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PRAGMATIC PARTICLES IN ONLINE SYNCHRONOUS SESSIONS AMONG AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION MANAGERS

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ABSTRACT
This study is a pragmatic investigation of online synchronous chat sessions involving thirty-nine participants involved in an external quality assurance online course organized for higher education managers in Africa. The participants were drawn from eleven African countries by the Association of African Universities. The study adopted the pragmatic principle of conversation structure to identify and analyze the pragmatic particles used by the participants in synchronous chat sessions regarded as computer-mediated communication of the conversation type. Three categories of particles namely, bid initiation, bid change and bid exit were analysed. The analysis reveals the occurrence, distribution, and functions of the particles. Bid change particles were the most frequently used particles followed by bid initiation and bid exit in that order. It was concluded that although pragmatic particles usually predominate in spoken conversation, the interactive nature of online written dialogues provide another domain of digital affordances in English worthy of socio-pragmatic investigation.

Keywords: Pragmatic particles; Online synchronous chat sessions; Computer-mediated communication; Pragmatic functions

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) has redefined traditional notions of face-to-face communication and conversation. The affordances of web-based internet facilities facilitate electronic or virtual communication and conversation in real-time. Unlike telephone conversation, digital technology has made it possible to communicate and hold conversation online across vast regions simultaneously. The Web 2.0 revolution has also made it possible for teaching and learning to take place successfully online. Thus, conventional face-to-face classroom conversation can now hold in a virtual space provided the participants have the technology, connection, and skills required for such an interaction without the limitations of space, time, and boundary. The use of interactive whiteboards (IWBs) in teaching and learning is one of such facility. The combination of both audio and video in telephony, as afforded by new means of social media applications

where participants can hear and see other participants are made available by internet social media communication.

One form of CMC, which involves 'multi-user domain' (MUD) or 'chat room', is synchronous sessions. These sessions involve participants, who are diverse and spatially located being connected, to communicate in real time with each other simultaneously. In such mediated sessions, participants enjoy speed and immediacy. The higher the immediacy of feedback, the rapid the time of exchange of messages! The rapidity of electronic interaction in synchronous sessions creates the 'illusion of a fast-paced, 'real' conversation' (Mey, 2001, p.147). The success of the interaction depends on the technology, connectivity, and skill (especially typing speed) of the participants.

Given the above, this study investigates the pragmatic particles of online synchronous chat sessions involving thirty-nine (39) participants who were involved in an external quality assurance online course in 2010. The course was organized for higher education managers drawn from eleven (11) African countries by the Association of African Universities. The rest of the paper reviews the concepts of pragmatic particles and online synchronous sessions and then analyzes samples of the pragmatic particles observed in the chat sessions paying attention to the pragmatic functions of such particles.

2.0 Literature/Theoretical Underpinning

2.1 Conceptualizing Pragmatic Particles (PPs)

It is difficult to have a satisfactory explication of the term 'pragmatic particles'. The difficulty is traced to the different perceptions of the term which goes by different descriptive names. Secondly, pragmatic particles are sometimes regarded as 'verbal distractions', 'verbal shutters', 'fumbles', 'gambits', 'fillers', 'void connectives', and so on with negative connotations. On the positive side, Zarei (2013, p.108) quoting Brinton (1996) lists more than twenty terms used to identify the different names by which pragmatic particles are known in the literature. Some of these terms include: pragmatic connectives, comment clauses, connectives, discourse connectives, discourse deictic items, discourse operators, discourse particles, discourse markers, discourse-shift markers, discourse words, hedges, initiators, and interjections. Others are: markers of pragmatic structure, pragmatic markers, parenthetic phrases, pragmatic connectors, pragmatic formatives, pragmatic expressions, pragmatic particles, reaction signal, verbal ties, among others.

The different terms, used to describe pragmatic particles, suggest the different understandings and perspectives of conceptualizing the term. As Zarei (2013) observes, "despite the quantity of research in this area, however, no consensus has emerged regarding fundamental issues of terminology and classification" (p.108). In spite of the lack of agreement, we shall attempt to aggregate the various conceptualizations of the term in terms of forms and functions. These are sub-classified along five parameters namely; (i) discourse-oriented definitions; (ii) response signal-oriented definitions; (iii) conversational continuity-oriented definitions; (iv) interaction essential-oriented definitions; and (v) structural-oriented definitions. The first four are function-based while the last is form-based.

(a) Discourse-oriented definitions: These are function-based definitions as exemplified below. Blackmore (1987a) defines the term as "those expressions used to indicate how the relevance of one discourse segment is dependent on another" (p.125) while for Redeker (1991), pragmatic particle is a "linguistic expression that is used to signal the relation of utterance to the immediate context with the primary function of bringing to the listener's attention a particular kind of linkage of the upcoming utterance with the immediate discourse context" (p.1168). For Goldberg (1980), pragmatic particles are "marking devices which display the speaker's understanding of the contribution's sequential relationship or relevance to the information set as established by the immediately preceding contribution" (p.141),or as Schiffrin (1987) puts it, "sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk" (p.31). Fraser (1990) sums up the discourse-oriented definition as follows "… a type of commentary pragmatic marker signaling a sequential discourse relationship or how the speaker intends the basic message that follows to relate to the prior discourse" (p. 387-392).

(b) Response signal-oriented definitions: These are function-based definitions as well. For Schourup (1985, PPs "…constitute the range of conventionalized responses in English mediating between covert thinking of participants and displayed verbal behavior" (p.3). This definition agrees with the position of Levinson (1983) that pragmatic particles "… indicate, often in very complex ways, just how the utterance that contains them is a response to, or a continuation of, some portion of the prior discourse" (p.88).

(c) Conversational continuity-oriented definitions: These are still function-based definitions. In this regard, Edmonson (1981) defines PPs as "…conventionalized ways of plugging potential gaps, such that in fact no gap is perceived by the interlocutor" (p.54). PPs could be regarded as utterances used to "…maintain the continuity of discourse" (Crystal-Davy, 1975, p.88-99). This is why Brown (1977) considers PPs as utterances used to "… fill the silence and maintain the speaker's right to speech while he organizes what he wants to say" (p.109).

(d) Interaction essential-oriented definitions: These are also function-based definitions. In the words of Östman (1982), PPs as (are) markers which "…implicitly anchor the act of communication to the speaker's attitude towards aspects of the ongoing interaction" (p.152). They are "vehicles for the establishment and maintenance of interpersonal relations between interlocutors" (James, 1983, p.193).

(e) Structural-oriented definitions: These are form-based definitions as exemplified by Keller (1979) who defines PPs as a "certain set of signals in the conversationalist's speech used to introduce level shifts within the conversation or to prepare listeners for the next turn in logical argument" (p. 220). They are also regarded as expressions which "help the speaker divide his message into chunks of information and hence they also help the listener in the process of decoding these information units" (Erman, 1986, p.146). For Evan-Zohar (1982), PPs are vehicles for "…demarcation and concatenation…[which] specifically express organizational relations both locally and formally" (p.179-180).

2.2 Features and Functions of Pragmatic Particles

Pragmatic particles have certain features which make them recognizable and isolatable.

(i) Oral discourse-oriented

Generally, PPs have high frequency in oral discourse thus they are regarded as a feature of oral rather than written discourse due in part to the informality of oral discourse. Östman (1982 argues that "the grammatical 'fragmentation' caused by lack of planning time" (p.169) makes pragmatic markers expedient in oral discourse. Although pragmatic markers predominantly occur in spoken discourse, (Brinton, 1996; Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1985; Defour, 2008) and seldom in written text (Tamminen-Parre, 2009), Östman (1982) identifies "interactional writing, impromptu conversations carried out in writing" (p.11) as discourses which manifest pragmatic particles. In fact, Zarei (2013) argues that there are no principled grounds to deny discourse marker status to similar items that are largely found in written discourse such as *moreover, consequently, contrariwise.* Although certain discourse markers occur essentially in speech, the occurrence of discourse markers is not restricted to oral discourse only. This accounts for why synchronous chat is identified as a form of impromptu speech of the text-only written conversation in this study.

(ii) Structurally detachable

Pragmatic particles are often restricted to sentence-initial position although not exclusively (Auer, 1996; Zarei, 2013). In typifying the structural characteristics of PPs, Östman (1982) notes that they are "…short and tend to occur in some sense cut off from, or on a higher level than the rest of the utterance, at the same time as it tends to modify that utterance as a whole" (p.5).

(iii) Propositionally empty with invariable cognitive content

PPs "resist clear lexical specification" and may be "propositionally empty" (Östman 1982, p.5) though "each pragmatic particle has a prototype meaning or function of its own, its occurrence in whatever medium or register" (Östman, 1982, p.4). It is for this reason that Brinton (1996) describes discourse markers, a term

she prefers to pragmatic particles, as "elements of discourse which do not contribute to the propositional content of the utterance" (p.33). This implies that PPs have little or no propositional meaning, or at least are difficult to specify. It is the propositional emptiness that resonates Schiffrin's (1986) proposition of "meaning-minimalist view" (p.42) of the discourse particle.

On the invariability of the propositional content, Scheler and Fischer (1998), characterize "discourse particles as lexemes with an invariable cognitive content which is employed on different communicative levels" (p.1). Scheler and Fischer (1998) identify the cognitive content along four variables namely: (i) the speaker's mental state (ii) hearer's supposed mental state (iii) propositional level, and (iv) the speaker-hearer interaction level as well as the action level. Heidar (2011) and Zarei (2013) both identified seven features which characterize discourse markers. Zarei (2013) arranged these characteristics in order of those features mostly referred to in the literature to include: connectivity, optionality, non-truth-conditionality, weak clause association, literality, morality, and multi-categoriality while Heidar (2011) listed the following features: position, multigrammaticality, indexicality, optionality, referential category, structural category, and cognitive category in his study of the socio-pragmatic functions of discourse markers in international law texts.

On the functions of pragmatic particles, two basic concepts govern the occurrence of PPs namely, planning and politeness. Planning is speaker-oriented and directly affects the content and form of the resulting utterance or text. Politeness on the other hand is interaction-oriented and its direct effect (both on content and form) is attitudinal which is behavioural. From this perspective, Östman (1982) notes that PPs perform two types of tasks: interactional and attitudinal. The interactional functions of PPs include attention-getting, focusing on the speaker, and appealing to the addressee. For Defour (2005), PPs are categorized in terms of text-structuring and interpersonal functions. Textual functions of PPs include foregrounding and backgrounding, saliency or peak marking, narrative segmentation (that is beginning and ending episodes), changing topic or character, resuming narration after interruptions, and shifting narrative mode. Yilmaz (2004) provides a typology of the functions of pragmatic particles along the following three domains: conversational structure, interpersonal, and content. This study adopted the conversational structure proposed by Yilmaz (2004).

Defour (2008) offers an interesting historicization of the process of grammaticalization of lexical items which enables lexemes to undergo loss of semantic meaning ('semantic bleaching') or increase in pragmatic implicatures ('pragmatic strengthening'). According to Defour (2008), lexical items go through a uni-directional process of grammaticalization from propositional meaning to text-structuring function and finally to increasingly expressive or interpersonal function. This grammaticalization process, Defour (2008) observes, has two processes namely (i) the process of 'subjectification' which is defined as "the process whereby lexical meanings become increasingly associated with speaker attitude" (Traugott, 1995a, p.2) and (ii) 'intersubjectification', a process through which meanings become "more centred on the addressee" (Traugott, 1999, p.3).

3.0 Synchronous chat sessions as impromptu written conversation

One of the features of PPs is that they are predominantly a characteristic of oral discourse or conversation as well as impromptu or spontaneous speech. An impromptu speech is typically found in spoken language characterized by spontaneity. For Östman (1982) impromptu speech is a discourse type characterized by "on-the-spot-created language that is to be processed in real time; the prototypical instance being spontaneous… " (p.10). He notes that impromptu speech focuses on the "cognitive and interactional processes involved than on the ultimate linguistic product". In other words, on-the-spot-creation, real-time language, the context of the situation, the medium, and the topic distinguish impromptu speech from other forms of speech. Östman (1982) identifies interactional writing, impromptu conversations carried out in writing as forms of impromptu speech.

It is in this characterization that we identify synchronous chat session as interactional writing of the conversational impromptu type. Synchronous chats are computer communications in which participants are aware of real-time interaction with others online simultaneously (Spencer & Hiltz, 2003). Video and audio are

synchronous when the interactants can see and hear other users more or less in real time such as Skype sessions. Chat rooms and multi-user domains (MUDs), interactive television and telephone conferencing are synchronous computer-mediated communication.

Chat sessions, according to Spencer and Hiltz (2003), consist of users logging on to a common server and posting short messages to a common viewing area. A conversation setting is created with the group watching the stream of messages pass by while occasionally making a comment or posting some longer text. This kind of conversation is froth with challenges. One is the influence of typing speed and ability, which increases the lag time between thought and comment. Lloyd-Williams (2008) observed that "the increase in thought and comment lag time can be the difference between silence and communication" (p.6) yielding a communication anxiety which Lloyd-Williams calls 'thematic obsolescence'. Secondly, a participant may start typing and then abandon the idea either because they have changed their minds or because they have noticed that the theme has moved on and they do not wish to make a thematically 'non-synchronous' posting. This scenario is not exclusive to synchronous chats as it also occurs in face-to-face communication especially when ideas are found but not voiced for several reasons.

One of the characteristics of conversation is the immediacy of feedback. The immediacy of feedback refers to the time at which the reply and subsequent response are separated from the initial comment. This concept is an aspect of the media synchronicity theory (MST) which is an extension of the media richness theory (MRT). According to Spencer and Hiltz (2003), a medium with a high immediacy of feedback would facilitate the rapid exchange of messages which qualifies it to be described as a conversation. It is this assumption, in spite of the limitations of typing speed and ability as well as connectivity challenges, that qualify text-only synchronous chats used for this study as electronic or computer-mediated conversation.

4.0 Methodology

The focus of this study is two-fold. First is to identify the occurrence and distribution of pragmatic particles especially those used as bid initiation, bid (turn-taking), and bid closing particles in synchronous sessions. Secondly, to account for the functions of the observed particles within the three domains of conversational structure, interpersonal, and content.

4.1 Sample and Participants

This study used synchronous chat sessions involving 39 participants and four facilitators who met and shared information and ideas in the same text-only virtual environment without audio or video. There were eight contacts which yielded 11 synchronous chat sessions with three broken and inconclusive sessions due to connectivity challenges. The participants were engaged in an online course on the theme: "External Quality Assurance: Options for Higher Education Managers". The course was facilitated by the University of South Africa Distance Education Department from September 15 to November 21, 2010 under the auspices of the Association of African Universities (AAU). Participants were drawn from eleven countries as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Distribution of Participants across Countries

Country	**Number of Participants**
Botswana	2
Ethiopia	1
Ghana	8
Mali	2
Namibia	3
Nigeria	5
Sierra Leone	1
South Africa	2
Sudan	1
Tanzania	2
Uganda	1

Total	**39**

4.2 Transcription and Duration of Synchronous Chats

The eleven synchronous chat sessions were transcribed after downloading them from the domain site set up for the online course. The following notations were used to indicate the interactants: F1 means First Facilitator to enter the chat session and mail the first post; F2 means second Facilitator to join the session and send the second post in that order. P1 refers to the First Participant to enter the session and send the first post just as P2 means the Second Participant to join the session and post his or her comments in that order. In other words, for each session, individuals were listed as F1 to F4 if they were four facilitators who logged in and posted messages or P1 to P11 if there were eleven participants who logged in and posted messages. Each session (conversation) was expected to last at least 60 minutes all things being equal. The shortest session lasted one minute, and the longest lasted 81 minutes. See Table 2 for the duration of sessions.

Table 2: Duration of Chat Sessions

Chat Sessions	Duration in Minutes
First Session: Wednesday, September 22, 2010	10:18am-10:19am (1minute)
Second Session: Wednesday, September 22, 2010	10:35am-10:41am (6 minutes)
Third Session: Wednesday, September 29, 2010	09:32am-09:44am (12 minutes)
Fourth Session: Wednesday, September 29, 2010	09:56am-11:07am (71minutes)
Fifth Session: Wednesday, October 6, 2010	09:49am-11:07am (78 minutes)
Sixth Session: Wednesday, October 13, 2010	10:04am-10:16am (12 minutes)
Seventh Session: Wednesday, October 13, 2010	10:22am-11:06am (44 minutes)
Eighth Session: Thursday, October 14, 2010	09:58am-10:55am (57 minutes)
Ninth Session: Wednesday, October 20, 2010	10:03am-11:23am (80 minutes)
Tenth Session: Thursday, November 4, 2010	10:02am-11:09am (67 minutes)
Eleventh Session: Wednesday, November 10, 2010	10:01am-11:22am (81 minutes)

Each session was analyzed in terms of the pragmatic particles used as bid particles. Such particles were classified along the following terms: (i) Bid initiation (opening particles) used for greeting or summons, (ii) Bid/Turn-change particles and (iii) Bid closing particles. It is important to note that within the Turn-taking system, turns could be used to perform the pragmatic functions of Turn-taking, Turn-holding, Turn-yielding, and Turn-supporting.

4.3 Findings

In this study, particles were identified and categorized along the parameters of bid initiation (opening) particles; bid/turn-change particles; and bid closing (final) particles.

4.3.1a Distribution of Bid Initiation (Opening) Particles

This category of particles includes particles used as vocatives. Sometimes the vocatives go with honorifics. These particles are found in the conversational structure domain and they are used as pre-entry or turn-entry devices to signal the beginning of the interaction in the form of greetings. Table 3 below shows the distribution of these particles.

Table 3: Occurrence and Distribution of Bid Initiation (Opening) Particles

Particles	No. of Occurrence	Percentage
Honorific	66	45.2
Hi + honorific	46	31.5
Welcome + honorific	15	10.3
Welcome	9	6.2
Hello	3	2.1
Hi	1	0.7
Cheers	1	0.7
Morning	1	0.7

Morning + honorific	1	0.7
Good Morning + honorific	1	0.7
Greetings to all	1	0.7
Good afternoon every1	1	0.7

From the table above and the pie chart below, 'honorifics' accounted for 45.2% of the observed particles followed by 'Hi + honorific' which accounted for 31.5% occurrence. 'Welcome + honorific' , 'Welcome' and 'Hello' followed with 10.3%, 6.2% and 2.1% respectively. Others as listed in Table 3 cumulatively accounted for 4.9% as shown in the pie chart but individually it accounted for 0.7% occurrence in the bid initiation particles observed in the study.

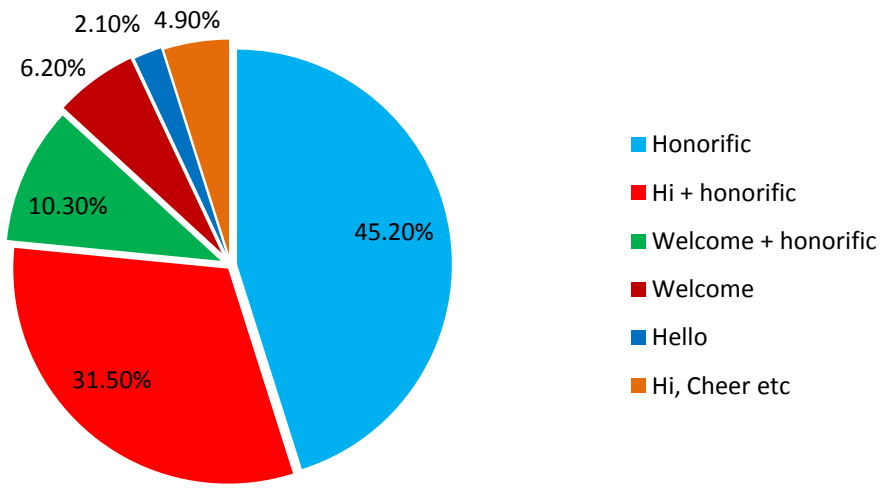

Fig 1: Occurrence and Distribution of Bid Initiation (Opening) Particles

Table 4 below presents the functions of bid initiation particles identified in the study. Essentially, bid initiation particles were used within the conversation structure domain as turn-entry devices, to signal request or invitation, as a floor holder, floor claimer and as a response to a greeting. Within the interpersonal domain, such particles were used for the socio-pragmatic function of politeness and to create an emotional effect.

Table 4: Functions of Bid Initiation (Opening) Particles

Conversational Structure Domain	Interpersonal Domain	Content domain
Turn-initiation or Turn-entry device Request/invitation Floor holder Turn and Floor claimer Response to a greeting	Politeness Emotional effect	Empty

5.1b Distribution of Bid /Turn Change Particles

Table 5 below and the pie chart show the distribution of bid/turn-change particles. Bid or turn-change particles were classified into four subclasses. The first are those regarded as 'core' particles which usually consist of single lexical items. This accounted for 51% of observed bid change particles with 'Yes/yes please', 'Yes + honorific', 'Sorry/Sorry + honorific' and 'Ok/ok + honorific' having high distribution of 27.5%, 18.8%, 17.5% and 12.5% respectively. The second are phrases used as particles which accounted for 30.6% occurrence with 'I think', 'I agree', and 'Lets/Let us' having a distribution of 52.1%, 16.7% and 14.% frequency respectively. The third category are coordinators and subordinators used as particles which accounted for 10.8% occurrence with 'so' and 'but' having the highest frequency of 58.8% and 29.4% respectively. The last

category are adjuncts which are used as particles. This accounted for 7.6% with 'certainly' as the most frequent adjunct accounting for 16.7%.

Table 5: Occurrence and Distribution of Bid/Turn Change Particles

Particles	No. of Occurrence	Percentage
Core particles (80 or 51.0%)		
Yes /yes please	22	27.5
Yes + honorific	15	18.8
Sorry / Sorry + honorific	14	17.5
Ok /ok + honorific	10	12.5
Please/pls	6	7.5
Well/very well	4	5
Of course	3	3.8
Also	2	2.5
Sir	1	1.3
Excellent	1	1.3
Noted	1	1.3
Agreed	1	1.3
Phrases used as particles (48 or 30.6%)		
I think	25	52.1
I agree	8	16.7
Let's/ Let us	7	14.6
I see	3	6.1
You see	1	2.1
You know	1	2.1
I know	1	2.1
By the way	1	2.1
Let me	1	2.1
Coordinators and subordinators used as particles (17 or 10.8%)		
So	10	58.8
but	5	29.4
and	1	5.9
because	1	5.9
Adjuncts used as particles (12 or 7.6%)		
Certainly	2	16.7
Traditionally	1	8.3
Hopefully	1	8.3
Perhaps	1	8.3
Actually	1	8.3
Now	1	8.3
Thus	1	8.3
Definitely	1	8.3
Unfortunately	1	8.3
Particularly	1	8.3
Usually	1	8.3

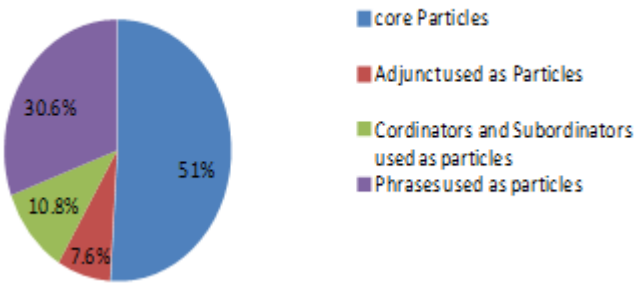

Fig 2: Summary of Bid Changing Particles

With regard to the functions of bid /turn-change particles, the details of the functions are presented in Table 6 below across the three domains of conversational structure, interpersonal and content.

Table 6: Functions of Bid/Turn change Particles

Conversational Structure Domain	Interpersonal Domain	Content domain
Turn-initiation or Turn-entry device	Speaker emphasis	Summary/Assessment
Floor holder	Response particle	Answer-preface to question
Turn and Floor claimer	Politeness	Topic expansion
TCU-Initial Self Repair	Hedging	Topic expansion at conversational level
TCU-Medial (Built-in) Self Repair		
Response to a question		
Repair organization		

5.1c Distribution of Bid Closing (Final) Particles

These are class of particles used as bid closing to signal turn completion or turn-exit devices within the conversational structure domain. Table 7 below shows the distribution of these particles. From the distribution, 'Thanks/Thanks + honorific' accounted for the highest occurrence while others were evenly distributed. 'Thanks' (with or without honorific), 'bye' (with or without honorific) as well as 'please' and the abbreviated form 'pls.' accounted for the commonly used bid closing particles whenever the participants had the opportunity to 'sign out' properly.

Table 7: Occurrence and Distribution of Bid Closing (Final) Particles

Particles	No. of Occurrence	Percentage
Thanks / Thanks + honorific	6	42.8
Bye/ bye + honorific	2	14.3
Please/pls.	2	14.3
Good bye for now	2	14.3
Cheers	2	14.3

The functions of Bid Closing Particles are presented in Table 8 below.

Table 8: Functions of Bid Closing Particles

Conversational Structure Domain	Interpersonal Domain	Content domain
Turn completion or Turn-exit device	Emotional effect	Topic closure
Repair organization	Response particle	
	Politeness	

In summary and from the data presented, Turn-change particles had the highest frequency of 49.5% occurrence followed by Bid initiation particles with 46.1% and Bid closing with 4.4% as shown in Fig 3 below.

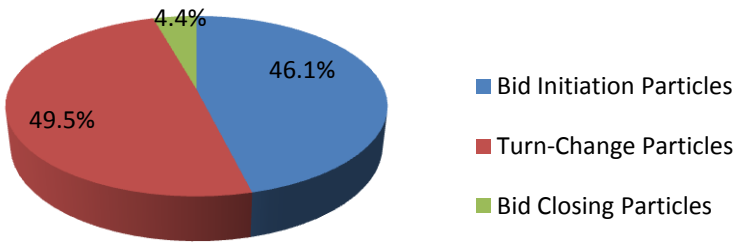

Fig 3: Summary of Distribution of Particles

5.0 Discussion

Bid Initiation Particles

From the distribution of the bid initiation particles shown in Table 3 above, honorifics and 'hi' + honorifics were the most dominant vocatives used in the synchronous chat examined in this study. These were followed by 'welcome' with or without honorifics. Honorifics include name-calling as indicated in the underlined segments below.

F1: Samuel and Taha, you can see what we have been discussing so far by clicking on this link

F1: Akli, I think the problem of human capacity is a significant one

F1: Sayed, appeals are a very important part of QA.

P2: Prof, quality enhancement involves the assessment of some aspects that can be documented in written forms….

Examples of "hi" + honorific include the following:

P2: Hi Neil, I hope you are doing very well

F1: Hi Abiodun and Akli

P4: Hi everybody, …

Honorifics in the form of name calling are used as turn-entry devices to signal when a new participant enters the chat session and also to perform interpersonal function of politeness and floor claimer. When honorifics are used with names, it serves several functions. First, a speaker claims the floor for another that is, the person whose name is called. Second, it could be a response to an issue raised by the speaker whose name is called and to which the current speaker wants, the person called, to contribute to. Thirdly, it could be a call to the person addressed to hold the floor longer probably to offer an explanation or to elaborate on an issue. The underlined segments below show how honorifics are used to invite participants to join in the conversation for several reasons.

P1: Tony, do the issues related to the quality of examination papers, coverage of the curriculum, etc matters?

P6: Akli, quality of examination papers is very vital otherwise we turn out bad nuts

F1: Hi Akli –yes I agree

P1: Juliana, I do agree with you Juliana

P5: Akli, I agree with you that moderations of exam questions and the result are important

P1: Joe, new institutions may be monitored and guided by QAA bodies till they obtain accreditation.

From this extract, P1 (Akli) raised an issue on quality of examination papers to which P6, F1, and P5 make contributions with P1 coming in to agree or offer more clarifications. Each speaker addresses each point by calling on the speaker intended to hold the floor or to note the point being made within the conversation structure and interpersonal domains of the discourse. However, in this study, it is important to note that bid initiation particles had empty content since such particles had no propositional contribution to the theme whether locally or globally. The only exception could be when the word 'please' or any other expressive word is used to preface the topic in the course of the interaction.

Other forms of vocatives used are those which relate to time. The vocative *"Good afternoon every1"* where the word *"every1"* combines letters and number (alphanumerical characters) is a common form in the

language of texting and social media communication. It reveals the formulaic form of digital writing (Egbe and Ekpe, 2009; Egbe and Muodumogu, 2014) bearing in mind the constraints of time and space for typing and quick response.

Bid Changing Particles

Table 4 presented the findings of bid change particles. In the first subclass, that is core particles, 'yes' and 'yes please' and 'yes' + honorific were the most frequent particles. 'Sorry' and 'sorry' + honorific (used as bid particles either seeking or confirming mitigation) as well as 'ok' and 'ok' + honorific' respectively followed in frequency. These are particles used to establish support and agreement. There were few cases of the use of adjuncts as particles. While only 'certainly' occurred twice, other adjuncts identified in this study occurred once. 'So' is the most frequently used subordinator as a particle followed by 'but' as the most frequently used coordinator as a pragmatic particle. The most frequently used phrasal particle is the phrase 'I think' followed by 'I agree' and the 'let-form'.

In considering phrases used as particles, it is important to note the form of the verbs used to convey or perform pragmatic functions. These verbs include conceptual verbs such as 'think' and 'know'; consensual verbs such as 'agree'; and perceptual verbs such as 'see'. The frequent occurrence of the form 'I think' points to the mental processes involved in the chat. This could be added to the other forms of either 'I know' or 'you know' also identified in this study. These two forms are used to seek cooperation and confirmation on points raised. Besides, the occurrences of these conceptual verbs suggest that unlike most other social media communication which is mainly phatic providing more of information, the participants in this synchronous chat investigated were in a teaching-learning platform. Such a platform will provide information as well as exposition of points made. Such an interaction requires the participants to think through issues since it was not just social chatting to share information. It requires the interactants to not only provide information but also analyze and synthesize information. The other epistemic verbs: 'see', and 'agree' perform different pragmatic functions in the conversational structure. 'See' for instance is used as a bid particle seeking support and solidarity; while 'agree' is used to confirm support. Samples of the verb forms used in the study are reported below with their pragmatic functions in **boldface** or **highlighted**.

F1: I think it is important to start by building in an inclusive way some agreement about minimum criteria **(Turn Control Unit (TCU) - Initial Self Repair)**

P8: Neil don't you think affiliation of the QAA will influence the reason for the reviews? For instance, if an HEI's rating will influence the quantum of fund from gov't, even in the USA where accreditation is voluntary, the understanding is that State support still depends on accreditation.

P9: HEI's are also supposed to be informed of the panel ahead of the assessment exercise.

P11: I agree that HEIs have to be informed well in advance so they can be ready for it though they should really be always ready as QA is not a one day thing **(Support/ Floor holder/TCU-Initial Self Repair)**

P5: I think affiliation in this context helps as a check for HEIs to ensure QA **(TCU-Initial Self Repair)**

F1: Colleagues, this was a wonderful discussion and the issues you raise are pertinent. May I end by encouraging all of you to start working on module 1 activities and post your responses on the platform so I can start reviewing them.

P4: Thank you and must say it has been a wonderful experience

F1: I see, we have a healthy discussion this morning. **(Pre-exit cue/Floor holder)**

F1: Unfortunately I think the AAU server is struggling when lots of people log on at the same time **(Floor holder/TCU-Medial (Built-in) Self Repair)**

P2: Neil, I see we are experiencing some technical/internet connection problems. **(Floor holder/TCU-Medial (Built-in) Self Repair)**

Adjuncts used as pragmatic particles perform several functions from being used as hedge devices to being used as repair organization, speaker emphasis, and as topic expansion. For example:

P2: Hi Tony, Hi everybody. I will start with a joke[,] last chat Gloria addressed me as a "she" and you can see that I'm a "he". I think it is advisable for you all to upload your photos, cause we need every bit of information about you all, for future contacts!

F1: Certainly, in an online environment it does help to create a more personalized space and a sense of talking to another person. Maybe we could have an EQA process on the photos uploaded? **(Speaker emphasis, politeness and hedging)**

P7: Certainly, QA process on photos has indeed help [ed] to upload his. Let us all adhere to all regulations so that we can complete on schedule. (**Response to a statement)**

P5: Training is key to the survival of the QAAs as well as HEIs seeking accreditation and affiliation. This should be as frequent as possible

P11: Definitely, it's their only survival as the whole world seems to what [want] to open avenues for higher education at every little corner. (**Speaker emphasis**)

P9: Thanks Neil, that will be very helpful

F2: By the way, I am based in South Africa but participating in a UNESCO Conference on Quality Assurance in Bamako. (T**opic expansion**)

P4: Mandatory process I believe would be very helpful in Africa. That will facilitate comparability of qualifications

P5: Yes, interactive sessions with HODs, Deans & VC has assisted, we have also developed a participatory approach that includes all lecturers and students (**Floor holder and assessment**)

F1: So we need to engage at both senior and "chalkface" levels. How would you all feel if you were asked to participate in a peer review panel? What information and support would you need? **(Topic expansion at conversational level)**

Bid Closing Particles

Internet fluctuations during chat sessions may account for the low frequency of bid closing particles observed in this study. Such fluctuations may be due to disconnection, poor network or internet connectivity at user domain or at the main server. When this happens, sessions do not end as planned. In all cases, these particles were used to signal turn completion or turn-exit, for politeness, and to mark topic closure.

The extract below shows however that there are instances in which bid closing particles are used for repair organization and for creating emotional effect as illustrated below. The particles are underlined.

F1: Ok I will send out a general mail after the chat suggesting groups for the continuing discussion. So maybe today we need to focus on any outstanding queries about Module 2 and then how Module 2 relates with Module 3?

P5: What is the main question for discussion please? (**Repair organization and politeness**)

P5: Thank you Tony **(Turn-exit)**

P9: Thanks Neil, that will be very helpful. **(Turn-exit)**

F1: Our current time is up. Remember you can continue discussions asynchronously on the course website under announcements.

P11: Thank you all. This was my first and I love it **(Turn-exit and Topic closure)**

F1: Goodbye and good luck with Module 3 **(Turn-exit)**

P8: I have enjoyed this session. Some faces are still dummies, can we have your pictures? Please if you discover some QAA websites let me know.

P11: Thanks and bye all **(Turn-exit)**

P8: nice week and God bless, byeeeeeeeeeeeeee **(Emotional effect)**

The use of the shortened form 'pls.' and the lengthened creative 'byeeeeeeeeeeeeee' are the affordances of online platforms. The lengthened 'bye' appears like a smiley and it is used for creating emotional effect. It is important to note that in electronic conversations, one's emotions could be expressed through the use of certain fonts and icons. For example, "one can only talk (in small letters) or SHOUT (in capitals), use alphanumerical characters, or smileys or 'emoticons' to express certain feelings or attitudes" (Mey, 2001, p.147-148; Janney, 1996, p.204).

6.0 Implication to Research and Practice

This study examined the distribution and functions of three categories of particles – bid initiation, bid change and bid exit in an online synchronous session. Given that all the participants were drawn from different regions

of Africa, a socio-pragmatic analysis could have been done. Such an analysis would reveal whether regional variety of English had an effect on the choice, distribution and function of pragmatic particles observed in the study. Secondly, a socio-pragmatic analysis would also reveal whether the subject of discourse in anyway influenced the observed particles in this study. However, this study has provided insights and domains within which certain pragmatic analysis can be framed namely, the conversational structure domain, interpersonal domain and content domain.

7.0 Conclusion

This study has provided insight on pragmatic particles used in online synchronous sessions. The study showed that synchronous chats are instances of impromptu written speech and therefore are computer-assisted communication, which yields pragmatic particles often common in conversation. What is important is that synchronous chats share the characteristics of speed, spontaneity, on-the-spot-created language, and immediacy of feedback associated with oral speech. Against this justification, the study defined and delimited the scope and functions of pragmatic particles as used in synchronous chats among English speakers in selected African countries involved in an online quality assurance course. The study revealed the occurrence and distribution of pragmatic particles used as summons or bid initiation, bid/turn-change, and bid closing particles with bid/turn-change having the highest frequency. These three categories of particles were analyzed in terms of their functions within the conversational structure, interpersonal, and content domains. The findings and discussion revealed how English is used in online discourse interaction among users of English as a Second Language (ESL). It also revealed some of the affordances of digitally-driven written English and the need for further investigation into the socio-pragmatic functions of discourse markers in synchronous online chat sessions.

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