed differences in the age, as well as the gender of the users. The study found that the religious status was the most frequent among female users, whereas the social status was the most numerous among male users.

The above studies have provided a good glimpse of how these statuses are used. This study, moreover, aims to shed further light into this scarcely researched area (Sanchez-Moya & Cruz-Moya, 2015; Al-Khawaldeh et al., 2016; Ueberwasser & Stark, 2017) by combining both the discursive realizations and the pragmatic themes.

3. Methodology

This research work used data from three different sets of mobile phone contacts representing both males and females. The three sets belong to a male university professor, a housewife, and a female high school student. The data of this study were collected between January and March 2017. At that time, status notifications were either written texts or emojis. For completing one's profile, WhatsApp users at those times were required to have a text-based status notification.

The status notifications used in this study were for Yemeni users with various backgrounds and levels of education (ranging between school students up to Ph.D. holders). Even though the contacts used in this study were mainly Yemenis, their communication has been open to various types of users including non-Arabic speaking contacts. The professor's contacts involved professors, friends, relatives, colleagues in other countries, and so on. The contacts of the housewife and the student were primarily female Yemenis, with some from other Arab speaking countries particularly KSA and UAE.

The data comprised a sample of 846 different statuses that belonged to 846 users (one status for every user). After collecting the data, they were qualitatively examined and analysed into forms and themes. For obtaining the discursive realizations, they were initially categorised into two major types, namely, automatically-generated and self-generated. The self-generated category was subsequently categorized into minor four types: purely text, hybrid, purely iconic, and blank. As for identifying the major themes in the sample of the notification statuses, the data were classified into smaller categories, including religious, social, and personal categories.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the findings obtained from this study. The analysis of the data is classified in connection to the two objectives of the study.

4.1. Discursive realizations

The first research question of this study is to find out the discursive realizations uses of the text-based status notifications of WhatsApp users. The analysis of the data showed two types of status notifications: automatically-generated and self-generated notifications. The two types are presented below.

4.1.1 Automatically-generated statuses: Data uncovered that 156 statuses, which represent 18% of the total 846 of the sample, used auto-generated notification statuses. These statuses include the ones with "Hey there! I'm using WhatsApp!" and other alternatives such as "Available", "At the Cinema", and "Urgent calls only". These notifications appeared in both the Arabic language (the mother tongue) and English. This finding is in line with (Sanchez-Moya & Cruz-Moya, 2015), who found that 35% of their sample used this kind of status.

The use of these statuses can be attributed to the fact that many users might not be aware of the space provided by the App or perhaps they are not even able to know how to use it. For some users, however, this might be intended to show a lack of interest in "reshaping their digital identity" (Sanchez-Moya & Cruz-Moya, 2015, p. 56).

4.1.2 Self-generated statue notifications: After identifying the auto-generated statuses, the remaining 690 statuses that represent 82%, are then examined. These self-generated statuses are the ones that have been intentionally added or modified by the users to share with their contacts. Data yielded four categories of these notifications, namely: purely text, hybrid, purely iconic, and finally blank statuses. The percentages given in Figure 1 below are for the 690 total of the self-generated statuses. These categories are presented and discussed in the following paragraphs.

Purely- text realizations: This makes 53% (369) of the total sample. Users deliberately used both quoted or personally composed texts (see section 4.2 for the discussion of this category).

By creating their own texts, users intended to actively use the space provided by the WhatsApp to interact with the other members of their community. The users have deliberately selected texts that are of importance to them and they feel they might be of interest to their contacts as well.

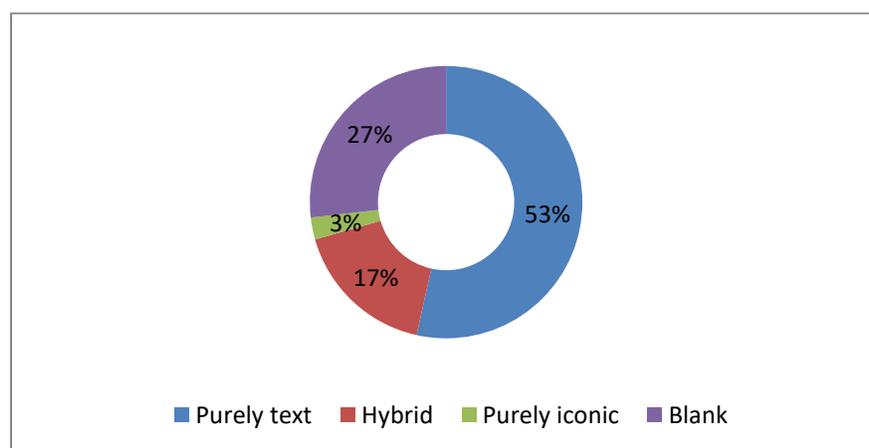


Figure 1: Discursive realisations status notifications

Hybrid realizations: users seem to be purposely intended to use both the usual text forms as well as the vast options of emoticons that WhatsApp puts forward to its users. It has been found that these statuses make 17% (118) of the total sample. Examples of such statuses from the data include “♥Sh♥”, “♥My S7♥”, “life is a test 🤔”, “Fragments 😊”, “a smile in your brother’s/sister’s face is a charity 😊”. According to Sanchez-Moya & Cruz-Moya (2015, p. 58), there are three main uses for the emoticons: reinforcing the verbal message, adding a semantic value, and storytelling. These have also been clearly identified in the data of the present study.

Purely iconic: data show that there are statuses with icons only. This type makes (18) 3% in the sample of this study. This finding shows it is limited. This might be due to the sample of a majority of elder users rather than younger users. Some examples are: “👤🔪♥”, “♥”, and “🙏”. Sanchez-Moya & Cruz-Moya, (2015, p. 58) found that this type of status has been used majorly by younger users, as a means to “transmit a more cryptic kind of communication”. This finding is also in line with Ueberwasser & Stark (2017), who found that that emojis are used between 14-28%.

Blank realization: users intentionally deleted the text options provided by the WhatsApp and used a blank space instead. This type makes 27% (185) of the total sample. This may indicate that even though these users are aware of this facility, they showed no interest in communicating any message about themselves by utilizing it. Further, these users seem to emphasize their knowledge of this facility, and yet they deliberately delete it. This finding is also in agreement with Sanchez-Moya & Cruz-Moya (2015), even though it was the least common realization in their data.

The analysis of the data concerning the types of self-generated statuses uncovers that the pure text type is the most prevailing. Blank realization has also been used more in the data. The least is purely iconic, which may indicate less familiarity of the users in the sample with the icons, used for various situations.

4.2 Themes of WhatsApp notifications

The second research question of the present study is to find out the major themes used in the WhatsApp status notification used in this study. The analysis of data revealed five major patterns of themes. They are religious, social, personal, and national, as shown in Figure 2 below.

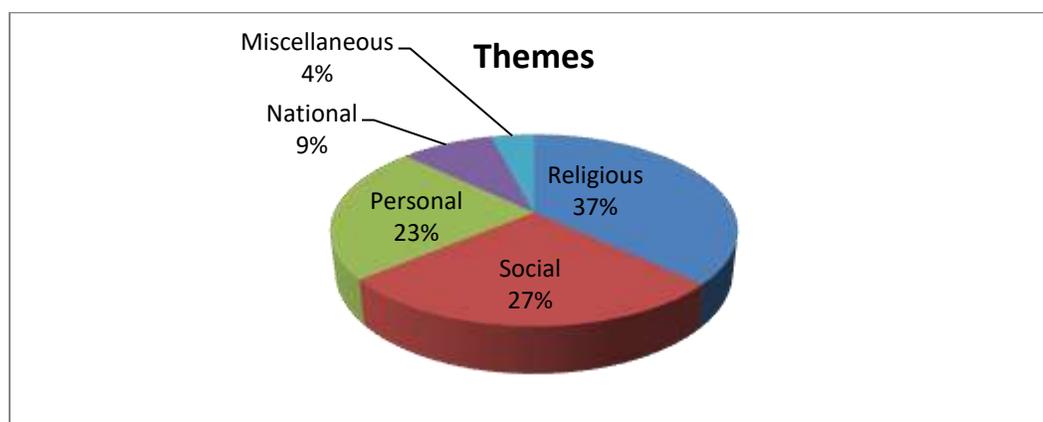


Figure 2: Major themes for status notifications

1. **Religious status notifications:** This type is the most common category in the data gathered from the users in this study. As shown in Figure 2 above, 180 (37%) of the used texts are majorly categorised as religious. These include verses of the Holy Quran such as: “And whoever fears Allah - He will make for him a way out”; Prophet Sayings, e.g. “You are only as good as those who associate with”; prayers e.g., “Oh Allah! I ask you for help, and I depend upon you in my all issues”; and supplications to God “Prayers be on his prophet Mohammad and his family and companions”, and “There is no god save Allah”. Though with less percentage, this finding is in line with the findings of Al-Khawaldeh et al. (2016), who obtained 26% in this type. This is also in agreement with Al-Smadi (2017), who found that this status is more frequent among female users.

The frequent use of these items can be attributed to the tendency among the users to utilize this facility to share religious messages with their contacts. Users seem to prefer to communicate religious items to their contacts. They perhaps mean either to remind them of their religious duties, to invite them to take part in what they do, to repeat their religious verses or sayings in order to be

rewarded by Allah, or to give their contacts an image that they are more linked to religion. Although these might provide some explanations, more qualitative work eliciting users' justifications will perhaps enlighten us further in this issue.

2. Social status notifications: the second major category that could be classified in the sample data comes under social notifications. This represents 27% (132) of the total sample. Data showed that users intended to fill this space provided by the App with texts that can achieve social purposes. These statuses reflected expressions that share functions and events with other members of the community on various occasions such as greetings, marriage and engagement, death, and the like. Examples of this type include:

- Greetings: "Salam!", "Have a nice day!"
- Marriage and engagement: "Hope she'll have a blessed life.", "Oh Lord make things go well (wedding)!", "Congrats on your engagement!"
- Public occasions: "Many Happy Returns❤️", "Happy Valentine!", "Ramadhan Mubarak".
- New baby: "Congrats on the new baby".

This result here is in line with Al-Smadi (2017), who found that this status is more frequent among male users.

3. Personal status notifications: the third category identified fall under personal notifications. This makes 23% (113) of the total. These are expressions that reflect personal purposes such as expressions of love, expressions for one's self, saying farewell and so on. Examples of this type include:

- Love for beloved persons: "In all languages in the world 'I love you'.", "Oh my Lord! Preserve them for me ❤️ and do not deprive me of them ❤️.", "Your love is not my choice, it's my fate".
- Saying farewell to a beloved person: "May Allah let their way be safe for them.", "Have a safe journey!"
- Personal wishes for things expected: "Oh our Lord! make it easy for us to go to Makkah for Hajj.", "Oh our Lord make us among those who attend the month of Ramadhan".
- Other: under the personal type also, there are notifications that were intended to inform contacts about things in connection to the user. These include telling friends and contacts that s/he lost their contact numbers, and that they excuse him/her when he/she confuses any of them; example: "Kindly each one should introduce herself to me as I have lost all my contacts". There are also statuses, which tell contacts information about the users, such as changing the telephone number. Personal statuses also included statuses in which users write their full names in Arabic or English, their post at jobs, or sometimes their titles.

4. National notifications: This type deals with the statuses written in connection to the home country and the national situation. Although Yemen is in unrest, the percentage of notifications of this kind in the sample is somewhat limited. As seen in Figure 2 above, only 9% of the data could be placed under this category. Most of these statuses were in the form of wishes or prayers for the country -or sometimes a city or place of it- to be in better conditions. Here are some examples: "Oh Allah, save Yemen and its people", "Oh God, save Taiz (Yemeni town) with your sleepless eyes", "My heart will eternally beat 'Yemen'", and "Oh my country, green herbs that grow inside

my body”. This finding here is in agreement with Al-Smadi (2017), who found that the national status is the least status used by Jordanian users.

6. Miscellaneous notifications: these include notifications that serve many purposes. Some statuses give positive and encouraging meanings, for example, “don’t be sad, what’s coming would be better.”, “challenging words often lead to beautiful destinations.”, “After every breath, new life is given.”, and “Be good, do good, and have fun.”. Some other statuses include indirect messages e.g., “I’m being envied as if I own the whole world.”, and “Stay away from negative people, they have a problem for every solution”. Other statuses are meant to tell something about the user, such as “Sorry for not taking part in group discussions”.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Concluding remarks

This paper is intended to examine the discursive realisations and the thematic categorization of a sample of 846 text-based status notifications of WhatsApp users in the year 2017. The sample comprised three sets of data for a male university professor, a female housewife, and a female high school student. The major findings of the study showed a variety in the discursive realisations, including auto-generated statuses, which marked 18%, and the self-generated statuses, which made 82%. The most recurrent self-generated type was the purely text (53%). Data also revealed that the most used themes are religious (37%), social (27%), and personal (23%). The findings of the present study are hoped to have added more glimpse of grasping WhatsApp users’ preferences and purposes on using the statuses, along with previous research in this area. This would primarily be valuable for expanding our understanding of the discursive and pragmatic features used with the facilities offered by this application.

5.2. Limitations and future research

As the data used in this study were collected before the upgrading of the WhatsApp status into a multimodal one, this study was confined to the text-based statuses only. WhatsApp statuses in the new multimodal, however, would be an immense source of data that could result in further insights when it is looked at by applied linguists. This new multimodal status can provide an excellent platform for eliciting insight in the discourse and pragmatics of the forms used. Researchers can investigate various relevant facets, including differences between people of different nationalities, genders, ages, and levels of education.

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