Effects of SMS Texting on the Writing Skills of University Students in Nigeria: Case of the College of Education Akamkpa

Odey, Veronica E.[1], Essoh, Ndobo, E. G.[1] & Endong, Floribert P. C.[2]

Abstract

Students are compelled, in examination situations, to use langue properly for an effective communication of their ideas and a grammatical formulation of their answers. Improper use of language is, in this respect, often sanctioned in various glaring ways. Despite this linguistic and examination requisites, students -often advertently or inadvertently - violate language rules, sometimes under the influence of intensive/frequent use of particular communication technology. This paper explores the influence of technology - particularly the SMS (Short Messages) texting - on the use of English language by Nigerian university students, in a typical pedagogical situation. It focuses specifically on students of the College of Education, Akamkpa in Nigeria. Based on a content analysis of 250 SMS messages generated by 50 third year students of the institution and answers scripts produced in an examination situation by these students, the paper demonstrates that intensive use of the SMS texting affects students' language literacy. Texting influences them to consciously or unconsciously transfer the pattern of written proper for SMS messaging into their essays. The paper shows features of the SMS language observed in both SMS messages by the students and their answer scripts. The five most dominant features include vowel deletion, graphones, alphanumeric homophony, punctuation 'errors' and initialization among others.

[1] Department of Modern Languages and Translation Studies, University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria.
Email: grace.essoh@haoo.fr odeyveronica@gmail.com
[2] Department of theatre and Media Studies, University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria.
Email: floribertendong@yahoo.com

1. Introduction

English, like the other languages, is a very complex system of rules in which sound structure and meaning are integrated for the purpose of communication. The language follows general principles called rules of grammar. These rules guide the combinations of words that convert complex meanings according to the ordering of such words. No doubt, Awoyemi (2013: 34) views it as a complex part of human psychology, a phenomenon which is orderly, meaningful and creative. The creative nature of the English language is seen in the fact that though standardized, it is very flexible; that is, it can have variations and can be subject to a complex dynamism (Awoyemi 2013: 34; Brasa and Mous 2013: 234; Balogun 2013:91, Ako 1999:5). These variations may occur in its use in the level of formality of the language to suit the occasion (formal and informal use).

A number of protective approaches are continually adopted to check anarchy in the use of English and preserve the language from 'adulteration'. One of such approaches is the disdain for (nay diabolisation) and the prohibition of such phenomena as pidgins, slang words, texting lingo and the like, (especially in formal context). These linguistic forms (texteses and other computer mediated language) are generally perceived to be a threat to the English language. Nevertheless, the emergence of technologically mediated languages and their pervasive use worldwide constitute a serious force contradicting and frustrating these purist sentiments. Awoyemi (2013:36) notes that the Standard English cannot remain 'undefiled' as it daily comes in contact with different people and cultures. Thus, with the recent appearance of multiple genres of language through the internet and other forms of technologically mediated communication - such as text messaging -, English is bound to be 'defiled'. In the same line of argument, Bodomo (2009) concedes that new communication technologies such as the SMS do not only engender new ways of using language, but also new forms of literacy which are associated with the introduction and uses of the new technologies. These new forms of language use are likely to affect Standard English.

In line with the protective approaches towards preserving English's purity, informal use of English language in a rather formal context –notably an examination situation – is often considered "obscene", untenable, intolerable and censorable.

In most examination situations, candidates are clearly reminded of the necessity nay obligation to use Standard English to render their communication more intelligible to examiners and in return earn maximal/marginal marks for their efforts. A whole lot of sanctions are provided and applied against cases of ungrammatical use of the English language in examination situation. Mistakes in such examination situations are usually unfailingly penalized by examiners (Oluga and Babalola, 2013:340). Nevertheless, because of frequent and profound engagement in technologically mediated communication –through chat rooms on internet, SMS messaging and the like-, students are often influenced to use linguistic deviations (ungrammatical forms of language) which are theoretically sanctioned with reduction of marks. Dansieh (2011:222) attempts a theorisation of the phenomenon when he succinctly concedes that:

As more and more students worldwide acquire and use mobile phones, so are they immersing themselves in text messaging. Such is the situation that some teachers, parents and students themselves are expressing concerns that students' writing skills stand the risk of being sacrificed on the altar of text messaging.

This position is centred on the assumption that SMS text messaging has negative effects on students' communication skills. As we shall later demonstrate in this paper, this thesis has utterly been challenged by a number of schools of thought. However, our aim in this article is to hinge on this hypothesis and illustrate the observable effects of the SMS text messaging on students' writing skills, using Akampka College of Education - a tertiary educational establishment based in Cross River state of Nigeria – as our case study. The paper is grounded on a content analysis of some 250 SMS messages generated by 50 students of the institution and an analysis of essays produced by these students. The paper equally seeks to investigate on the correlation between the frequency in the use of texts messaging by students and the frequency of use of text massaging language in the scripts of the students.

2. Language use in SMS Messaging

SMS is an abbreviation standing for "Short Message Service". It is a technology that enables the transmission of typed text messages from a mobile phone to another. As a service, it makes it possible for users of mobile and portable devices to exchange brief written information/messages through cellular network.

The SMS technology emerged in Africa around the 2000's, with the coming of the mobile telephony. Though it is somehow difficult to reveal the exact statistics on its evolution in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular, grossly, it can be suggested that its use has exponentially increased over the years. According to Dansieh (2013: 224), there is a remarkable proliferation of mobile phones in Africa. Such a proliferation defied all prediction in the area of mobile cellular telephony. Subscriptions to mobile telephony operators have been on the rise: from just 5% in 2003, it augmented to over 30% by the end of 2008. According to a report released by the International Telecommunications Union (2009), Africa is rated as "The region with the highest mobile growth rate".

SMS messaging is undoubtedly the most widespread communication method in Africa, probably because of its affordability and reliability. An SMS is virtually cheaper than a voice mail. In addition, it is a relatively rapid way of reaching out to a correspondent. The service has evolved over the years from a simple person-to-person messaging to include interaction with automated system. Barasa and Mous (2013: 236) summarize the advantages of SMS thus: (i) it is cheaper than the voice mail, (ii) it is less intrusive, that is, nobody hears you sending the message and nobody can decipher what the incoming message is all about, (iii) it makes direct conveyance of the message without interruption from the recipient, (iv) it can be saved for future reference unlike the spontaneous spoken word, and (v) it offers a choice, for instance to reply, forward or delete them. In the same light, Richardson and Lenarcic (2009:842) opine that the SMS service represents a facilitating tool which institutes a state of 'constant touch' to dominate between those connected in what has become a ubiquitous social network. According to them, SMS are also pervasive and indispensable 'talismans' to the masses that are vital to some as conduits for personal well-being. This is true as they offer some comfort to their users. Despite all these advantages, the SMS service is difficult to use because of its obvious constraint of 160 characters which represents a very reduced size for communication. This dictates a circumstantial use of language. Richardson and Lenarcic (2009:843) note that:

Products are often designed to be easy to use but perhaps sometimes they may become too easy to use in which case their utility in application is almost an unconscious process for the consumer.

This is certainly not the case with the text messaging, given the obvious systematic constraint of 160 characters, being the maximum size of a single communication […] the puzzle of text messaging is an ongoing challenge to craft miniscule missives, malformed in appearance perhaps, but with cohesive meaning that at times may appear to border on lyrical composition.

The limited number of characters per message remarkably affects language use in text messaging as there naturally arises the need for the message to be compacted to fit the limited size provided for the communication, without sacrificing the intelligibility of the message sent. This calls for a great deal of creativity on the part of the encoder (texter) and really puts to test the latter's capacity to phrase his message concisely, in an economy of words (Essoh, Odey and Endong 2014; Barasa and Mous 2013: 236; Richardson and Lenarcic 2009; Ling 2005). Richardson and Lenarcic (2009: 846) make reference to this creative and 'artistic' use of language in SMS messaging when they note that the relatively limited supply of 160 characters that constitute the expanse of a single text message very much compels the author of such a message to adopt a strategy to "relate cogent meaning and this becomes a shared approach to generate a dynamic mobile social network".

The systematic constraint of the number of character has therefore given rise to linguistic creativity with the development by texters of a whole lot of imaginative and innovative techniques aimed at making the technology work best for them. These techniques include phenomena like multilingualism, abbreviation, the use of numeral and graphones, the use of single pronounceable letters and multiple other forms of word and phrase shortening. Text messaging involves the use of such forms like pictograms and logograms. The texter may employ shortened phrases through use of symbols in order to represent the word. A text may equally consist of a series of alphanumeric blendings. Examples of such compositions include the following: "4 u" used for "for you", "luv u" used for "love you", "b4" used for "before", "love you with all my heart" used for "luwamh", "to whom it may concern" in the place of "twimc", "2d8" used for "to date" and "db8" used for "debate" (Essoh et al 2014; Crystal 2008, Dansieh 2011; BBC-Focus on Africa, 2004). All these language techniques have caused the SMS the language to be considered a kind of independent written register which does not necessarily depend on the conventions of the standard written language.

A number of labels and terminologies have therefore been coined to refer to it. These labels include technologically mediated language, internet slang, chattisch, netspeak, webslang, netlingual, digital English, textese among others (Barasa and Mous 2013; Dansieh 2011; Crystal 2001; Sutherland 2008; Thrurlow 2007). Suntherland (2008) offers an insightful description of the SMS language in his submission that: "as a dialect, text ('textese') is thin and –compared, say with Californian personalized license plates – unimaginative. It is bleak, bald, sad shorthand. Drab shrinktalk. In fact, linguistically, it's all pig's ear and best described as penmanship for illiterates".

3. SMS Language and Language (English) Literacy

There are suppositions and apprehensions among literate adults, language educationists and linguists that the SMS language is a serious threat to standard written English. Indeed, there is a great debate over the question and a great deal of arguments and counter arguments have been offered to contribute to this hot debate. Detractors of the SMS language argue that technologically mediated communication and its resulting languages (netspeak, netslang, SMS languages and the like) constitute a veritable curse as they impact very negatively on student communicational skills, particularly on their writing skills. This school of thought argues that regular use of the technology affects the writing reflexes of the texter (in the long term) and influences him/her to use the SMS language even in formal context. Oluga and Babalola (2013:340) for instance critique the service and present it as a phenomenon which affects the spelling system of the texters, making it difficult for them to get the correct orthography of words as they are used to spelling incorrectly and using abbreviated forms of words in text messaging. Oluga and Babalola (2013:340) offer some of these negative impacts of SMS on Nigerian students' written skills thus:

They [students who frequently use SMS language] use abbreviated forms of words unconsciously even in formal written communication like application letters written for employment purpose, essays written in examination purpose etc. Therefore words like 'that', 'this', 'what', 'because' and 'people' are mistakenly written as 'dat' or 'dis', 'wot' or 'wt', 'bcs' and 'pple' respectively. Such mistakes as far as application letters are concerned give a bad impression of the writer […] Those who are used to the very short text messages become lazy writers and may not find writing error free or undiluted continuous writing like letters, essays, report or feature easy again.

This position is however challenged by two schools of thought. The first is led by Crystal (2008) who bases his counter argument on six principal observations. He points to the fact that (1) in a typical text message, less that 10% of the words are abbreviated; (2) the use of abbreviations is not a new phenomenon in the world. It has been in practice for decades; therefore it cannot be viewed as a new language and therefore not as a threat to the English language literacy. (3) Children and adults alike use text language, the latter being more likely to do so; (4) students do not habitually use abbreviations in their homework and examinations; (5) before people can text, they must first have acquired language literacy that is, they must have learned how to spell. Therefore, text messaging cannot be a cause of bad spelling; (6) given the fact that texting provides people with the opportunity of engaging with the language through reading and writing, it improves people's literacy. Based on these observations, Crystal (2008) firmly argues that the SMS language does not negatively affect language literacy.

A second counter school of thought led by Russell (2010) bases its argument on the status of the SMS language as an independent and new language as well as on the need for students to acquire the basis of the English language so as to be empowered to distinguish between wrong (ungrammatical) uses and good (grammatical) uses of the English language. This school of thought argues that, since the learning of a new language does not affect students' ability to use English grammar, it would be fallacious to conclude that texting have potentials of affecting students' mastery of English grammar. This school of thought equally holds that the emergence of various jargons in the history of languages have never caused a dynamism to occur in English grammar. English grammar has not changed despite the survival of these jargons. It would therefore be recommendable for students to seek to have a mastery of the basics of the English language (in pedagogic situations) so as to be able to distinguish between "slang, texting lingo (ungrammatical languages) and correct English".

Somehow in line with Russell's (2012) exhortation addressed to learners of the English language (to seek to distinguish between SMS language and Standard English), netslang and other forms languages characterizing technologically mediated communication have been included to school curriculums in a number of western countries.

A report released by Australia's ABC radio, for instance, stipulates that Australian educators in Victoria are stirring up a bit a storm by teaching SMS text messaging as part of a language arts curriculum, to high school students (Barasa and Mous 2013: 237; Donovan 2006:204). Similarly, an article posted on 'Wikinews' reports that, in November 2006, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority gave its approval to the move that secondary school students be allowed to use mobile phone text language in the end of year examination papers (Dansieh 2011; Wikepedia 2010). This may indicate that the SMS language is now relatively tolerated in some pedagogic situations (formal context) such as examination contexts in some parts of the world. However, in Nigeria, most schools combat the use of SMS language and all other linguistic deviations from the English language in examination situations. They do this partly by seriously sanctioning such use with penalties, notably reduction of marks (Awoyemi 2013, Ugot 2010, Oluga and Babalola 2013). Indeed, Students, in examination situations, are often reminded of the necessity, nay obligation to use langue properly for an effective communication of their ideas and a grammatical formulation of their answers. Improper use of language is, in this respect, often sanctioned in various glaring ways, notably through reduction of marks. However, despite this linguistic and examination requisites, students -often advertently or inadvertently - violate language rules, sometimes with the influence of intensive use of particular communication technology notably the SMS texting.

4. Materials and Methods

This study combined both quantitative and qualitative approaches for the collection and the analysis of numerical and qualitative data. The corpus of the study came from over 50 third year students of Akampka College of Education who were mobile phone users and texters. The main tools used for the collection of data included observations and sample SMS texts generated by students, together with essays (answer scripts) produced by these students.

Informants were required by the researchers to forward the five most recent SMS texts they had sent to friends/correspondents, indicating date (time) at which the messages were sent. This was to measure frequency of use of the SMS service by informants. The researchers focused exclusively on messages sent by informants. This was for purely methodological reasons, since the study focused exclusively on informants' use of the SMS service and not their friends/correspondents' use of the SMS language.

The SMS messages (250 in total) were downloaded and analysed on the basis of language features. The researchers equally considered the informants' answer scripts (50 scripts/essays in total) produced in an examination condition. These scripts were content-analysed to determine to what extent the SMS language observed in the SMS texts occurred the answer scripts. It equally served to do a co-relational analysis of the frequency of occurrence in the scripts against the frequency of use of the SMS service by the informants.

5. Discussion of Findings

This section of the study provides a discussion of major findings. It presents an analysis of the SMS linguistic features in both the SMS messages and student's answer scripts and equally provides a co-relational analysis of the rate of students' use of language in SMS messaging and their use of this language in examination situation.

5.1 Co-Relational Analysis of use of SMS and use of SMS language in Scripts

The study sought to show the correlation between frequency use of the SMS service and frequency of SMS language features in the students' essays. This was to determine the rate at which the student use of SMS language affects their writing skill. Table 1 bellow provides some findings on this aspect of the study.

Table 1: Correlation between Frequency SMS Texting and Use of SMS Slang in Essays (In Terms of Number of Essays)

Frequency Use of the SMS service		Frequency of Features of SMS slangs			
		Scripts		Words	
		number	percent	number	percent
SMS Slang Used	Many times a day	7	14	6239	21.69
	Daily	5	10		
	Others	2	4		
SMS Slang not Used		36	72	22648	78.31
Total		50	100	28887	100

The findings of the study indicate that less students (over 28% of our sample) used SMS language in their essays. Majority (14%) of this portion of the sample used SMS service many times a day.

Data in Table 2 below re-enforces this assumption as it indicates that the more students use SMS texting, the more they tend to employ SMS slang in their essays. SMS slang constituted 2.18% of essays produced by students who used SMS texting many times a day, as against 1.05% and 1.29% respectively for students who used the service daily and others.

Table 2: Co-Relation between Frequency of SMS Texting and Use of SMS Slang in Essay (In Terms of Words)

Frequency Use of the SMS service	Frequency of Features of SMS slangs		
	SMS Slang used	Total words in scripts	percent
Many times a day	69	3153	2.18
Daily	24	2085	1.05
Others	11	1001	1.29
Total	104	6239	1.66

Findings of the study may therefore suggest that students' constant use of the SMS service (more especially their use of SMS language in the texting process) seriously affects their written skills. These findings also go in line with the presuppositions formulated by the detractors of the SMS language that heavy use of netslang through technologically mediated communication negatively affects language literacy.

5.2 Analysis of SMS Linguistic features in SMS Messages and in Answer Scripts

Findings indicate that the same linguistic forms/features of SMS language observed in the 250 SMS messages collected from students appeared in these students' essays. Table 3 below, suggests that these linguistic features (of the SMS language) included truncation (short forms), vowel deletion, alphanumeric, homophony, graphones (letter homophony), initialisation, lack of inter-word space, logographic emoticons, onomatopoeic expressions and punctuation.

Table 3: Occurrence and Frequency in SMS text and Students' Essays

Features	In SMS messages		In Answer Scripts	
	Occurrence	frequency	Occurrence	Frequency
Truncation	69	9.57	08	7.69
Vowel deletion	106	14.70	27	25.96
Alphanumeric homophony	99	13.73	15	14.42
Graphones	101	14.00	19	18.26
Initialisation	77	10.67	11	10.57
Lack of Inter-word space	75	10.40	08	7.69
Logographic emoticons	43	5.96	00	00
Onomatopoeic expression	65	9.01	04	3.84
Punctuation	86	11.96	12	11.57
Total	721	100	104	100

As shown in the table 3 above, almost all the features of the SMS language considered for this study were found in both the SMS messages and the students' essays. The five most dominant features of this SMS language (as observed in the study) include vowel deletion , graphones (letter homophony) , alphanumeric homophony, punctuation 'errors' and initialisation (in decreasing order).

Vowel deletion represents the most dominant SMS linguistic feature constituting 14.70% of such features in SMS messages and 25.96% in students' essays. Like truncation, vowel deletion is often used for the purpose of brevity. A situation of vowel deletion is said to have occurred when the texter creates a contracted version of the word(s) he/she intends using. While the vowels of the intended word are omitted, the consonants are maintained to represent the whole word. Examples drown from our sample include 'pls' for 'please'; 'kds' for 'kids'; 'yr' for 'your'; 'nt' for 'not', 'Gd' for 'good'; 'sde' for 'side'; 'mther' for 'mother'; 'fther' for 'father'; 'bcs' for 'because'; 'wt' for what'; 'msg' for 'message'; 'txt' for 'text'; 'ltd' for 'limited'; 'frm' for 'from' among others. These examples and others appeared both in the SMS messages and the students' answer scripts. For example, the word 'ltd' found in one of the texters's SMS message ("God is nt ltd" [God is not limited]) was observed in his scripts in the sentence "we had a very **ltd** time, and so could not continue with the exercise."

The third most dominant feature of the SMS language observed in both the messages and the students' answer scripts was the phenomenon of alphanumeric homophony.

This feature represented 13.75% in SMS messages and 15% in students' essays. As a feature of the SMS language, alphanumeric homophonies have to do with the more or less arbitrary blending of letter and number to represent word, phrases or clauses. In such situations, the texter – often partially – substitutes the word, phrase or sentence with phonetically similar letters or numbers that sound almost the same as the substituted word or phrase. Example drawn from our sample include 'b4' for 'before'; '2d n 4ever' for 'today and forever'; '2 g 4 U' for 'to go for you'; 'w8' for 'wait'; '2 r bt@ than 1' for 'two are better than one'.

Graphones otherwise called letter homophones constituted the second dominant SMS linguistic feature in both SMS messages (14%) and students' essays (18.26%). The term 'graphone' is constituted of two words: the radical "graphic" meaning written representation and suffix "phone" meaning speech sound. A graphone is therefore a neologism used to refer to a feature of SMS language in which words are written the way they are pronounced (spoken like written) (Barasa and Mous 2013). Letter homophony is the type of graphones we found the most in the sample. Example include 'D' for 'the'; 'R' for 'are'; 'U' for 'you'; '1' for 'one'; 'CT' for 'city', 'Xpress' for 'express' and 'W R U sad' for 'why are you sad ?' and 'Com C' for 'come and see'.

The fourth most dominant feature of the SMS language observed is punctuation 'error'. It constituted 11.96% of such features in SMS messages and 11.57% in students' essays. Punctuation 'errors' basically included violation of grammar rules at the level of punctuation. Our sample indicates 'errors' such as omission of punctuation markers and arbitrary use of these markers (commas for instance at the place of full stop or vice versa) to fragment sentences. Example include 'Na wa 4 u, M tired' meaning "Shit! I am tired of all this"; 'Go 2 him Will giv u al d mony' for "go to him. He will give you all the money"

The fifth most dominant feature of the SMS language is initialisation, representing 10.67% of such features in SMS messages and 10.57% in students' essays. Initialisation as a feature of SMS language is a word shortening process whereby letters are used to represent whole words or sentences. Example from the corpus include 'N' for 'Naira'; 'Bk' for 'book'; and 'GM' for 'general manager'.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has attempted to reach three objectives. Firstly it has demonstrated that the use of SMS language –though discouraged in examination situations – is employed by students of Akampka College of Education. This may lead to the conclusion that instructions often given to students (to use standard English in their answers) are not really effective as students do not pay much attention to such instructions. Secondly, the paper analyzed the different features of the SMS language as occuring in the SMS texts of the student, against their occurences in the students' answer scripts, showing that the same features do appear in both SMS messages and student answers scripts. Thirdly, the paper focussed on the correlation between the frequency of the use of SMS language in technologically mediated communication and its use in examination situations. Findings reveal that constant use of SMS language by student has high potentials of negatively affecting their writing skills.

Based on the major findings of the study, the paper recommends that students be more and more sensitized on the need to avoid SMS language in formal context of communication such as examination through special programmes conceived for such an objective. Such sensitization should not only be done in examination situations. Also, exam organisation services should motivate the use of Standard English in examination situation by 'recompensing' SMS slang-free essays with marginal marks. Further, adequate time should be given to students in exam situations as some of the cases of 'unauthorised' use of SMS language often stem from the fact that students to not have ample time to answer questions. Because of the limited time provided for examination papers, they tend to use short forms and other features of the SMS language in order not to be caught up by the time.

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