

SMS Linguistic Creativity in Small Screen Technology

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Abstract

SMS texting uses language in a creative way. This is necessitated by the small space available on the small mobile screen and the cumbersome nature of the typing keys. The resultant use of abbreviations, clippings, logograms and graphemes among others has raised debate in the writing arena with most people blaming SMS texts for impoverishing writing among students. This paper adopts the contrary view and takes a case study of Maasai Mara University students to find out that SMS texts have to use a register of their own which deviates from the standard written English. This paper also proves that before students can text, they already know the rules of the grammar of English which they manipulate in novel ways while compressing the messages. Given essays to write, the same students use standard written English. The paper also concludes by observing that abbreviations, clippings or even emoticons were in use even before SMS texting became widespread.

Keywords: SMS, texting, creativity, messages, writing and language.

1. Introduction

SMS language refers to the English language slang used in the mobile phone text messaging. Slang is vocabulary which is at the extremely informal end of the formality scale (Trudgill, 2002, p.83). These are the very informal words and expressions that are more common in the spoken language (The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary 2008). The SMS language deviates from the standard written language, a variant of English which is used in writing. It resembles a code in that it is not comprehensible to those who do not use the code. I refer to these as outsiders. The codes used are created because the phones do not have enough space to type messages. According to Crystal (2008), one SMS can contain up to 160 characters including punctuations and spaces; therefore, the message must be concise at the same time making sense (p.96). He adds that the keys used to type in the messages are small and can make it very stressful and time consuming to type full words.

The results have been incomplete sentences, highly abbreviated and clipped words which are characteristic of non-standard ways of writing. One school of thought contends that this non-standard way of writing impacts negatively on everyday language of 'texters' (Rosen et al 2009). However, Crystal (2008) downplays this notion and adds that SMS is here to stay and if it is causing problems we need to manage them (p.96). He further asserts that there is little reliable information about what happens to language when people create texts (p.96). Therefore, he focuses on positive aspects of SMSing which is creativity. O'Connor (2005) also capitalizes on the fact that a writer edits the message in order to format it into a limited but precise number of words. Of course proof-reading and editing is part of the writing process.

To justify that SMS does not impact negatively on the writing skills of the students, Crystal (2008) advances six points: (1) In a typical text message, less than 10% of the words are abbreviated; (2) abbreviating has been in use for decades, and thus is not a new language; (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 know how to spell. Texting can therefore not be a cause of bad spelling; (6) since texting provides people with the opportunity of engaging with the language through reading and writing, it improves people's literacy.

SMS has a relatively short history, ranging from 1992 to date, but it is used by millions of people worldwide. Among these are students who use SMS to communicate with their friends, relatives and lecturers, a phenomenon that has earned them the tag "thumb generation". There are a number of advantages associated with SMS texting: it is cheaper than the voice call; it is less intrusive, i.e. nobody hears you sending the message nor can one decipher what the incoming message is all about; it enables direct conveyance of the message without interruption from the recipient; it can be saved for future reference unlike the spontaneous spoken word

and it offers a choice e.g. to reply, forward, or delete them. The main disadvantage is that it can be cumbersome in composition due to the tiny keys to input data in the phone.

Writing woes have been blamed on SMS texting (see Dansieh, 2011). However, this paper looks at the efforts to use small screen technology through abbreviation, graphemes and rebuses as simply creativity. I reiterate that little is known about what happens to language when people create texts (Crystal, 2008, p. 96). This paper downplays the notion that SMS texting language instigated and harms students' writing skills. Instead, it finds out the creativity aspects of the SMS texting to the writing skills of university students. It specifically addresses these questions:

- i. What properties of the SMS texting style are manifest of creativity among Maasai Mara university students?
- ii. What proportion of SMS texts sent by Maasai Mara University students uses SMS style?
- iii. What impact do the small mobile phone keys and small screens have on SMS texting creativity of university students?

This first section of this paper presents the introduction, purpose of the paper, literature review and the methodology. The second consists of the results and discussions while the last section presents the conclusion.

1.1 Literature Review

SMS texting has had a relatively short history (1992 to date) but it has aroused interest among authors and researchers. The first book solely written on SMS texting was by a Finnish author Hannu Luntiala in 2007 about a business executive traveling throughout Europe and India (Crystal, 2008).

The following year David Crystal, a renowned Linguistics professor, wrote a more comprehensive book on SMS texting *Txtng: The Gr8 Db8 (Texting: The Great Debate)*, a book whose title announces the SMS texting language. In this book Crystal refutes that SMS language and its use of abbreviations and slang can impact negatively on student language and literacy. He puts forth six defenses: (1) in a typical text message, less than 10% of the words are abbreviated; (2) abbreviating has been in use for decades, and thus is not a new language; (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 know how to spell. Texting can therefore not be a cause of bad spelling; (6) since texting provides people with the opportunity of engaging with the language through reading and writing, it improves people's literacy.

More recently, John McWhorter (2013) has been urging grammarians to think of email and text messages not as the scourge of the English language but as "fingered speech," in which written thoughts can be shared at the speed of talking. Whereas there is a group of linguists who do not think SMS impacts negatively on student writing skill, others led by Sunderland (2002) see otherwise and summarize SMS texting as "bleak, bald, sad shorthand. Drab shrinktalk ... Linguistically it's all pig's ear ... it masks dyslexia, poor spelling and mental laziness. Texting is penmanship for illiterates." Note the use of strong images in condemning SMS.

Indeed, SMS texting has been condemned as "textese", "slanguage", a "digital virus" among others. Despite these negative connotations, linguists have delved into studies of SMS texting or messaging language and written books and articles in journals on the same. Wood and Meachem (2011) in their *Longitudinal study of children's text messaging* discovered that text composers and readers must be familiar with acceptable phoneme and grapheme mapping in written English and must also differentiate the sequence of discrete language sounds or phoneme in a word. According to them, text messaging has positive effects on literary skills, a view shared by Beverly and Wood (2003) and later by Crystal (2008). Thurlow (2003) also supports this view and adds that language can be adaptive and addictive rather than subtractive. Pathan (2012) while analyzing the SMS language from a stylistic dimension notes that language changes through time and technology plays crucial roles, so textspeak manifests linguistic creativity of texters to utilize small screen technology.

1.1.2 Properties and Style of SMS language

A more detailed linguistic properties and style of SMS language is suggested by Crystal (2008) as follows:

- Acronyms and Abbreviation: formed from initial letters of various words), for example: "LOL" (Laugh out loud)
- Clipping: a word formed by leaving out the last letter/letters e.g. comin, aft, 'coming, after' respectively.
- Logograms: a written symbol that represents a word/ meaningful part of a word eg 8 'ate'
- No capitalization
- Replacing (one letter or digit replaces entire word)
- Rebus: Words and sentences made out of a combination of letters, pictures or logograms eg CUL8R 'see you later'.
- Graphones: words are used as they are pronounced eg kam 'come'
- Emoticons/smiley: a combination of keyboard characters designed to convey the emotions associated with particular facial expressions eg :-['unhappy'.
- Non-conventional spellings, for example: "Nite" (Night) or variation in spelling.
- Contractions (deletion of middle letters), for example: "Nxt" (Next).
- Emoticon/smiley's are combinations of keyboard characters designed to the emotions associated with particular facial expressions eg :-[which means " I am unhappy".

This paper uses these properties as the reference point while analyzing the creativity aspects of the SMS texting.

1.1.3 SMS Texting

SMS are initials standing for Short Messaging Services. A text is composed and sent using mobile phones. Typically, a single SMS can accommodate up to 160 characters although there are some wireless devices which can send longer messages with a system called concatenated SMS which breaks a long message down into smaller chunks sending them in sequence (Crystal, 2008, p.96). Still, messages are compacted to save effort on the cumbersome keys. This makes texters to think clearly how they will phrase the words in order to put the point across with the least words possible with the character limit allowed, forcing creativity in the forms of abbreviation, rebuses, multilingualism and graphone among others.

This SMS is a register of its own as it is very informal and deviates from the conventions of the standard written language. In fact it is like a conversation between two friends which McWhorter describes is written at the speed of talking. As a result the SMS language has been labeled internet slang, webslang, chattish, netspeak, netlingua, digital English, textese, texism and so on (Thurlow 2007; Crystal, 2008). This naming is based on the attitude towards it, its users or its style. The act of sending a text message is termed "texting", the sender is called a "texter".

Today, text messaging is considered the most widely used mobile data service. It is estimated that by the end of 2007, half of the world's population (3.3 billion) was mobile phone subscribers. Out of this, 2.4 billion people, constituting 74% of all mobile phone users worldwide, were active users of the SMS (Wikipedia, 2010).

1.1.4 Uses of SMS

SMS is mostly used for interpersonal services; however, there are other services that it is used for. These include text votes e.g. in Tusker Project Fame in Kenya (a television talent tapping show in East Africa) to save competitors on probation, opinion polls in television channels like KTN and CITIZEN, enquiring and receiving bank balance updates and topping up credit by keying in a given code. Today, Kenyans are using SMS money transfers called M-Pesa, Pesa mkononi and Orange Money by Safaricom, Celtel and Orange telephone companies respectively. Between 2007 and 2010, the number of users of M-Pesa rose from 52,000 to 9.7 million according to company statistics (Agence France Presse, 2010).

The SMS messaging services have also been adopted by the Kenya Power Company in querying balances, settling bills and other updates. There are also numerous other product and service industries that have adopted the SMS messaging for marketing strategies.

SMS is used in place of voice calls in when the latter may not be convenient. Generally, texting is considered more economical. Some people simply text because it is relatively cheaper compared to placing a phone call to another mobile phone. In Kenya, some mobile companies, for example Safaricom, have introduced as little daily subscription rates for SMS texting as Ksh 5 for 20 messages within the network.

1.2 Methodology

40 participants were purposely selected from Maasai Mara University in the Narok County of Kenya: 10 from each year of study. Each was allowed to forward 10 SMS communication with their lecturers, friends or classmates. Where in my opinion the SMS message was dominated by texting language, the subjects were asked to resend the same message in standard writing so that the translation given will capture the intended meaning. Essays written by the same students during their continuous assessment tests were assessed for possible influence of SMS language. Subjects were treated with dignity and anonymity and the data was handled with confidentiality (Oso and Onen, 2005, p.47).

2. Results and Discussion

2.1 Analysis of SMS texts.

This section presents common content and styles used in the 400 SMS texts that students forwarded for analysis. The aspects of the message that are textese are italicized. The message is followed by a translation into the conventional writing and a brief comment proving the creativity aspects of SMS, at the same time downplaying the notion that SMS has negative impact on writing skills. Since a single SMS text combines more than one aspect of the text language or style, SMS messages have been sequenced as they were sent. Each message then analyzed according to the SMS properties suggested by Crystal (2008) and checked for the proportion of textese words in it relative to the whole message.

they are listed in sequence and each analyzed in terms of all the SMS features present in it.

1. *Evng am nt* feeling well *nt* able to come
Good evening I am not feeling well. I am not able to come.
Out of the nine words used in (1) only four are textese. There is omission of vowel [i] and [o] in 'evening' and 'not'. A full stop has been omitted between well and not and at the end of the sentence. Also, through ellipsis 'Good' is missing in 'good evening'. This is not a new phenomenon as more often one sees in writing such ellipsis.
2. *2ko* complex *lt* 6
We are in complex lecture theatre six.
Two out of four words used are textese.
In (1) One digit, 2, replaces two letters 'tu'. Abbreviations 'lt' represent 'lecture theatre' are used. This is probably to quickly write in the small screen technology which is cumbersome. At the same time LT as initials is used in the time table for the same reason.
3. *2ko rm* 4
We are in room four.
In (3) two words out of three are textese. Vowel [u] deletion is also observed in *rm*. (2) and (3) are written very fast to a lecturer inquiring the classroom and the writer does not have much time to write in full.
4. *Plix ask for my jacket which got lost on Tuesday.*
Please ask for my jacket which got lost on Tuesday.

In (4) one out of five words is textese. 'plix' is one of the various creative ways of writing 'please' others are 'pliz, plz and pls'. This is probably echoed from the name Xaviour where the 'X' is pronounced as [s]. Most of the sentence, however, is written in standard English.

5. *Plz am supposed to hv an exam kesho commskill and was told to cal u to see if u can pliz set.*

Please I am supposed to have communication skills examination tomorrow and was told to call you to see if you can please set it.

In (5) 6 out of 22 are textese. The message contains 100 characters skillfully condensed in order to fit in the screen and give room for more in case there is need by vowel deletion in 'plz', 'hv', clipping of last letters 'cal' and code switching in Swahili of 'kesho' which is apparently shorter than 'tomorrow' in English by three characters. A graphone is used in 'plz' to represent the way it is spoken.

6. *:*""*:*

*; ^ ; The beauty of life does not depend on how happy u r, but how happy others
“%”
(can be because of u! Gd day teacher @PIUS B@*

The beauty of life does not depend on how you are, but how happy others can be because of you.

In (6) the writer creatively draws a tree using emoticons made from punctuation marks and a mathematical symbol "per cent". Only 6 words out of 28 words used are textese. One letter 'u' replaces an entire word 'you'. Before letter writing was overtaken by emails and SMS, writers of letters used to draw emoticons like banana symbols on the envelop with brief descriptions like 'open with a banana smile'. This creativity has gone a notch higher by using varied emoticons to draw a tree or anything else.

7. *Hello madam I ve missing maks in sbe wat didn't I submit?*

Hello madam, I have missing marks in SBE. What didn't I submit?

In (7) only 3 words use SMS texting language. Graphones are used in 'wat' and 'maks' for 'what' and 'marks' respectively. An apostrophe for omission is left out in 'I ve'. 'sbe' is formal abbreviation for a course code, it is in lower case because of the difficulty in shift to upper case amid texting. Contractions and wrong use of punctuation marks have been used in writing even before the advent of emails but here it is a way of saving effort in order to fit into the small screen.

8. *Hello madam? Wil u stil mek it 4 todays class scheduld 2 b at 3pm?*

Hello madam? Will you still make it for today's class scheduled to be at 3 pm.

There are omissions in 'stil' and 'wil'. 'Mek' is written as it is pronounced and '4' and 'u' replaced whole words which result in fewer words just enough for the maximum required in the screen and justifies the difficulty in typing words especially where four letters are found in the same key eg pqrs so as to type 's' one has to repeatedly press the key to obtain it and if one misses it, he or she has to restart the process.

9. *Just a reminda of 2moroz clas plz confam: gdnyt*

Just a reminder of tomorrow's class. Please confirm. Goodnight. In (9) non-conventional spelling is used in 'reminda'. '2moroz' is a mixture of replacement, non-conventional spelling, graphone and omission of apostrophe. 'y' seems to be used where the sound [i] occurs. Effort is saved by not repeating 's' in 'class'.

10. *how do u xpect dat hapn its one of de tings dat sucks..kuna vi2 zngne znakuaga kpt 4 specific ppl..unarada my boxx*

How do you expect that to happen? It is one of the things that annoys. There are some things that are kept for specific people. Are you getting me boss?

In (10) 15 out of 21 words are textese. There is a great deal of omission of vowels in 'xpect, kpt, ppl, zngine, znakuaga'. Some words have omissions of both consonants and vowels e.g. 'happening' and substitution of [ð] sound with [d]. In addition 'xpect' is a graphone since 'x' is the way the first syllable is pronounced. This is a second instance of 'x' being used in place of 's'. Originally the sentence is long but the replacements and shortenings make it shorter.

11. *hawa u... umekul sana. Me nko gud hows home anyway.*
How are you...you are very quiet. I am good. How is home anyway?
(11) is a case of graphone and replacement in 'hawa u' for 'how are you'. 'kul' is also a graphone for 'cool'. 'nko' and 'anway' has deletion of vowel [i] and of course wrong spelling in 'gud'. The merger of two 'how are' and replacement of a whole word 'u' in 'hawa u' respectively is a sure way of compressing words to fit the limit allowed at the same time saving energy in pressing the keys.
12. *Umekam daro? If so kamnje unigotee*
Have you come to class (darasa)? If so come outside and greet me.
Again, a case of graphone in 'umekam' and clipping and slang in 'daro'. The code mixing observed is simply a creativity feature and reflects on the writer's ability to differentiate the sequence of discrete language sounds or phoneme in English and Swahili which results in economy of letters.
13. *MAN U r luzers!*
Manchester United are losers!
(13) is a case of clipping of the word 'Manchester', logogram in the replacement of 'you' with 'u'. 'Luzers' is graphone. This kind of clipping is also used in radio and newspaper, so it will be untextwise to write MAN U in full. SMS as a spoken text written
14. *hi madam i can c u.. we a in lec thter 6 on ua left*
Hi madam, I can see you. We are in lecture theatre 6 on your left.
(14) Uncapitalized initial word of the sentence as well as the first person singular 'I' characterizes textese. The others are replacements of 'see', 'you' and 'are'. 'ua' is a case of graphone.
15. *giv us one mo wk to submit the assignments. today ur lukin elegant*
Give us one more week to submit the assignments. today ur loking elegant.
In (14) there is clipping in 'give' 'more' and 'looking'. Also, there is deletion of middle letters in 'week' and 'between'.
16. *mbossy we!!! Juz kip of 4m sam of the thngs i do n al do tht 2..*
You boss, just keep off from some of the things I do and I'll do that too.
In (16) most words are shorter than they are in the conventional writing. This is probably to make them fit within the small space provided in the phone screen. There is apparent omission of 't' in 'just' and 'some', which are also written as they are spelt. The same is the case with 'that'. Two letters have been replaced with [i] in 'keep' and 'n' and '2' are replacement of whole words 'and' and 'too'. The words 'al', 'juz', 'kip' are written as they are pronoun, while '4m' is replacement of some letters.
17. *Its ok.but id b hpi if u tel me.nway its ok nyt*
In (17) there is omissions of an apostrophe in 'its' and deletion of letters in 'hpi', 'tel', 'nway'. logograms are seen in 'b' and 'u' for 'be' and 'you', and misspelling in 'nyt'. ;
18. *Pliz nietee 4 pens frm students cntre al refund the cash...2 blu 2black*
Please bring me four pens from students' centre. I will refund the cash... 2 blue 2 black
19. *Wud you mind taking me to tao...nataka kuendea parcel flani... usikatae pliiiiiz!*
Would you mind taking me to town... I want to collect a certain parcel... do not decline please.
20. *Wat did you min? u left me hanging...xpound am waiting.*
What did you mean? You left me hanging (in suspense)...expound I am waiting.
There is graphone in 'what', mean and logogram in you 'u'.
21. *Haha that was first wol. Gudnyt*
Haha (laughter) that was first. Goodnight.
22. *Hahahahaha...thts funny...tht is def funny.wow. well let me see... am I going to see you today?*
Haha (laughter)... that is funny... that is definitely funny. Well let me see... am I going to see you today? 22 echoes an informal speech. Notice the way the actual laughter, speech fillers (let me see) have been captured in writing and use of ellipsis. Even though most of the text is in conventional writing.

2.2 Analysis of students' essays

This section analyses samples of essays written by the texters whose SMS messages have been analyzed above. 11 sentences are sampled from the essays written by the subjects in order to find out any influence of the SMS texting language.

23. *The* Written language does not *have* feedback. The feedback takes some time since the reader must take time to read and give *out* feedback.
24. Up and down movement: *It* shows that the nectars are not 200 metres away from the hive.
25. One will never resist language acquisition since he/she will never even realize that the process of acquisition is taking place while *in* language learning one can resist *it* since it takes *a long* time to learn *it*.
26. I discussed the issue later with my classmates and realized that where I was standing, the network is not usually available *there*.
27. Find out if the information he or she might give is original or second hand.
28. Downloading is copying of information from the files into *the* computer hardware or the *USB* cables.
29. It's important to define a problem before attempting to solve it so that you can know the real problem you want to solve.
30. There is *less* pressure from competitors in terms of the need to improve their services and materials for study.
31. Make sure your dressing code is appealing and appropriate.
32. Introduction of new employees means introduction of new skills which should replace the old skills of the former employee.
33. Cases of violence have been observed by university students who occupy *residencial* houses outside the school.

A few mistakes, in italicized words and phrases can be found in these sentences; however, they are not laced with SMS text features like clippings, logograms and vowel deletions among others that are common in typical SMS messages. In 23 there is a wrong choice of the word 'have' and unnecessary use of 'out' as in 26. In 25 and 28, the italicized words had been omitted. In 33 'residencial' is misspelt.

3. Conclusion

The analysis reveals that the small space available for typing and the difficulty in using the small keys force texters to devise more effortless and economical ways of writing which often result in creativity. The most common forms of SMS language by the Maasai Mara University Students are clipping, graphone, logograms, non-conventional spelling, code-switching (between English and Swahili) and lack of capitalization where it is required. There is always a tradeoff between which method will result in use of fewer letters. Though the texters deviate from standard writing, it is evident that before doing so, they first understand the standard English and apply its written form in its most economical miniature form. Graphones for instance reveal the writers understand the writing conventions but prefer to write as it is pronounced. Images like trees, heart and emotions for happiness and sorrow further reveal how symbols can be pieced together in a more fascinating way. The SMS texts help students think of more creative ways of using the minimum resource at their disposal. Again, the textese is only a small proportion of the SMS message. The SMS language also does not affect the quality of the essays which students write at home or when they are timed. They are careful not to abbreviate unnecessarily, clip and use logograms or any other textese.

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