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Abstract

This paper presents the results of a linguistic study in graffiti in Kenyan universities a case study of Rongo University College using Lexical Pragmatics framework. The main purpose of the study was to investigate and analyze the linguistic elements in graffiti in Kenyan Universities. "Graffiti" and its occasional singular form "graffito" are from the Italian word *graffiato* ("scratched"). "Graffiti" is applied in art history to works of art produced by scratching a design into a surface. A related term is "sgraffito" which involves scratching through one layer of pigment to reveal another beneath it. This technique was primarily used by potters who would glaze their wares and then scratch a design into it. Graffiti takes the form of written language whose authorship always remains anonymous. It precisely refers to any wall writing, pictures and symbols or markings of any kind on any surface anywhere no matter what motivates the writer. Most graffiti are viewed as illegal or vandalism of property by those in authority. The university students use graffiti as a form of communication. This study investigated, identified and described the types of graffiti used for communication by the students of Rongo University College and the linguistic features of the graffiti used. The data was collected from the walls of lecture rooms, washrooms, surfaces of doors, chairs among others. This data was analyzed qualitatively to arrive at inferences and conclusions.

Introduction

Gross (1997) argues that in order to understand graffiti as a mode of communication, it is insufficient to simply decipher the texts without first identifying graffiti as a medium. Graffiti is a linguistic phenomenon which involves both "form and content" by commonly making use of discourse "any segment of signs larger than a sentence," and sign – something which "stands for something other than itself". Thus, it is both useful and necessary to acknowledge and examine the significance of graffiti as a product of human linguistic expression, as well as the nature and impact of the message being communicated. Crystal (1995, p.181) observes that graffiti is

typically obscene or political in character, but a great deal of humour and popular wisdom content has formed the basis of several collections by folklorists, artistes and humorists, number of graffiti found on the university walls attest to this. Coulmas (1996) describes graffiti as writing or drawing scratched on a wall or other surface such as inscriptions that contain quotations from poets, salutations, idle words, obscenities, love addresses and satirical remarks. Crystal (1997p,.181) describes graffiti as any type of public markings that may appear in the forms of simple written words to elaborate wall paintings found in the navy. This study deals with words or fragment sentences (texts), drawings and writings scribbled on the surfaces of the university. Yieke (2003), in a study conducted on graffiti in Kenyan universities suggested that graffiti should never be ignored by those in authority if they wanted to know the sentiments and needs of the students. This clearly implies that students in learning institutions use graffiti writings to communicate issues that if addressed are beneficial to the smooth running of these institutions. She continues to assert that if well channeled, graffiti could provide a forum for students (who consider themselves a minority) to express themselves in a wide range of topics and at the same time, act as an expression of academic freedom and on-going intellectualism. Obeng (1998) in a graffiti study done in Legon University in Ghana established that graffiti in a place reflected graffitist political and ideological inclinations, social and ethnic identities, and the prejudicial and stereotypical view they hold about certain people and their languages as well as their views on specific persons and personality. This assertion was important in the current graffiti study because it implies that graffiti writing at Rongo University could be unique due to the social and cultural inclinations of the students and the locational background. Chaffee, et al (1990) argue that graffiti and other “public art media”- a collective term for alternative communication method have been largely dismissed as subversive and illegitimate. This phenomenon could largely be attributed to the key features of graffiti, accessibility and anonymity (Chaffee, 1990). Like many other forms of media or art, graffiti serves to advertise and propagate ideas, share information and support or oppose the system. However, a distinctive quality separating graffiti from other, more “legitimate.” forms of media is that it is “one of the easiest and most efficient” way for individuals and groups to voice political dissidence, social alienation and anti-system ideas because it offers to individuals, high-accessible communication channels at low-risk retribution. Nwoye (1993) asserts that groups that had been prohibited from or denied avenues of public expression seek other outlets, with graffiti on walls of public places a favored option; and she goes ahead to identify students population in most parts of the world as one such group. The fact that students do write graffiti in an area that facilitates the anonymity acknowledges the vulnerability of face (Goffman, 1967). It is usually during face-to-face encounters that hazards are maximized due to the instantaneous consequences inherent in face to face behavior. Graffiti therefore constitute avoidance discourse that like other avoidance discourse, it insulates the participants against face threat. Yieke (2004) examined graffiti as one widespread yet generally overlooked way of voicing dissatisfaction. After analyzing samples of graffiti from factories in the Export Processing Zone of Kenya, she asserts that these writings should be taken seriously for they are one way in which otherwise muted individuals can express their feelings and share their concerns with others in the same situation. Graffiti constitutes an act of self-disclosure and an expression of a very personal nature, but maintains the writer’s privacy through anonymity. Mc Cormick (2003) argues that in institutions where formality and structure are privileged, graffiti

offers opportunities to break away from the rigidity to create a space for a more organic discourse by inviting uninhibited and uncensored discussions that are often rare in scholarly writing. Freed from the unyielding language of academic, students are able to assert aggressive identities and resist dehumanization. For instance, numerous evidences of extensive multi person dialogues staged in campus bathroom stalls suggest graffiti not only serves its purpose as a mode of communication but also serves it well. According to graffiti studies conducted in the U.S.A., some universities now recognize the importance of graffiti in informing them of important social issues and problems at these institutions. They have thus formed "graffiti corners" where students can freely write graffiti without fear of being accused of vandalism. The authorities then take photographs and videos to keep as records for future action and then repaint the surface for fresh graffiti. The first reason that makes this study imperative is because although universities in the west take graffiti writings seriously as a way of avoiding students unrests and as a valid communication channel graffiti writing at Rongo university and many other Kenyan universities is still illegal and the on acceptable communication channels include notice boards, posters, university web site postings and meetings between students council and the university administration which in most cases is one way (from administration to students but not vice versa). The second fundamental question is that why graffiti would still be used by students as a tool of communication in such an era of social media? These arguments point to the value of this study. The linguistic analysis graffiti would provide insights into the use and value of graffiti to learning institutions in Kenya and the world with Rongo University being a microcosm of learning institutions.

Theoretical framework:

The graffiti analysis in linguistics can be dealt with within the theory of lexical pragmatics.. Words are grouped into semantic classes, organized in the occurrence of semantic properties, and organized from the presence or absence of a feature (Munge, 2009, p.16). The theory of conversational implicatures also come handy, this was developed from William James lectures (1965). Grice, in his paper "logic and conversation" (1975) endeavored to outline it as a theory of implicatures. Grice's theory is an attempt to explain how the learner gets meaning from what is meant [intention], from the level of expressed meaning [explicit] to the level of implied meaning [implicit]. Grice, therefore, provided a framework for the interpretation of utterance where he points out that, knowing what the speaker actually said in producing a particular utterance, knows what sense or referent was intended (Levinson, 1983, p. 101). Grice then came up with four conversation maxims that help one to determine what the implicature might be. These refinements then in conversational implicatures theory led to Neo-Gricean theory. The conversation maxims through integration and unification were reduced to Q-principle and I-principle (Atlas & Levinson 1997, p.75). Lexical pragmatics will provide an explanatory way and try to give a systematic account of the phenomena under discussion, especially in this present study of graffiti.

Research Methodology

A descriptive research using both quantitative and qualitative data analyses was adopted in this study. This is because qualitative research helps the educational researcher to obtain in-depth

data on the study problem. Qualitative research enables one to study things in their natural settings attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Human behavior is also explained best using this approach. The location for this study was at Rongo university Migori County. This area was considered suitable for study because as with many other areas no research has ever been done on graffiti writing by students yet there has been persistent writing of graffiti at the university.

Findings and Discussions

The graffiti are conversational. This study revealed that the graffiti used at the university is highly conversational. The graffiti is written on the surfaces which later attract responses triggering more graffiti. The graffiti which attracts responses include the obscene ones and those on issues that are emotive at the university. The examples are shown below. "Ng'ony mit duk" written in Dholuo language translated means sex sweet naked. This was found on the door of males' washroom, next to it there were responses such as "do what brought you here". Another instance was found in the lecture room which was "we love prof gudu" which is a response from those who love the principal thereby replying to voice a different opinion. The graffiti are radical and political. Most of the graffiti written reflect a lot of political issues of the university thereby defining some of the political moments at the university. This study also shows that during university student's elections there is an upsurge of graffiti writings. Examples include: "Vote no to the constitution". This captures the constitution making moment at the university when the students were making their university; this graffiti was meant to persuade students to vote against the constitution. This lexical pragmatics augments the fact that graffiti use is done within some contexts for relevant interpretations. The graffiti are obscene and abusive. Most of the graffiti found on the surface and walls had the use of vulgar language more so those found in the male washrooms, examples include:

"Ng'ony mit duk" written in Dholuo language translated means "sex sweet naked"

"Okong meru" translated to mean your "mother's private parts"

"Only the stupid use permanent marker pens". The graffiti use a lot of code mixing. Most of the graffiti found at the university indicate that there is a lot of code mixing ranging from the use of Kiswahili, Dholuo, sheng' (Kenyan pidgin) and English. Examples include:

"rongoni" written in Dholuo meaning "this rongo"

"Ng'ony mit duk" written in Dholuo language translated means sex sweet naked

"wasee" Sheng meaning "comrades"

"wacheni ujinga" Kiswahili meaning "stop stupidity".

The code mixing helps to deduce the setting of the university as it is located within the environment of Dholuo speakers and in the Kenyan context. They also use short words and fragmented sentences. Graffiti artists employ use of short words. In texts like 'NO', "so what" the writers of graffiti at the university do not use normal grammatical expressions. Sentences are predominantly characterized by simplicity or reduced syntactic complexity. The sentences or words are incomplete. Both content and functional words may not be overtly seen. The graffiti text is short, brief and void of grammatical and punctuation marks that the artist does not ponder as necessary in putting the intended message across. To many of the graffiti texts on at the university, the subject and the object are overtly left out as demonstrated in those words. The

study also shows gender differences in graffiti writing at the university. Both genders use graffiti as both the male and female hostels indicated use of graffiti, however, majority of sex related graffiti and use of vulgar words were found in male washrooms eg. findings concurs with the findings of(Bruner & Kelso,1980) who reviewed various quantitative studies on graffiti in restrooms and concluded that there were indeed differences based on gender. In their study, they found out that male and female restroom graffiti differed in two major respects. The first is that women's graffiti are more of a dialogue. One woman would raise a question and others would provide a string of responses and serious replies. Men wrote graffiti on sexual conquests while women wrote on friendships and relationships (Cole, 1991).

Conclusion

Most of the graffiti were written in English, however there was use of Dholuo, Kiswahili and Sheng'. This study reveals that the graffiti used at Rongo university shows that they are conversational, obscene, radical and political, use of short words and fragmented sentences. They also show gender issues in terms of use. The lexical pragmatics theory and Grice maxims adequately explains the data on the graffiti.

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