

The 'SMS' Style of Communication: Implication on Language Usage among Nigerian University Students

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ABSTRACT Language is a form of social practice often used to create speeches which aids communication. Language plays a major role in interpersonal and inter-group communication. Thus, it encourages individuals to send across messages in each given situation. The use of the SMS style in communication is a language style which is formed intentionally by means of conscious, systematic patterning and implementation. This paper thus examines the SMS style of language communication among Nigeria university students with emphasis on its effects on English language usage. The paper concludes by re-affirming that the frequency of SMS style will generate greater linguistic confusion if it is not controlled.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language has always been central to the study of man in his environment. Language is a dynamic construct which has social relevance especially in its environment of usage. The greater value of language lies in its communicability, which is the individual's ability to use the words in a given context.

The short message service 'SMS' is a miniature and abridged style of transmitting written information. This style became prominent in Nigeria during the introduction and advent of the mobile phones (handsets/GSM). The SMS style of communication was used for different communication purposes such as exchanging information on events; invitation to religious, social, political, academic meetings, making business contacts and sending goodwill messages (Taiwo 2009: 102).

This style of communication makes extensive use of language. This portrays language as an organized activity which uses words to accomplish its designated function. Based on the emergence of the SMS communicative style, attention is no longer given to the grammatical rules of the English language which was adopted as the official language in Nigeria. The English language is used as the language of 'all' official proceedings, communication, administration, education, law, commerce/trade, executive and legislative use.

1.1 Objectives

Prior to the technology age, language use in bilingual communities was restricted to the con-

text of speech. Over the years language use extended to writing and in recent times, especially from the mid-1990s; we have the computer mediated styles of communication.

This medium introduced among other styles, the use of the short message system of communications. The predominance of SMS style usage of university students and youths triggered the curiosity of the researcher to investigate the concepts of language, style and communication, English language in Nigeria and its attendant problems, and the 'SMS' styles of communication in Federal University of Technology, Owerri [FUTO]. There was random selection of text messages, which were written by the students. These messages were compiled by the researcher and generally interpreted as represented in the paper. The paper concludes by affirming its position that users of this communication style should see it as a process of acquiring linguistic confusion. The subjects of this study are students in the Information Management Technology (IMT) Federal University of Technology, Owerri.

2. LANGUAGE, STYLE AND COMMUNICATION

These concepts are interdependent basically because human ideas, feelings, emotions, intentions and interaction are expressed through these processes. Language is regarded as the source of human life and power. Possession of language enables the individual to have human essence; the distinctive qualities of mind that are unique to man (Noam Chomsky, in Fromkin et al.

2003: 2). According to Algeo and Pyles (2004: 2), language is “a system of conventional vocal signs by means of which human beings communicate”. In another view, Anyanwu (2002: 138) sees language as “a system composed of symbols, signs and vocal acts arbitrarily created and conventionally used in communication”. From these definitions it can be deduced that the characteristics of language are as follows:

- language is conventionally used by people
- language operates in a planned system
- language defines peoples habits and behavior
- language is a means of communication.

Language as conventionally used by people means that it is generally accepted to be used as a form of communication in particular community, having a force or law. When we say that language operates in a system, we mean that it has some internal plans or principles governing its use. The knowledge of these internal principles will enable a user to bring together, in a systematic way, discrete units of sounds into larger ones and be able to assign meanings to them.

The habitual nature of language means that one acquires a settled practice which cannot easily be given up. A language habit, once formed becomes a self identity. In language behavior voice is used, this starts from a child's first cry. Language is primarily oral (speech), an unavoidable behavior formed before writing. Finally, language as a means of communication simply indicates that we use it to transfer information, ideas and thoughts to others. Language enables man to actualize his essence as he communicates with others.

Style is simply referred to the manner of expression which could be written or oral. Gray (1969) gives a summary of scholars perception of style; “the psychologist, sees style as a form of behavior, the rhetorician sees it as the speaker, the critic sees it as individuality. For the philosopher, style means an implicit speaker; while the linguist defines it as formal structures in function”. Some other scholars also see it as; “any particular and somewhat distinctive way of using language” (Trask 1997: 201). It is also seen as, “a system of interrelated language means which serves a definite aim in communication” (Gal'perin 1977: 33). Style is an “individual, unifying character found to be present in any work resulting from intentional activity”

(Mathesius cited in Vachek 1974: 114). Crystal (1987) sees style as “a situationally distinctive use of language”. From the above definitions, it is obvious that style reflects individual or group, beliefs and socio cultural orientation. Style relates to language and interprets the individuals or group language habit which may make the users unique.

Communication, on the other hand, is the process of interaction which is carried out in a variety of ways; gestures, facial expressions and talking, to influence the behavior of others. Whenever we do these, we are communicating, thereby transferring meaningful ideas, information, thoughts, feelings etc from the communicator to the receiver.

According to McLaughlin (2006: 3), communication from a theoretical perspective, “is a process of sending and receiving messages that serve to transmit information between persons or groups.” In his view, “when someone successfully transmits a message that is understood by someone else, communication has occurred”. He further defines communication from a linguistic viewpoint as “a rule-based mental system of language codes for expressing and understanding thought, feelings, and ideas” Code in this definition, it means a system of rules for arranging arbitrary symbols in an orderly, predictable manner that allows anyone who also knows the code to interpret the meaning. It is, therefore, evident that communication is a two-way, continuous process which breaks down when either the sender or receiver fails to do what people use language to do. This leads to the important issue of communicability in linguistic and communicative competence. These concepts are concerned with what people are doing with words of a language in particular situations; expressing intentions, purposes, beliefs, and desires.

Communication demands that the interlocutors should be knowledgeable in the language development and change so as to achieve fidelity as we share our conception of the different situations in which we interact. In view of this, Bloor and Bloor (2004: 228) confirm that “since language is a human social phenomenon, it, develops and changes as people use it for social purposes”. This implies that much of our understanding of the world and activities we involve in depend on language. An interlocutor therefore needs to attain both linguistic and com-

municative 'competence in a specific language used in his environment such that he could express understandable (intelligible) thoughts or ideas through the appropriate language and in the suitable context This paper, therefore, examines the English language in Nigeria and its attendant problems.

3. ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA AND ITS PROBLEMS

The English language is evidently the most colonial legacy of the British colonial masters to Nigeria which added to the already existing multiplicity of languages. The history of the English language in Nigeria is like Oral Literature in Africa that is transmitted from generation to generation. According to Babajide (2001: 3), Osuafor (2002: 23, 2005: 105) and Ogu (1992: 65), the advent of the English language in Nigeria dates back to 1472 (15th century) in places like Warri, Calabar when they started having contact with Europeans. Osuafor (2005: 105) however locates the three popular phases of Nigeria's socio-political history: the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial eras and observes that Nigeria during the pre-colonial period was influenced by such factors as missionary activities, trade and commerce.

The Portuguese were the first people from Europe to enter West Coast of Africa. They encountered communication problems with the natives as they tried to understand themselves; Ogu (1992: 66) records that: The Portuguese Merchants did not speak much of the English language and were more interested in commerce, but as good traders they realized the need to communicate with their customers. The mixture of the indigenous languages and the Portuguese dialect of English and their own language gave rise to what today we call 'pidgin'.

Thus, 'pidgin' English developed rapidly when the English displaced the Portuguese in the pepper trade since English traders: sea captains and the governors of the English ports were not content to use any form of Portuguese in their dealings with Africans. To facilitate mutual intelligibility in the use of English language in Nigeria, professional interpreters were involved. This promoted the teaching of English language in Lagos and Calabar as recorded by Omolewa (1981) in Otagburuagu (2002: 83) The Efik of Calabar who recognized the use of En-

glish in trading founded schools to train their children, among other things, in English. Traders made individual efforts to learn and those who had little facility of exposure to sophisticated teaching, improvised with the non-standard, or Pidgin English" ...English became the language of business. And at Calabar it was observed that English was the only European language spoken by Calabar traders.

A situation like this created a struggle for supremacy between English and the numerous native languages-spoken in Nigeria. Eventually, the English language was officially adopted as the country's lingua franca. Its adoption as a channel of instruction in 1882 enhanced the training of manpower to run the important government services. According to Baldeh (1990: 2), "For these, the English language was a *sine qua non*". In quick succession the education ordinances and codes of 1882, 1882, 1918 and 1926 were enacted with a view to promoting the new language for general internal use. Attitudes of the Africans in thinking that their native languages are inferior to English however necessitated the adoption of English as the official language in Nigeria without opposition.

3.1. The Problems

The multiplicity of native languages in Nigeria actually created a problem of understanding in communication among the different ethnic groups. It was difficult for Nigerians to adopt either of the three languages: Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa as their official language. It was in this controversial situation that English came as a 'savior' to the language needs, of Nigerians hence its adoption as the country's official language. As soon as English language was converted into a second language, Nigerians reshaped it with a distinctive flavour to suit their experiences. Bamgbose (1995: 9) recognizes five dimensions of the problem of English in Nigeria: educational, political, cultural, socio-cultural and linguistic problems. According to Bamgbose (1995: 9).

Educationally: The changing role of the English language as a medium and subject of instruction affected educational language policy aimed at entrenching English as the language of education per excellence, particularly with the requirements of pass in English for Certification at most levels of education and credit for

admission to (almost all) programmes in Nigerian higher institutions.

Similarly, Otagburuagu (2002: 86) observes that "... for higher education, it was mandatory to pass qualifying test in the use of English before one could be allowed to register for the General Certificate of Education ordinary level Education. This practice persisted up till 1960 or so". Today in Nigeria, English language is an essential instructional tool in the educational sector from Nursery school to higher institutions of learning; it is also studied as a subject.

Politically: Nigeria adopted the use of English as a second language because of its role in government affairs. Bamgbose (1995: 10) asserts that Nigeria enthusiastically accepted the English language seeing its advantages in terms of political participation and employment. Thus, Otagburuagu (2002: 87) confirms that: "the mastery of the English language provided a handy tool for the Nigerian nationalist movement and helped the leadership to initiate and sustain the political struggles that later led to the emergence of an independent sovereign nation". The role English language plays in the Nigerian politics cannot be over emphasized as up till today, it is the language used in political campaigns, government proceedings, news gazettes, policies, budgets etc.

Culturally: It is said that language helps a nation to project her culture to the outer world. Nigerian culture is greatly affected as they try to exhibit their culture through a second language. The result is that as they use Nigerian English, they introduce new ways of life, modes of dressing, eating (table manners and food) etc. dates, years and months could be expressed through code-mixing of vernacular and English. English language is used in transmitting our culture through spoken or written medium and through such channels as radio, television etc.

Again, English language influences the socio-linguistic perspective of every Nigerian such that everyone aspires to learn it for its role in several domains. In most social gatherings involving different ethnic groups, English is often used. Again, all official transactions, higher education, legislature, entertainment are dominated by the use of English, because of the official position accorded it.

Linguistically: Nigerian languages were greatly influenced. This resulted in code-mixing and lexical borrowing. However, Nigerians

resort to English language use to ease communication problems to ease the differences in language, to transact business, in social gatherings, to give instructions in schools at all levels, write literary works, laws, budgets, minutes of meetings, etc. We can therefore summarize the role of English in the following words (Olagoke 1984 in Osuafor 2002: 22), "Because of the extreme multiplicity of languages in most ESL countries and the relatively underdeveloped state of the indigenous languages, and also for reason of colonialism which has given a lot of prestige and bread and butter advantage to the study and learning of English, the language is used for official purposes and for education, commerce, administration, the media and for national and international communications." This paper thus, goes further to examine the SMS style of communication and its implications.

4. THE 'SMS' STYLE OF COMMUNICATION AND ITS IMPLICATION

The short messaging habit is like every other habit, which when formed becomes difficult to stop. However, it has been observed that the use of text messaging is common among youths, students in secondary and tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Most students in the higher institutions of learning had formed the habit of using text messages in most of their communications. The reasons are obvious; it is quick, it does not adhere to the rules of English grammar it is relatively cheap, more convenient, allows creativity, used in establishing new and re-enforcing old relationships etc.

In a quick 'SMS' survey which the researcher conducted, the subjects were one hundred students in their first year in my use of English class in school of management Technology; department of Information Management Technology. The following messages were randomly selected.

4.1. Selected Text Messages

- Y re u nt comin 2 schl dis days —*why are you not coming to school these days*
- swthat, I ms u so daly—*Sweetheart, I miss you so dearly*
- I shl be comin 2moro. Ok – *I shall be coming tomorrow ok!*

- *I4got ur Reg No – I forgot your registration number*
- *I wnt 2 tank u 4 ur luv n support tru d yr – I want to thank you for your love and support through the year*
- *Hv a 9yc day – Have a nice day*
- *In dis mnth of june u re mygr8ng 4rm zero 2 hero nd 4rm przn 2 palace – in this month of June you are migrating from zero to hero and from prison to palace.*
- *Gud wl elimin8 nd tamin8 al doze dat axpire nd conxpire 2 dextroy ur hat dexire. Gud nyt – God will eliminate and terminate all those that aspire and conspire to destroy your heart desire. Good night.*
- *I mz kalkulatl dia fe ystaday – I miscalculated their fare yesterday*
- *4got my bk unda d ridin table, pls bring it 2 skul, I apreci8 – I forgot my book under the reading table, please bring it to school. I appreciate*
- *Philip, Tri 2 c if u can cum 2 sosc xtensn, d GsT lektura wants us 2 ryt a txt lang asst - Philip, try to see if you can come to (sosc) school of science extension, the GST (General Studies) lecturer wants us to write a text language assignment.*
- *I neva sin a lektura like u. I neva belif pple kan no GST 102 lik dis. Ur Lvl day tun my head. But I tank God I'm Lky 2 mit sm I lik u. – I have never seen a lecturer like you, I did not believe that people can teach/ know GST 102 (Use of English Course) like this. Your level is turning my head, but I thank God that I am lucky to meet someone like you.*
- *I'l liv 4 skul @ 8.00am I hop U' r goin - I will leave for school at 8. 00am I hope you are going?*
- *It's gr8 2 hia dat u' re logd out of 200 Lvl and abt 2 browz 2 300 Lvl may u double click gudnes, meci, & danload success, gud helt & favo, Hv a succesf NW SESN - it is great to hear that you have logged out of 200 level and about to browse through 300 level. May you double click goodness, mercy, and download success, good health and favour. Have a Successful new session.*
- *Dis xmas season, jehova o bu ngwongwo', wI carry al ur problems, U'I ova tek ur enemies. Hapi xmas IJN - This Christmas season, Jehova, carrier of all yokes will carry your problems. You will overtake your enemies. Happy Christmas in Jesus name.*

4.1.1 Analysis of Students Response and its Implications on English Language

As a follow up to inquiry on the students use of 'SMS' text messaging, the researcher asked these questions in class.

Questions

- ❖ How often do you use SMS?
- ❖ When do you use it?
- ❖ Do you like it?
- ❖ Why do you like/prefer it?

Their responses are analyzed below;

Based on the response of the students it is obvious that text messaging is characterized by word shortening, abbreviation, capitalization, acronyms, poor punctuation, bad grammar, poor spelling, wrong use of small letters symbol and other forms of text communications

Incidentally, this habit of the use of text linguistic features is not controlled as students transfer (unconsciously) the use to their academic work and this influences how they are subsequently evaluated. Again, the creativity which text users achieve do not make them to appear intelligent, responsible, motivated, studious, because they cannot control the use of SMS during formal academic writings.

Although text messaging enhances communication (informally), this paper expresses the fear that it has more negative influence on users as regards communicability in English language. It is true that text messaging allows for creativity among users but to what extent does it enhance mutual intelligibility (when the receiver could not decode the text lingo)? And to what extent do the 'texters' achieve possibility, feasibility, and appropriateness which are needed for successful communication in English?

This is because students spend a greater period in the days testing messages, making and receiving calls, saving answers to likely examination questions to be used in cheating than reading. Thus, they misappropriate the opportunities they would have used in learning to write formal, semi-formal and proper informal letters, and even essays, to texting messages. This habit invariably affects their speech as students hardly have adequate responses to questions in classes. They cause confusion for their examiners by using unconventional features of text messaging symbols which is used to represent words,

Table 1: Categorization of preference of SMS users

Question 1 How often do you use SMS?			Question 2 When do you use it?			Question 3 Do you like it?			Question 4 Why do you like/prefer it?			
Always	Not always	No contribution	Every time	For text only	No contribution	Yes	No	No contribution	Easy	Short	Saves cost/time	No contribution
51	29	20	8	64	28	84	1	15	20	18	49	13

as in 2day (today) b.4.(before) gr8 (great) @ (at) 9t (night) bcos (because) etc. They also use capital and small letters indiscriminately, as writing first person pronoun 'I' in small letter, 'i' and using capital letters in the middle of sentence as 'i wish u success in ALL ur papers' Table 1 is showing the categorization of interests of SMS users.

In view of this Russel (2010: 3) feels that: "Young adults who used more language-based textisms (short cuts such as LOL" 2nite, etc.) in daily writing produced worst formal writing than young adults who used fewer linguistic textisms in daily writing". This is true because, if one fails to consciously avoid its' use in formal writing; the inevitable resultant effect is poor performance in academic assessment. Text messaging destroys the ways students read, think and write. It' makes them to show lazy attitude towards reading and writing as they are incapable of thinking rightly as to decode ideas accurately. Again, they find it difficult separating formal and informal English as they freely use "U" for "you", "4" for "for", "pls" for "please", "2mrw" for "tomorrow" etc. during formal academic work.

SMS messaging style is therefore harmful to students' writing and grammar. This view is supported by Holloway (2011: 10-11) who states; *...Writers and language experts have come out against the use of SMS abbreviations. British journalist and broadcaster, John Humphreys has said that texting is "wrecking our language" and has called its users "vandals". Linguistic traditionalists worry that texting will reduce users' ability to write correct English sentences, and will harm their spelling and vocabulary. Because SMS originated from the need to send, very short messages, it discourages complex vocabulary and prevents the creation of longer, more sophisticated phrases.*

The situation noted above explains the focus of this paper that the use of text messaging has contributed to the deformation of the English language in Nigeria and beyond.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper concludes that the SMS messaging style of communication is fast becoming a universal phenomenon commonly used in communication and unconsciously transferred to most formal writing situations of Nigerian students. Text language users resort to it mostly because of limited space, maintaining a desired speed, lack of appropriate words and spelling etc.

Therefore, students should not be overwhelmed by the social relevance of text messaging. They should rather aim at attaining mastery of and communicability in the target language because bastardization of a language cannot enhance its development. Anything worth doing is worth doing well.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the observations made in this paper, the following recommendations are made in order to achieve communicative competence in the English language:

- ❖ Students should not only see text messaging as the easier and quicker means of communication but should realize its negative effects on their academic work. They should imbibe the practice of writing formal letters and essays adhering to grammatical conventions and writing mechanics.
- ❖ They should be conscious of their writing so as to separate informal and formal writing in other not to use text features in their formal academic work.
- ❖ Lecturers should emphasize the avoidance of text messaging among students by organizing public enlightenment lectures telling them the educational implications of such usages. They should also give assignments and assess student' work properly. This is in line with what Otagburuagu (1997: 10) views when he cites Broughton and Brumfit (1980:20) as saying that: "The ability to

put sentences together effectively needs systematic encouragement and sometimes explicit teaching and part of the work in a writing course involves teaching students to be sensitive to the rules of discourse in English”.

If these recommendations are utilized, it is believed that the SMS style of communication and its negative effects on students' academic performance, especially those learning English as a second language, and communication generally shall be reduced or possibly nipped at the bud.

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