

Exploring the Language of Informal English Text Messages

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Abstract

This study focused on a corpus of 100 informal English text messages obtained from 2 nonnative male and female professional English speakers during 2 months. The main aim of this study was to analyze the language of this kind of newly born language to see how senders express their concepts within a tiny cell phone screen and how receivers interpret them. Our findings revealed that abbreviation was the main genre applied in this mode of creative writing. For the sake of brevity, speed and convenience, use of incorrect grammar, incorrect punctuation and incorrect spelling found to be widespread. Besides, there were further shortening strategies utilized to have the fewest numbers of characters in each message. Additionally, common background knowledge was considered essential for decoding this somewhat secret language.

Keywords: Abbreviation; Mobile phone; Short Message System; Text message

1. Introduction

Interpersonal communication is vital for humans and people make use of it all the time. Various means of communication constitute face to face communication, e-mail, chat, Facebook, MySpace, instant messaging, and text messaging. As Butt and Phillips (2008) suggested, mobile phones "support interpersonal interaction". One of the largest field of growth in this way of interaction is the Short Message System (SMS) commonly known as text messaging (Faulkner & Culwin, 2005; Herring & Zelenkauskaitė, 2009). Since the first generation of mobile phones, text messaging has gained popularity among a wide range of people and mainly among teenagers, young adults and college students (Faulkner & Culwin, 2005; Walsh, White, Cox & Young, 2011). Furthermore, several scholars maintained that text messaging may develop into a major form of

interpersonal mediated communication (Leung, 2007). This mode of communication is utilized widely due to the fact that it is a fast, easy and convenient way; besides, it is cheaper as compared to voice services. Accordingly, Leung (2007) reported that students' motivation to use text messaging were for reasons such as convenience, low cost, entertainment, affection and fashion. However, it has been mentioned that some people display overdependence on text messages. It means that throughout the day they spend a large amount of time exchanging text messages without self-control. The very reason behind this specific issue may be their strong need for interpersonal communication (Igarashi, Motoyoshi, Takai, & Yoshida, 2008). This preferred means of communication is generally seen among people of the same age and with whom one like or is close to (Holtgraves, 2011). People send text messages while listening to a friend, driving, shopping or watching a movie. According to Lee and Perry (2007), text messaging is displacing face-to-face communication (p.74).

Yet, this emerging means of electronic communication is specifically interesting because it manifests an amalgam of written and oral communication modes (Holtgraves, 2011). In text messaging, the process of writing and speaking has become one. Therefore, it can be stated that the mentioned structure "is a written form of communication that takes place interactively in real-time" (Holtgraves, 2011, p. 92). The language employed in this way of communication is so special that a person without the necessary background knowledge can hardly decode it.

This study aims to focus on the features of the language that is being used in informal text messages. Furthermore, it seeks to analyze their genre structure in order to find out how senders express their ideas as well as how receivers interpret them.

2. Literature Review

Originally, mobile phones were exclusively purposed for voice communication. Apart from this specific function and after a short while, these communication tools were utilized for additional functions such as taking pictures, listening to music and accessing the internet (Walsh, White, Cox, & Young, 2011). Simultaneously, the Short Message Service (SMS) feature developed as an unintended commercial byproduct of this standard design (Faulkner & Culwin, 2005).

The SMS feature of mobile phone technology is the ability to exchange strings of alphanumeric characters from one phone to another, using the keypad to type messages and the display screen to read them (Hutchby & Tanna, 2008). These messages are commonly known as 'texts' and the activity of sending and receiving texts has become known as 'texting' (as in 'I got your text'; Faulkner & Culwin,

2005; Hutchby & Tanna, 2008). According to Holtgraves (2011), messages are usually short, simple, intimate, and affective. Spatial constraints on texts length, a single SMS is confined to 160 characters—together with the challenge of a tiny screen add to further reasons such as need for speed and ease of typing to make the messages markedly brief and to the point (Herring & Zelenkauskaitė, 2009; Thurlow & Brown, 2003). Brevity, as the major weakness of SMS, is somehow justified; given that, the most popular application of the texts is the exchange of messages between friends (Leung, 2007). Paradoxically, this very shortcoming has contributed to the growth of sub language of abbreviations and characters which mainly resembles to code rather than a standard language (Leung, 2007). One of the most significant features of this language is its elliptical nature, that is, the frequent use of abbreviations, acronyms, misspelling, emotions, consonant clusters with a number and so on as the result of limitation in the length of a message and for the purpose of brevity and speed (Baron, 2004; Berger & Coch, 2010; Leung, 2007; Holtgraves, 2011; Ling & Baron, 2007; McWilliam, Schepman, & Rodway, 2009; Thurlow & Brown, 2003). Likewise, Holtgraves (2011) reported that nearly 82% of users utilize abbreviation when they text. Furthermore, it was declared that the mentioned abbreviations were increasingly seen in further modes of writing like electronic (e.g., e-mails) and traditional pen-and-paper forms (written notes) (McWilliam, Schepman, & Rodway, 2009).

This technology-based language created by texters is nonconventional, nonstandard and nonliteral, (Holtgraves, 2011; Thurlow & Brown, 2003). It is derived from standard English and is created to facilitate ease of communication (Berger & Coch, 2010). Therefore, it is applicable only if the partner is acquainted with this way of talking. Nonliteral language can lead to misunderstandings; because, unlike a literal interpretation, the intended meaning is never explicitly declared but instead depends on inferences (Eisterhold, Attardo, & Boxer, 2006). The recognition of nonliteral intention often depends on allusions to preceding knowledge or to a common background; thus, it can be comprehended more easily when the speaker and listener know each other well (Kotthoff, 2003). Indeed, the risk of employing nonliteral language with friends is generally lower than using it with strangers (Pexman & Zvaigzne, 2004). Accordingly, Whalen, Pexman, and Gill (2009) indicated that benefits of conducting this form of language outweigh the risk of being misunderstood.

Consequently, Short Messaging Service (SMS), as the most recent mode of communication, is changing the way people interact with each other. Primarily, messages were more structured and formal; gradually, the language shrank and turned to be less like the written form (Faulkner & Culwin, 2005). As Halliday (1985) declared, these changes affected by modern technologies, reshape the

language and even the mind. Eventually, they lead to the convergence of speaking and writing, exhibiting features of both. However, according to Brown and Yule (1983) the distinctive functions of spoken and written discourse are in a way that we employ speech for human relationships (interactional); whereas, written language for working and conveying information (transactional), considering the fact that the contexts are notably different.

Hitherto, there has been a considerable amount of research devoted to text messaging. Nevertheless, to our best knowledge, none of the conducted studies has examined SMS in the light of genre analysis. In addition, the participants of all the mentioned papers were native English speakers whereas ours are nonnative ones. All in all, the purpose of this paper is to define some of the language features of this recently-most-common mode of communication. In order to reach this optimum goal it is intended to analyze the genre structure of some informal English text messages of nonnative texters to put light on this creative use of language, the way senders encode and receivers decode the transmitted messages.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

Our participants were one male and one female SMS users who received English text messages from 2 other people. All individuals involved were informed of the purpose of the study. It's worth noticing that our texters were not native; they were Iranian English teachers who spoke English as their foreign language and were quite proficient in speaking English. However, our sample is not representative of the whole community.

3.1 Procedure

During two months' time 100 of their text messages were randomly selected and uploaded for a more detailed analysis. All the recorded text messages were transcribed word-for-word and in precisely the same format as the messages appeared on the mobile phone LCD. This included replicating exactly the character length, number of lines, order of the words, misspellings and punctuations. Subsequently, we counted the exact number of words, sentences, abbreviations, capital letters and punctuations in each SMS. The results were conveyed to some charts and tables that will be analyzed in the next section.

4. Results and Discussion

To begin analyzing our results we intend to focus on the length of messages, that is, the number of sentences and words conveyed through each transmission. The whole number of sentences and words transmitted within our 100 sample text messages are about 126 and 739, respectively.

Taking a look at Figure 1, it can be seen how many sentences have been conveyed through each of our sample messages. Obviously, due to the conciseness of the texts, one-sentence-messages are dominant:

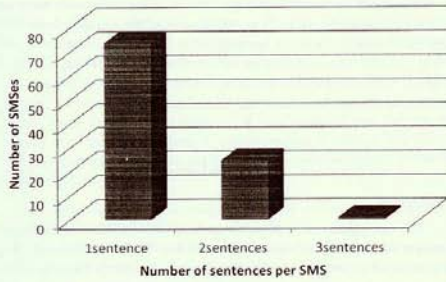


Figure 1. Number of sentences transmitted through each text message.

Figures 2 and 3 depict the statistics concerning the amount of words transmitted via each text message. Based on Figure 2 it is apparent that the use of three, four, five, six, seven and eight words in each SMS is more frequent than other types and according to Figure 3 70% of the messages are placed within this range of words. 28% of the messages hold more than 9 words in each; besides, the percentage of texts with two words and below is not significantly conspicuous. In his study, Holtgraves (2011) stated that 90% of the text messages contained 17 words or less and the average was 14 words per message.

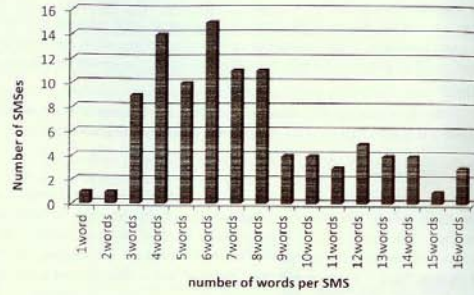


Figure 2. Number of words transmitted through each text message.

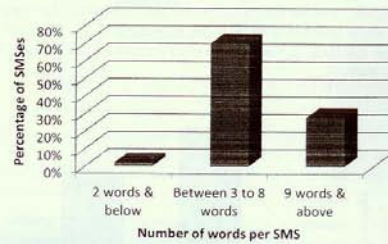


Figure 3. Percentage of words in each SMS.

Based on our findings abbreviation is the most important genre applied in text message writing. Whereas many people write out full words and sentences,

many others ensure that their messages are as economical as possible by using their own language conventions and shortcuts. The fact that only a tiny space is available for communication, has made the texters to condense as much meaning as possible into a small message. Implementing this method of text composition, one saves time as well as effort and users are then more likely to exploit the service for subsequent messages.

In the following, we present our findings on the basis of some different shortening strategies applied in our sample texts for abbreviating words.

Abbreviation:

In fact, messages are a combination of actual words, abbreviations and short forms which represent the characteristics of the language in SMS text messaging. This language is to some extent identical to rebus writing which employs pictures, single letters or numbers to represent the whole word (like "u" that replaces "you," "8" that means "ate" and "<3" that is the picture of a heart and stands for "love"; Yule, 2005).

Stylistic features of abbreviation are misspellings, acronyms and omission of vowels, consonants, subject pronouns and punctuations. In the informal situation the use of nonstandard spelling and abbreviation is acceptable whereas in serious and formal situations this would be inappropriate. It is considerably interesting to state that although it is faster to write in short forms, it takes more time to read than normal English. However, the context and the background knowledge play a significant role in interpreting the message. Accordingly, it was suggested that using text message abbreviations can improve word recognition (McWilliam, Schepman, & Rodway, 2009).

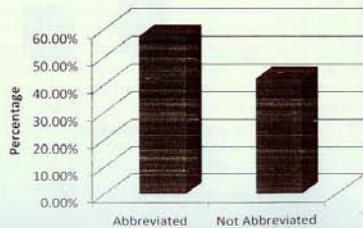


Figure 4. Percentage of abbreviated and unabbreviated words.

Based on our previous findings the whole number of words transmitted through these 100 text messages are about 739. According to Figure 4, approximately 58% of the words used are abbreviated and the rest that is about 42% have their normal form of spelling. The words that have been abbreviated are mostly long with a string of letters, and because the objective of texters is to use the fewest number of characters needed to convey a comprehensible message, these words are shortened (see Appendix for a summary of all different kinds of abbreviation discussed above and utilized in our samples).

Below there is another Figure that illustrates the difference between male and female use of abbreviation in their texts.

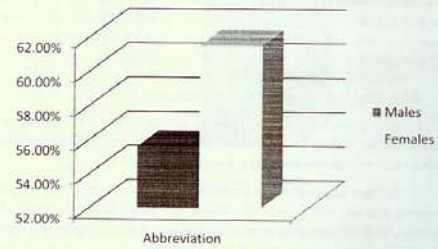


Figure 5. Difference between males' and females' use of abbreviation.

Figure 5 reveals that women abbreviate nearly 61.5% of the words; whereas, men abbreviate 55.5% of them. In spite of the fact that the discrepancy is not highly noticeable; it shows women's more tendency toward abbreviation and shortening than men.

Although variations of message composition, linguistic alternations and shortening strategies often depend on some factors such as the individual's personality traits and relationship status (Holtgraaves, 2011) there seems to be some general guidelines for textual shortening in text messages. Below we will elaborate more on the ones appeared in our samples.

Omission of vowels

One of the most popular techniques for reducing the number of letters in a word is vowel omission. For some of the words that do not own a specific abbreviation, users mostly drop the vowels in order to make them short. Therefore, merely a set of consonants—called consonant clusters—remains, and the reader is forced to interpret this string by re-adding the vowels (e.g., “tnx” for “thanks” and “imprtnt” for “important”) relying on the premise that in English consonants generally hold more semantic value than vowels (Thurlow & Brown, 2003).

Use of numbers as/in words

Another widely used method for the sake of brevity and speed is the combination of numbers and letters in words. A word or part of it is replaced by a number that has the same sound, or technically called letter-number homophones (Thurlow & Brown, 2003). Examples are “later,” which changes into “ltr” or “2” and “4” that stand for “to, too” and “for, four,” respectively.

Misspellings and phonological approximation

In writing text messages some words are misspelled intentionally to make them more similar to their pronunciation form. Texters “write it as if saying it” to establish a more informal register (Thurlow & Brown, 2003).

Users often implement representations of the sounds that they would make when saying specific words like ‘bz’ instead of ‘busy’ and ‘r’ instead of ‘are’. Additionally, lexical items such as goin (going)—so-called G-clipping (Thurlow & Brown, 2003), gimme (give me) and cuzn (cousin) serve the need for both abbreviation and phonological approximation.

Acronyms

Acronyms are the use of initial letters as representations of whole words (Yule, 2005) like utilizing ‘OMG’ instead of ‘oh my God’. The analysis of these often-strange lexical abbreviations should be supported with strong background information of texters.

Capital letters

Considering our samples, the main purpose of using capital letters is to emphasize certain words in sentences. Like ‘sAW’ in the sentence ‘i SAW her @ skool’ which means ‘she was at school and I saw her’. Capitalization can also have semantic meaning such as ‘dA’ that stands for ‘day’ or ‘mayB’ instead of ‘may be’.

However application of capital letters in messages is not quite noticeable. For the sake of speed and ease of typing, texters do not use capitalization where

needed, like the beginning of each sentence or for some specific words like ‘English’ and ‘I.’ Yet, it is the senders’ personal preference to type their messages in capital letters (Thurlow & Brown, 2003).

The following Figure demonstrates the amount of capital letters used in our samples. It can be perceived that only 2.8 % of the words have been capitalized (this amount does not include capitalization of the first letter of each message that is done automatically by some cell phones).

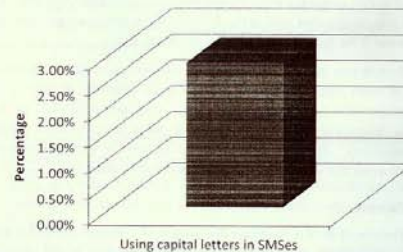


Figure 6. Percentage of using capitalization in SMSes.

Nonstandard grammar

There are no standard rules for writing SMS. Users mostly omit subjects from their sentences to be fast and short. In the sentence ‘promise he won’t come’ ‘I’ has been omitted. The original sentence is ‘I promise he won’t come.’ Likewise, the application of interrogative sentences with *do*, *does*, *is*, and *are* is so rare. Generally, sentences have their imperative and usual form but with a question mark at the end to indicate their distinctive intonation and form. Like ‘u der?’ instead of ‘are you there?’ or ‘u go?’ in place of ‘do you go?’. Nevertheless, still there are some texters who are mindful of correct grammar and usage even while text messaging.

Use of emotions

People involved in SMS text messaging communication seem to compensate for the lack of vocabulary and visual cues by utilizing emoticons—pictograms (Leung, 2007)—they borrow from e-mail. When interpreting a received

message without emotions, it is difficult to get the reader into the context because he doesn't know someone is sarcastic, sad, sort of jokey or actually serious. Thus he might misinterpret what they are attempting to say and in his reply he gets it completely wrong and looks a fool. However, the paucity of emotions is broadly prominent in text messages.

Emoticons, such as :(, :) and ;) are a representation of body language, which non face-to-face communication would otherwise lack. These can alter the meaning of a text message identical to body language which can change the meaning of verbal communication. Notice these two sentences: 'hes here☺' or 'hes here☹.' It's quite apparent that in the first one the texter is happy because 'he' is there; whereas in the second one that he is absolutely sad.

Texters may also take advantage of different phonetic spellings and vocal imitation of some sounds known as onomatopoeia (Thurlow & Brown, 2003), to create miscellaneous types of verbal effects in their messages such as 'hehe' for laughter or 'hooraaaaay' to show extreme happiness in the sentence 'skools r off 2moro, hooraaaaay'. Applying punctuation can likewise be useful for creating some kinds of emotions that we will be referred to in the subsequent part.

Punctuation

The aim of texts is to reduce the number of characters needed to put across a meaning. One of the substantial results of this principle is that punctuation is disregarded to a great extent. The use of punctuation is significantly limited. Punctuation, such as the full stop, is usually needless because the end of a line will exhibit the end of an utterance. Additionally, the use of apostrophe in words like 'hes' or 'hers' has been neglected. Nevertheless, apostrophe is not thoroughly dead (Thurlow & Brown, 2003).

Some punctuation indicates some sort of emotions like surprise (wowww!!!!!!). In this case multiple punctuation (what????!!) may be more desirable. Similarly using a chain of dots (well....) can convey the meaning of pause for thinking or deciding.

5. Conclusion

This study manifested that abbreviation is the most important genre applied in text message writing and it constitutes some strategies for reducing the number of letters, words and sentences. Because the objective of texting is to communicate fast and briefly, and because users desire to be as economical as possible and save their money, time and energy, they tend to use the fewest numbers of characters per SMS. For the sake of this brevity some features of language undergo a slight change.

Omitting punctuations, capital letters, vowels, subject pronouns and some types of emotions, using letters as/in words, nonstandard grammar and approximating the spelling of words to their actual pronunciation form are the stylistic features of this type of nonliteral, idiosyncratic writing. Having this much of contraction requires texters to own enough background knowledge and to be familiar with these shortening techniques.

On the whole, still there are a lot of vague points in this field that are beyond the scope of our paper and have to be discussed in future researches. As an instance studying to see if SMS text messages are a hybrid of spoken and written genre or they bear their particular independent genre. In addition, the impact of texting on students' spelling and writing is still under question.

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Appendix

Summary of All Different Kinds of Abbreviations Discussed Above and Utilized in Our Samples

Abbreviated words	Meanings	Abbreviated words	Meanings
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abt	about	dey	they
akcidnt	accident	didn	didn't
always	always	diz	these
anoder	another	doin	doing
anser	answer	don	don't
apreciat	appreciate	drinkin	drinking
awfl	awful	enaf	enough
b	be	er	her
Bcz	because	ertier	earlier
bdA	birthday	evry	every
beder	better	feelin	feeling
bt	but	fone	phone
bin	been	fren	friend
BZ	busy	gen	again
c	see	gimme	give me
cal	call	goin	going
clas	class	grl	girl
cn_cnt	can can't	gr8	great
coud	could	gun	gone
cum	come	hapy	happy
cupl	couple	hav	have
cuzn	cousin	helpt	helped
d	the	hm	him
dan	than	hr_hrs	hour hours
dat	that	imprnt	important
dA_dAz	day days	jokin	joking
ded	dead	jus	just
den	then	k	ok
der	there	kuf	cough
kidin	kidding	sory	sorry
kinda	kind of	sth	something
lisen	listen	stil	still
ma	my	stRt	start
mayB	may be	studin	studying
medcn	medicine	sum	some
mony	money	takn	taking/ taken
mor	more	takt	talked
mus	must	tel	tell
n	in/ and	terbl	terrible