

An Error Analysis of Punctuation and Preposition Usage (PPU) in WhatsApp Group Discourse

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Abstract

WhatsApp group chats provide a platform for interaction among members who belong to the same profession, religion or activity group; offering them the opportunity to congregate virtually, to disseminate (timely) important information and to solicit cooperation on workplace issues. Therefore, it represents a unique linguistic space where multiple users engage in unstructured, spontaneous conversations. In such informal digital contexts, conventional rules of grammar and punctuation are often disregarded, leading to frequent language errors. Two of the most commonly observed error types in WhatsApp group discourse are punctuation errors and preposition errors. This paper adopts the traditional grammarians' identification and classification of words that are called prepositions and their combination with verbs, adjectives or nouns to analyse the group discussions on various subjects and comment on the grammaticality or otherwise of their usage. A sampling strategy was employed to select 10 active WhatsApp groups and data were collected from WhatsApp group chats involving participants who regularly communicate in English. The result of the analysis reveals that punctuation errors were more frequent than prepositional errors, accounting for over 60% of all grammatical issues identified. The most common punctuation errors were: omission of full stops, commas and exclamation marks. Preposition errors mostly involved incorrect usage, omission and unnecessary additions reflecting either interference from the native language structures or general grammatical incompetence. It is recommended that WhatsApp users can use grammar-checking tools such as Grammarly, Microsoft Editor, even on mobile devices to help them catch common errors in prepositions and punctuation.

Keywords: *WhatsApp, punctuation, preposition, error, grammar*

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1.0 Introduction

The rise of digital communication platforms has transformed the way people use language in everyday interactions. Among these platforms, WhatsApp stands out as one of the most widely used messaging applications globally offering instant real-time and often informal communication between individuals and groups. WhatsApp group chats represent a unique

linguistic space where multiple users engage in unstructured, spontaneous conversations. These chats are typically characterised by informality, speed and lack of linguistic monitoring which makes them a fertile ground for investigating language variations and deviation from standard norms.

Some scholars who viewed WhatsApp group discourse as a multimodal, multiuser

conventional space characterised by interactive, affective and cohesive exchanges are Mbada et al (2023), Onuoha (2024) and Vogiatzis et al (2025). According to these scholars, the platform affords near-real-time communication, multi-modal expressions and the negotiation of social norms that make the digital environment function much like a physical conversational space. In such informal digital contexts, conventional rules of grammar and punctuation are often disregarded, leading to frequent language errors. Two of the most commonly observed error types in WhatsApp group discourse are punctuation errors and preposition errors. These errors may occur unintentionally due to constraints of mobile typing and the absence of proofreading. Sometimes, it is intentionally; in that wise, it serves as part of emerging digital shorthand. Moreover, such deviations are influenced by sociolinguistic factors such as the user's educational background, native language, age, and familiarity with standard written English.

The emergence of social media and other technological platforms has rendered the English language fluid and flexible in usage. Calude (2025) argues that digital communication creates new interactional environments that redefine how people use language socially. Different words and usages that flow with the contemporary realities are finding their way into English for daily communication. The rules of Standard English usage are no longer considered during communication on these platforms. Adherence to such rules is becoming unfashionable as hundreds of words are introduced daily, and coinages that would have been considered incorrect are now in use. WhatsApp, as an alternative to Short Message Service (SMS), allows its users to send text, voice messages, video messages and share images. The correct usage of punctuation marks is germane to attaining meaning in conversations and writings.

Bach et al (2020) argue that WhatsApp discourse is a new genre of writing, one that

blends features of spoken conversation (spontaneity, informality), is conditioned by technological affordances (speed, typing limitations, multimedia) and is guided by social expectations of immediacy and connectedness. Eva & Michal (2023) argue that writing is a skill that draws on the use of strategies, one of which is the punctuation marks. This skill must be learnt and mastered to write intelligibly. Oluseun & Adekola (2017) pointed out that punctuation helps in erasing ambiguity in writing, as the meaning of a sentence can be distorted if punctuation is poorly used. The meaning of a text can be altered substantially through the misuse of a punctuation mark. For instance, punctuation marks differentiate the meanings of these two sentences: Woman: Without her, Man is nothing (emphasising the importance of women to men). Woman, without her man, is nothing. (emphasising the importance of men to women)

Communication is an essential aspect of human activities. The presence of language accentuates the need to talk to one another. While talking, we use either a codified or non-codified form of language through either the written or spoken medium. WhatsApp users largely depend on and frequently use the written and spoken forms of the English language to pass across their ideas, views and opinions on any matter of public interest, especially those deemed to have direct relevance to the general well-being of a group that belongs to the same profession. Group interest brings affinity, cordiality and sense of responsibility towards the members of a WhatsApp group. As a result of this cordiality, members share their views on any matter of public interest using the English Language.

The educational status of members of a WhatsApp group largely affects the standard and variety of English they will use to communicate among themselves. It is expected that among lecturers of a university or tertiary institution, impeccable English of a high standard will be used among members without prejudice to those

lecturers whose discipline may not be English. Members of a WhatsApp group whose profession differs from teaching but whose academic attainment can be classified as being graduates fall within the category of those whose use of the English Language is expected to conform to the minimum standard, hence some level of proficiency is required of them when communicating on their WhatsApp platforms. Groups with no-educational status (NES) or reduced-educational status (RES) but are still comfortable using the English Language do sometimes attempt to make use of standard English, albeit not with full attention to grammaticality.

Huda et al. (2017) identify some of the common punctuations which are comma, full stop, question mark, colon and semi-colon that are often misused in selected scientific writings. In the same vein, punctuation marks in WhatsApp messages that are frequently misused often involve the omission of necessary punctuation marks such as commas, periods, colons, semi colons, and misuse of exclamation marks. Sometimes, it includes inconsistency in the use of capital letters. This pattern reflects a shift from writing as a formal, rule-bound activity to writing that mimics spoken discourse where rhythms and emotion often outweigh grammatical correctness. Susanto et al (2025) similarly emphasise that social media has transformed users' writing habits by encouraging informal syntax, shortened expressions and visual elements like emojis.

Prepositions are linking words that join nouns, pronouns and phrases to other words in a sentence. Prepositions are a class of closed grammatical words used to link nouns, pronouns, or phrases to other words in a sentence. Common prepositions include: at, in, by, on, and with. Prepositions are often idiomatic and context-dependent, making them one of the most challenging aspects of English grammar. Preposition helps create the intended message by learning how to correctly link words to their

specific meaning; we learn to build fluency and accuracy. Prepositions help our writing to be precise. They determine the position, time and limit of our actions.

The subject 'preposition' will not be exhaustively dealt with in this paper, but some frequently misused prepositional phrases will be dealt with as they appear in the constructions of WhatsApp users. Whenever a preposition combines with a verb, it becomes a prepositional phrase. The prepositional phrases that relate to time are the most abused of the types of prepositional phrases, and these are adequately discussed in this paper.

WhatsApp is a mobile messaging platform that facilitates one-on-one and group communication through text, voice, images, and videos. Group chats on WhatsApp create a multimodal, multi-user conversation space, where users interact in real time or asynchronously. Such platforms form part of a broader category of 'digital discourse, where the structure of communication often mimics spoken conversation more than formal written text. WhatsApp group discourse is generally characterized by informality, which encourages users to adopt casual language without strict adherence to grammar or style. Messages are sent quickly, often without proofreading. The writing style imitates spoken language, often through the use of slang, abbreviations and emotional punctuation, while overlapping messages from different users can interrupt cohesive structure. This communicative environment influences how language rules are followed or broken, especially regarding punctuation and preposition use.

In WhatsApp chats, punctuation serves not only grammatical functions but also paralinguistic ones. It is used to convey tone, emotion, or rhythm. For example, ellipses ('...') may indicate hesitation, sarcasm or an unfinished thought. Multiple exclamation marks or question marks ("!!!" or "???"") often express strong emotions. Omissions of periods or commas reflect

an emphasis on speed rather than grammatical correctness. These patterns suggest that punctuation in WhatsApp discourse is undergoing functional redefinition, which may lead to deviation from standard norms.

2.0 Material and Methodology

The influence of traditional grammar on the study of the English Language is indispensable in that it was the traditional linguists who identified the parts of speech under which words in English were grouped. From Aristotle's recognition of tense to the Stoics philosopher's classification of the noun, the verb, the adjective, the conjunction and the articles, the present classes or parts of speech have been commented upon by different scholars and they seem to have agreed on the definitions ascribed to these categories of noun, pronoun, verb, adjective, interjection, preposition, adverb and conjunction to a certain extent. This paper adopts the traditional grammarians' identification and classification of words that are called prepositions and their combination with a verb, adjective or noun to form an acceptable phrasal verb. Whenever any other combination is formed outside the grammatically accepted ones, it constitutes an error which is not acceptable to the grammarians. In Linguistic studies, the term 'error' typically refers to a deviation from standard grammar or usage. In the opinion of Heidi Dulay et al (1982), "errors are those parts of conversation or composition that deviate from some selected norm of mature language performance" (p 138). In this paper, wrong use of prepositions and punctuation marks or absence of prepositions and punctuation marks in the WhatsApp group conversations are treated as errors.

Prepositional errors tend to reveal deeper issues related to grammatical competence. These errors include incorrect preposition selection (e.g. "interested on" instead of "interested in"); omission of necessary preposition (e.g. "go

school" instead of "go to school"); redundant use (e.g. "discuss about" instead of "discuss"). Preposition errors are common among users of English as a second or foreign language and are frequently attributed to interference from their first language (L1).

The study of these errors is significant for several reasons. First, it provides insights into how language is evolving in digital contexts. Second, it contributes to the understanding of second language acquisition and usage in informal settings. Third, it highlights the need to rethink traditional grammatical standards in the face of new communicative practices. By examining punctuation and preposition errors in WhatsApp group chats, this study aims to uncover patterns of usage, explore the possible causes of these errors, and discuss their implication for digital literacy and language teaching. These preposition errors abound in the writing or conversation of people on WhatsApp, as people do not really understand its usage and because it is not that prominent in their mother language. The following expressions represent a misuse of prepositions:

- (1) My brother arrived around 2.pm (incorrect)
My brother arrived__at about 2.pm (correct)
- (2) I hail from Ijebu (incorrect)
I am a native of Ijebu (correct)
- (3) He was asked to stand in a corner (incorrect)
He was asked to stand at a corner (correct)
- (4) Her gossip about her friend was a wound, a stab on the back (incorrect)
Her gossip about her friend was a wound, a stab in the back. (correct)

Punctuations, according to Randolph Quirk et al (1972), are visual devices that modify the English we write. Punctuations are not words or sounds but marks that inform readers what the writer is doing or wants to do with his/her writing. For instance, when a writer wants to ask a question, he/she write the statement and put a

question mark in front of the statement. This question mark informs the reader that the statement is not just an ordinary statement that provides information, but a question that is seeking for information. Sentences without appropriate punctuation marks make the reading incoherent; it hinders full comprehension and enjoyment of what is written. Among many punctuation marks there are in English, attention shall be focused on the comma, period (full stop), exclamation mark, colon and semi- colon in this paper.

The comma is represented by the mark (,), it is useful in the following areas:

- (a) Separation of different grammatical units. Commas can be used to separate a phrase from a clause. We can use it to separate a dependent clause from an independent clause
- (b) It is also used in separating items that are more than two when mentioning them in a sentence.
- (c) We use a comma to separate a comment made on a sentence or an adjunct, which may appear either as a disjunct or a conjunct.

Example 1

- (a) Because of you, we attended the wedding.
- (b) When the man came, he was given the key.
- (c) I have not bought bread, sugar, carrots, oranges and pineapple.
- (d) From the beginning, I knew he would not speak the truth.
- (e) I know, from the beginning, he will not speak the truth.
- (f) I know he will not speak the truth from the beginning.

Note that the phrase ‘from the beginning’ is introduced to the sentence in (d) above as a disjunct, in (e) above as a conjunct and in (f) above as an adjunct. The adjunct, irrespective

of where it appears, can be deleted from the sentence. Its inclusion only enriches the understanding we have about the sentence; it does not affect the structure of the sentence. The full stop is represented by a dot (.) It signals the end of a complete thought. The full stop is applied in the following areas:

- (a) At the end of every simple, compound, complex or compound-complex sentence
- (b) At the end of a main clause
- (c) When using abbreviated words

Examples 2

- (a) The program has been running since yesterday. [simple sentence]
- (b) The woman was warned, but she ignored the warning. [compound sentence]
- (c) During break time, the match will be replayed for those who missed it. [complex sentence]
- (d) When the plane landed at the airport, I was there, but I did not see you. [compound-complex sentence]
- (e) The woman has a Ph.D. certificate. [abbreviated word]

Note that Ph.D. is an abbreviation of Doctor of Philosophy.

The exclamation Mark is represented by this mark [!]. It is used in expressing emotion such as joy, sadness, fear, excitement, surprise, shock and anger. It can be placed after a word, a phrase or a sentence; however, its usage must not be contextually empty. An exclamation mark is sometimes interchanged for emojis on WhatsApp.

Examples 3

- (a) What a reckless boy! [shock]
- (b) This is serious! [surprise]
- (c) You don’t mean it! [joy]
- (d) What! [fear]

However, placing exclamation marks on the expression below will make it contextually empty:

- (a) Handsome!
- (b) I will be there tomorrow!
- (c) Join me at the table!

The colon is represented with this mark [:]. It is one of the most-abused punctuation marks on WhatsApp; however, it is useful in the following areas:

- (a) When listing items that are written in a phrase or a dependent clause
- (b) When joining a clause or phrase which serves as apposition to another clause.
- (c) When the next clause makes anaphoric reference to the preceding clause.

Examples 4

(a) The specific objectives of this research are:

- (i) To explain the meaning of cohesion;
- (ii) To discuss the effect of gender imbalance;

(b) I have some news for you: Mr. Bright has been elected.

Note that Mr. Bright's election is an opposition to the phrase 'some news' indicated in the first clause.

(c) The boy has been violent in the past: this, not provocation, propelled him to attack the girl.

Note that the pronoun 'this' refers back to the act of being violent previously mentioned.

The semi-colon is represented with this mark [;] as Randolph described it, 'it is regarded as the coordinating mark of punctuation, corresponding to a coordinating conjunction and'. The semicolon is used to join two sentences or two independent clauses that are regarded as being sufficiently related to belong to one sentence.

Example 5

- (a) We support the coalition; many politicians in the opposition do the same.

- (b) The car needs refurbishment; the price of a new one is high.

Data was collected from WhatsApp group chats involving participants who regularly communicate in English. These groups include: working professionals, family or community groups, and students from different universities. The chats were selected based on language, which is primarily English.

A sampling strategy was employed to select 10 active WhatsApp groups over a period of 2 weeks. All participants voluntarily submitted chat samples with identifying information removed. Informed consent was obtained for ethical purposes. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study. All data was anonymized; names, phone numbers, and personal identifiers were removed. Group chats used in this study were accessed with full permission from the group administrators and members. The study adheres to ethical guidelines for digital discourse research, ensuring privacy and confidentiality.

3.0 Data Collection Procedures

Chat histories were exported from WhatsApp in text format. (.txt files) while Media notification (e.g. "image omitted"), emojis, and unrelated messages were filtered out. The messages were organized chronologically and labeled as excerpt. Errors were marked and categorized according to type.

The Data

Excerpt 1

Reminder! Reminder! Reminder!
Compliments of the season
Account numbers and names are
missing against these payments made
To Polaris bank in May 2025
(Exclamation mark error and absence
of a full stop)

Excerpt 2

Wow! [with three emojis]

Yesterday was such a memorable day
for me
Because of the outpouring of your
love.
Thank you so much dear family for the
heartfelt
Wishes and prayers on my birthday;
I'm so grateful for your calls, message
and gifts. Time will
fail me to express how grateful I am to
you all
May the almighty God bless you
tremendously.
I really really appreciate you all!
May the good Lord thank you for me.
I'M GRATEFUL SIRS/MAS!
(Exclamation mark error)

Excerpt 3

Like follow comments and share to
other platforms
And God bless you
(comma and full stop error)

Excerpt 4

Happy birthday dear long life and
prosperity in advance
God bless your new age.
Enter into another decade in God's grace
and Mercy.
Family today is my son birthday
your prayers and birthday wishes.
Thank you so much to my family for
showering me in love on my birthday
(comma and full stop error, Preposition
error, pluralisation of wish]

Excerpt 5

Accept my congratulation on your new
age celebration. Congratulation on your
birthday, God bless your new age.
[wrong combination of congratulation and
on]

Excerpt 6

Please be reminded that submission of all
First semester 2024/2025 is long overdue
ND1 and HND1 are to be submitted

Through the Excel format score sheets
earlier sent,
Soft copies to be sent to my WhatsApp
numberand
Hard copies to be submitted to the
department
Kindly ensure that all the above-
mentioned results
Are submitted on or before 10am on
Monday July 2025
[prepositional and phrasal verb error]

Excerpt 7

All through this week and beyond
God shall shield you and your loved ones
from every harm. This week, you work in
purposes... move in grace and power.
Great things shall begin to happen in its
own accord in your life this year and
beyond. Amen!
[Preposition, exclamation and comma
error]

4.0 Result and Discussions

Exclamation marks [!] attached to
'Reminder' in excerpt 1 and 'I really really
appreciate you all', 'I'M GRATEFUL
SIRS/MAS' in excerpt 2 do not convey any
emotional attachment to the expression where
they are attached. Attaching an exclamation mark
to 'reminder' does not convey joy, sadness, fear,
or surprise. The content that follows the use of the
exclamation mark does not justify fear, surprise,
etc. However, the word 'Wow' in excerpt 2,
which has an exclamation mark to it, clearly
expresses the emotion of surprise, elation or joy.
The writer reinforced this moment of ecstasy by
attaching three emojis of expression-less faces.
These emojis negate the impression of joy
conveyed by the word 'Wow!' The emojis should
have been those of smiling or laughing faces,
which reflect the joyful mood that numerous well-
wishers sent messages and gifts to the writer on
the occasion of the birthday celebration.

Also, the expression ‘I really really appreciate you all’ is a direct speech lifted into the writing. There is no need to repeat the word ‘really’. By using the word ‘grateful’, it has already conveyed appreciation of the writer; it is of no use to put an exclamation mark on the sentence again. The use of semi-colon in excerpt 2 between two independent clauses is justified as in:

‘Thank you so much dear family for the heartfelt wishes and prayers on my birthday; I’m so grateful for your calls, messages and gifts.’

The semicolon here could as well be replaced with a coordinating conjunction such as ‘and’, however, the sentence lacks proper insertion of a comma. It ought to have been written like this:

‘Thank you, so much dear family, for the heart-felt wishes ...’

The expression ‘so much dear family’ is a conjunct between ‘thank you’ and ‘for the heart-felt wishes’. When the conjunct is removed, it does not affect the semantic import carried by the sentence. The expression ‘thank you for the heart-felt wishes’ is a complete structure on its own.

In excerpts 3 and 4, the absence of a comma at the appropriate places to separate the command words brings a structural ambiguity. If the command words have been separated by a comma, such as this:

‘Like, follow, comment and share to other platforms. [And] God bless you.’

Structurally, the coordinating conjunction ‘and’ in the excerpt above is not necessary after a full stop. In the same vein, the absence of a comma and a full stop in the excerpt creates ambiguity. Let us consider the combination of **share** and **to**; this constitutes misuse of a preposition. It should have been written as ‘share on’ instead of ‘share to’. Therefore, we can rewrite excerpt 3 thus:

‘Like, follow, comment and share on other platforms.

God bless you.’

In excerpt 4, reading the excerpt without a comma would make ‘dear long life’ a personality in the expression, whereas it is not. By inserting a comma, the expression will read thus:

Happy birthday, dear,

Long life and prosperity in advance.

May God bless your new age.

The felicitated expression ‘Happy birthday dear’ is an adjectival phrase where ‘happy’ and ‘birthday’ serve as a qualifier to another adjective ‘dear,’ which in this context has been nominalised. Also, the expression ‘Enter into another decade in God’s grace and Mercy’, the combination of **decade** with **in** is wrong, it should be ‘decade of’

In excerpt 5, the combination of ‘congratulations + on + birthday’ represents a misuse of the word ‘congratulations’. We use the word ‘congratulations’ to commend someone’s achievement or someone’s success at doing something. The relevant question one can ask here is: Is age or attaining a certain age an achievement? What efforts do you put in to attain the age? Can you compare the efforts, the struggle and the challenges of becoming a managing director of an organisation to the one you put up (if at all there is any) before attaining a particular age? There are many ways to use the word ‘congratulations’ in a birthday context without necessarily saying ‘congratulations on your birthday’. For instance,

Specimen A: Congratulatory Message

Accept my congratulations for leaving behind
an age filled with milestone achievements;
The Otunba of Ewi of Ado, the first male
managing director
of Odua Group of Companies and the
Asiwaju of

Owo land. No doubt the year ahead is filled with joy and fulfilment just for you.

Specimen B-

I felicitate with you as you leave behind a year filled with a plethora of successes. May the good Lord crown all your efforts in the new age. Accept my hearty congratulations.

In excerpt 6, the phrase ‘to be’ and the word ‘through’ are misused in the context where they appear. The expression ‘are to be submitted’ or ‘to be sent’ connotes is going to be submitted or ‘is going to be sent’. It excludes the mandatory command tone that the expression should have carried. By adding the word ‘through’ to ‘are to be submitted’ as we have in excerpt 6, it turns ‘the Excel format’ into an agent instead of a material. The expression ought to have been written like this:

ND1 and HND1 results should be submitted using the Excel format score sheet earlier sent.

Another ambiguous combination in excerpt 6 is the ‘on or before 10am on Monday’. It should be noted that the coordinating conjunction ‘or’ used in joining ‘on’ and ‘before’ in this context is indicating one option out of two. If the options are paired, we are bound to have phrases such as:

On 10:00am

Before 10:00am

On Monday

With this pairing, it is evident that ‘on 10:00am’ is not grammatical. Therefore, the expression should have been:

.....all the above-mentioned results should be submitted on or before Monday by 10:00am.

As we would agree that by pairing the preposition, we can have ‘on Monday’ or ‘before Monday’ Lastly, in excerpt 7, apart from the absence of a comma in between the phrase ‘All through this week and beyond’ and the clause ‘God shall

shield you and your loved ones...’ the expressions:

work in purpose

move in grace

Great things shall ...happen in its own accord illustrate a wrong combination of prepositions in the first two expressions, while the third is a case of wrong use of a referential pronoun. The right combinations are:

work with a purpose

move by His grace (and)

Great things shall ...happen in their own accord

Key Findings

Punctuation errors were more frequent than prepositional errors, accounting for over 60% of all grammatical issues identified. The most common punctuation errors were omission of full stops, commas and exclamation marks. Preposition errors mostly involved incorrect usage, omission, unnecessary additions of prepositions or punctuation marks, reflecting either interference from the native language structures or general grammatical incompetence. WhatsApp platform users engage in transliteration of their thoughts from their respective first language into English; therefore, they tend to follow the syntactic rules of construction of the L1 in expressing their thoughts in the L2. Their application of punctuation followed what it should be in their first language, but not what it is in the English Language.

Users across all group types: students, professionals, and social participants exhibited these errors, though their frequency and nature varied by context. Despite these grammatical flaws, most communications remained intelligible, pointing to a shift in language norms within digital discourse environments. Finally, the study highlights how digital platforms like WhatsApp are reshaping written communication, often blurring the boundaries between spoken and written language conventions.

Conclusion

This study investigated the occurrence and types of punctuation and preposition errors in WhatsApp Group discourse, using data collected from various students, professionals, and social WhatsApp groups. The analysis revealed a high frequency of grammatical errors, particularly punctuation omissions and prepositional misuses, which are often influenced by the informal, fast-paced and convenience-driven nature of mobile messaging platforms. Though superfluous use of prepositions or their absence does not lead to incoherence in most cases but it sometimes creates ambiguity, which may encourage misinterpretations of the intended meaning of what a speaker said.

5.0 Recommendations

Educators and institutions should promote awareness of standard grammar usage, especially for students, through workshops, writing clinics and online resources. Emphasis should be placed on the functional importance of punctuation and correct preposition use in academic, formal and professional settings. Users can be encouraged to pause and review their messages before sending them to the recipients, especially in formal discussions. WhatsApp users should be encouraged to possess grammar-checking tools such as Grammarly, Microsoft Editor, even on mobile devices, to help users catch common errors in prepositions and punctuations.

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