

SMS LANGUAGES IN USE BY THE NIGERIAN STUDENTS

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Abstract

The use of SMS/text language in SMS/text messaging has been a great and even a top topic in applied linguistics. Text messaging or texting, refers to the exchange of brief written messages between fixed-line phone or mobile phone and fixed or portable devices over a network. The sender of a text is known as a texter, while the service itself has different names depending on the country. It is referred to as a *text* in North America, India, Australia, United Kingdom and Philippines, an *SMS* in Europe, Asia and Africa. This study is divided into introduction, SMS/text messaging, SMS/text language, criticism against the use of SMS/text language, the use of SMS/text messaging and language by students, the forms of SMS/Text language, some Nigerian peculiar SMS language (Acronyms) and slang expressions. Finally, suggestions were given and conclusion drawn based on the findings during the research.

Key words: mobile phone, SMS/text messaging, SMS language

1.0 Introduction

Today, text messaging is most widely used mobile data service, with 74% of all mobile phone users worldwide, or 2.4 billion out of 3.3 billion phone subscribers, at the end of 2007 are active users of the short message service. In countries such as Finland, Sweden and Norway, over 85 of the population use SMS. The European average is about 80%, and North America is rapidly catching up with over 60% active users of SMS by the end of 2008. The largest average usage of

the service by mobile phone subscribers is in the Philippines, with an average of 27 texts sent per day by subscriber (Wikipedia).

Matti Makkonen has been referred to in different contexts as the ‘father of text messaging’ but he rejects the title and honour. There are different stories on who was the first person to send SMS and when it was sent. One account of SMS/text messaging being used for the first time was on December 3th, 1992 by a 22-year-old engineer at Sema Group. He sent ‘Merry Christmas’ to Richard Jarvis via Vodafone network.

2.0 SMS/Text Messaging

David Crystal is one of the linguists who has written many articles and books on the internet, mobile phone and language. In his book *txtng: the gr8 db8*, he says that ‘short messaging, short mail, SMSing, person-to-person messaging, mobile messaging, wireless messaging, text messaging, texting, txtng...whatever we call it, it is evidently here to stay. He goes further to say that the popular belief is that texting has evolved as a twenty-first century phenomenon – as a highly distinctive graphic style, full of abbreviations and deviant use of language, used by a young generation that doesn’t care about standards. There is a widely voiced concern that the practice is fostering a decline in literacy. And some even think it is harming language as a whole.

Text messaging or texting, refers to the exchange of brief written messages between fixed-line phone or mobile phone and fixed or portable devices over a network. While the original term was derived from referring to messages sent using the Short Message Service (SMS) originated from Radio Telegraphy. The sender of a text is known as a texter, while the service itself has different names depending on the country. It is referred to as a *text* in North America, India, Australia, United Kingdom and Philippines, an *SMS* in Europe, Asia and Africa.

Text messaging is most often used between personal or private mobile users, as a substitute for voice calls in situations where voice communication is not desirable, possible or available. In most countries, text messaging is significantly cheaper

than voice call. Some years back it was free in some countries like Philippines. Text messaging has become so popular that it is used by many people around the world, especially the young generation and old ones who like texting. Text messaging now serves different functions like social communication, information notice, banking and marketing notification, political campaign, political protest and revolution, election supervision and even exam malpractice.

3.0 SMS/Text language

Some, having begun to text, swear they will never abbreviate. But evidently, most people do, for one of two reasons. It's easier. And it's fun (Crystal 2008:65). SMS/Text language is a shortcut or shorthand of written language in mobile phone communication used purposely by users due to constraint of space and because it is easy and fun. SMS/text language (which is also known as textese, txt-speak, txtese, chatspeak, txt talk, txtslang, txt, txtspk, txto, txtk, texting language, txt lingo, SMSish, etc) is a term for the abbreviations, acronyms and slang used by mobile phone users due to space and convenience in SMS communication. Crystal (2008:147), explains how the SMS/Text language emerged:

Faced with a new kind of communication problem presented by mobile phone technology, people all over the world have set about solving it in the same kind of way. They have done so, not by inventing a new language, but by adapting old language to suit the new medium. It is not the first time people adapted language to meet the needs of technological circumstances. The arrival of printing, wireless telegraphy, telephony, broadcasting, and the internet all pulled language and languages in fresh directions, introducing new standards and styles.

SMS/Text language is similar to that used by those sending telegraphs that charged by the word; people wanting to save money became shortening their messages to pay a smaller amount. SMS/Text language is nascent dialect of English that subverts letters and numbers to produce ultra-concise words and sentiments. The invention of mobile phone messages may be considered as its

source, although elliptical styles of writing date to at least the days of telegraph, and telegraph operators were reported as using abbreviations similar to those used in modern SMS/text language.

The objective of SMS/Text language is to use least number of characters needed to convey a comprehensible message, also as many telecommunication companies have an SMS character limit, another objective of SMS/Text language is to reduce the character count of a message/text, hence, abbreviation and vowel ellipses are employed and punctuation and grammar are ignored. For the advantage of SMS/Text language, Chiluwa (2008) says:

SMS (short message service) gives the subscriber the advantage of choosing specific number of words that would communicate comprehensively but briefly with the minimum cost. Again subscribers are constrained by space and time. Most handsets allow a maximum of 250 characters including space, symbols and punctuation marks. So subscribers are actually forced to create new linguistic forms to enable them maximize the available space and say all that has to be said.

In support of the above quotation, Crystal (2008) says that texting has led to more creativity in the English language, giving people opportunities to create their own slang, emoticons, abbreviations, acronyms, etc. The feeling of individualism and freedom excites people, making texting increasingly more popular and a more efficient way to communicate.

4.0 Criticism against the Use of SMS/Text language

Many people have reacted negatively against the use of SMS/Text language in different ways. According to Crystal (2008:8), 'There is now a widespread folk belief that, whatever texting is, it must be a bad thing'. To show an example of what he said, a broadcaster John Humphrys reacted this way:

Texters are vandals who are doing to our language what Genghis Khan did to his neighbours eight hundred years ago. They are destroying it; pillaging our punctuation; savaging our sentences; raping our vocabulary. And they must be stopped.

Another harsh criticism against the use of SMS/Text language is coincidentally from John but this time, John Sutherland. As he writes in his article 'Cn u txt?', he says...linguistically it's (SMS/Text language) all pig's ear...it (SMS/Text language) masks dyslexia, poor spelling and mental laziness. Texting is penmanship for illiterates. In response to this, Crystal (2008:11) says, 'As far as I know I am not dyslexic, mentally lazy, or illiterate. But I text.' Though SMS/Texting language may be a challenge to languages but it is not a bad thing and it cannot be stopped.

Amanda Pawelski of Colorado State University in her article 'Using Internet Slang in Spoken Conversation: LOL', she asks question on the use of SMS/Text language:

...the extent to which these new 'words' have become a part of English language, making their way into unexpected environments despite negative reactions. In addition, this growing occurrence shows that the lines of appropriateness regarding the use of internet-based lingo are rapidly blurring. As more and more generations of Kids grow up in the world of texting, will this trend continue to increase?

The answer is yes. SMS/Text language will continue to increase as far as there is a mobile phone and as long as there is constraint of space in SMS/Text messaging. Crystal (2008:32) says that people have to cope with the fact that texting is an instance of a variety of language in very rapid evolution.

Another way people criticize the use of SMS/Text language is the negative impact it is having on languages around the world. It is anglicizing other languages in one way or the other. The use of diacritic marks is dropped in languages such as French and many African languages. The use of pictograms, logograms and symbols in SMS/Text language are now present in many languages. There is also the use of numeral, substituting syllables or a word.

5.0 The Use of SMS/Text Messaging and language by Students

It is generally believed that young generations are the ones who invented and are using SMS/Text language. However, some old generations especially the elite and educated ones have joined the users of SMS/text language. As I write this work, I received an SMS from a professor which was full of abbreviations. We are tempted to use SMS/Text language in writing SMS not only because it is easy and efficient but also it is fast and fun. These young people that use SMS/Text language, most of them are students. They use SMS/Text messaging for both social and academic communications. Students equally use SMS/Text messaging and language in exam malpractice and academic writing respectively.

Text messaging has had an impact on students academically, by creating an easier way to cheat on exams. In December 2002, a dozen students were caught cheating on an accounting exam through the use of text messages on their mobile phones. In December 2002, Hitotsubashi University in Japan failed 26 students for receiving e-mail exam answers on their mobile phones. The number of students caught using mobile phones to cheat on exams has increased significantly in recent years. In England, 287 school and college students were excluded from exams in 2004 for using mobile phones during exams. Some teachers and professors claim that advanced features can lead to students cheating on exams (Wikipedia).

SMS/Text language has begun to appear on students' official and formal writings including their assignments and exams. Hayslett (2006) confirms it, "To many teachers' surprise, students have started sneaking abbreviations – 'u' for 'you', '2' for 'to', and '4' for 'for' into their papers and other class assignments". Recent research by Rosen et al (2009) found that those young adults (students) who used more language-based textism (shortcuts such as LOL, 2nite, etc) in daily writing produced worse formal writing than those young adults (students) who used fewer linguistic textism in daily writing. However, the exact opposite was true for informal writing. In many colleges and universities in Nigeria, students are not allowed to use their mobile phones inside an exam hall. This can help stop students from using their mobile phones to send SMS/Text messages within and outside the exam hall. However, this will not stop them from using SMS/Text

language in their formal writings like assignments and exams. In Crystal (2008:165) Jill Attewell in a paper for *Literacy Today* in 2003 says:

There are reports of examiners finding SMS abbreviations and slang in GCSE English papers. This is worrying, although enquiries should perhaps focus on how teachers have prepared their pupils for the examinations rather than on the students' use of mobile phones.

In support, Crystal (2008:165) says that in the end, whatever the strengths and weaknesses of texting as a variety of language, it is in the classroom that matters need to be managed. If there are children who are unaware of the difference between texting and Standard English, then it is up to teachers to make them aware. If there are children whose discourse skills are being hampered by texting, then it is up to teachers to show them how to improve.

6.0 Some Forms of SMS/Text language (Words and phrases)

6.1 Homophonic Single Grapheme Abbreviation

In English, some common phonetic transcriptions include "c" replacing "see", "u" replacing "you", and combinations such as "cu" replacing "see you". Texters use thirteen letters in the English alphabet for homophonic single grapheme abbreviation. Out of the five dictionaries, three dictionaries agreed "u" for "you", however the dictionaries had discrepancies on "b", which varied from "be", "bee", "bye"; "n" varied from "and", "no", "an", "in"; "r" varied between "are", "or" (Pomier, 2004).

Example 1: Homophonic Single Grapheme Abbreviation

Abbreviation	Definition
b	be/bee, bye
c	see
cu	see you
k	okay
n	and,no

6.2 Numeric Characters Replacing Homophones

In the English language, texters use four distinct numbers to replace the sound in a word. The number 8 replaces the sound /et/, 4 replaces /fTMr/, 2 replaces /tōō/, 1 replaces /wun/ (Pomier 2004).

Example 2: Numeric Characters Replacing Homophones

Abbreviation	Definition
b4	before
b4n, bfn	bye for now
cr8	create
d8	date
d8ing	dating
db8	debate
dict8	dictate
dv8	deviate
every1	everyone
f2f	face to face

6.3 Abbreviation

Abbreviation is one of most common SMS/Text language. Crystal (2008:50) calls it 'shortenings' with these examples min(utes), esp(ecially), doc(tor).

Example 3: Abbreviation

Abbreviation	Definition
add	address
attn	attention
bros	brothers
bye	goodbye
cos/cuz	because
info	information

6.4 Dropping Vowels

Dropping vowels from a word is a quick way to shorten the language, but retain the consonants for word for recognition. Not all of the words dropped every vowel in the word, like "chlya", which suggests the need to keep at least one vowel to help understand the meaning of the word (Pomier 2004). For Crystal (2008:45), it is referred to as 'Omitted letters' with these examples 'bt' for 'but', 'yr' for 'year' and 'getn' for 'getting'.

Example 4: Dropping Vowels

Abbreviation	Definition
fst	fast
msg	message
mtng	meeting
ppl	people
rgds	regards
spk	speak
thn	then
txt	text

6.5 Acronyms

Acronyms are the most common way texters have shortened the language through text messaging. Using acronyms allows a texter to write more in a condensed space; however, there are many drawbacks to using acronyms. Many texters are unable to decipher the acronym because they are not familiar with the acronym or the definition. Also, the acronym can often be obtuse or imprecise (Pomier 2004). For examples we use some peculiar Nigerian acronyms which are common with students. They are used both at SMS/Text messaging and social network chat like facebook.

Example 5: Some Nigerian peculiar SMS Languages and Slang Expressions

ACROMYN	SLANG	MEANING
LWKM	Laugh Wan Kill Me	Laughing seriously
LWKMD	Laugh Wan Kill Me Die	Laughing without control
MIDG	Make I Dey Go	Let me go
WGYL	We Go yarn Later	We will talk later
ICS	I Can't Shout	I'm speechless
DJM	Don't Jealous Me	Don't be jealous
UDC	U Dey Craze?	Are you crazy?
NUS	Na U Sabi	It is your concern
WSU	Who Send U	I don't care
OSAB	Over SAbi	Know-it-all
ITK	I Too Know	Claim to know everything
WDH	Wetin Dey Happen?	What is happening?
NDH	Nothing Dey Happen	Everything is fine.
FMJ	Free Me Jorh	Release me
BBP	Bad Bele People	Enemies
HUD	How U Dey?	How are you?
WKP	WaKa Pass	You are not welcome
BBG	BaBy Girl	Girlfriend or wife
NTT	Na True Talk	It is true
IKU	It Concern U?	It doesn't concern you
NDM	No Dull Me	Do not disappoint me
IFSA	I For Slap Am	I would have beaten/slapped him/her
IGBO	I Go Die Ooo	It is very funny
YB	Yes Boss	Yes sir
CWJ	Carry Waka Jorh	You are not invited
WBYO	Wetin Be Your Own	What concerns you?
U2DD	U 2 Dey Do	You like to show off
U2DV	U 2 Dey Vex	You get angry easily
MKG	Maka Gini?	Why?
WSDP	Who Send Dem Papa	Who gave them right?
INS	I No Send	I don't care
INFS	I No Fit Shout	I don't want to say anything

WWY	Who Wan Yarn	Who wants to talk/chat?
NBST	No Be Small Thing	Something is interesting/ serious
NOW	Na Wah Ooo	Exclamation for surprise/unbelief
NMA	No Mind Am	Don't mind him/her
MIHW	Make I Hear Word	Stop talking nonsense
NBL	No Be Lie	It is true
WD	Wetin Dey	How is it going?
UNGKM	U No Go Kill Me	I'm enjoying it
O2S	Omo 2 Sexy	Looking attractive
BUNT	Bros U No Try	You didn't do well
EFBU	E Fit Be U	It can be you
U2DF	U 2 Dey Fuck-up	You always disappoint or make mistakes
UNGJ	U No Get Job	Don't you have something to do?
IWP	I Wan Piss	I want to urinate
IDC	I Dey Come	I'm coming
UWTA	U Wan Try Am?	Do you want to try?
WDDU	Wetin Dey Do U?	What is the problem with you?
UWD	U Wan Die?	Are you not afraid?
IDH	I Dey House	I'm at home
WUT	Wetin U Talk?	What did you say?
YDTTM	U Dey Talk To Me?	Are you talking to me?
IWGS	I Wan Go Sleep	I want to sleep
IWG	I Wan Go	I want to go
UDSA	U Don Start Again	You have started again
NMA	No Mind Am	Don't mind him/her
NDBL	Nepa Don Bring Light	Light (electricity) is on
UCC	U Chop Craze?	Are you crazy?
UNGKM	You No Go Kill Me	You making me go crazy
UGKMO	You Go Kill Me Oo	I'm becoming crazy
VDCM	Vex Dey Catch Me	I'm very angry
UTT	U Too Talk	You talk too much
SYMJM	Shut Your Mouth Jobless Mugu	Shut up
IOT	I Open Teeth	I'm not laughing
SMSM	See Me See Motorcycle	What is my concern?
DDBL	Dem Don Bring Light	NEPA (electricity) is on

7.0 Suggestions and Conclusion

We have defined and explained the SMS/Text messaging and SMS/Text language; and have presented the argument or debate as David Crystal stated in his book. We have also given some peculiar Nigerian students' SMS/Text language and internet slang expressions with their meanings. SMS/Text language is a result of SMS/Text messaging which started with the invention of mobile phone with the idea of writing and sending message. This is new yet not the first time language is facing a threat from technology. We have to work together to face the challenge. The teenagers, parents, teachers, curriculum designers, language experts and linguists have roles to play. Teenagers/students should avoid using SMS/Text language in their academic writings; parents should encourage their children to use less SMS/Text language when sending SMS/Text message; teachers should teach the students both standard and non-standard orthography and writing and test their abilities in writing without using SMS/Text language; curriculum designers, language experts and linguists should work together to address the issue in an emerging area of linguistics and mobile phones.

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