SMS Language
as a Means of Communication

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Introduction

The language of SMS is born as a combination of numerous aspects of two very different types of communication and at this point can only be described as a spoken mode in a written medium. The invention of mobile phone messages may be considered its source. The objective of texting or sending an SMS message is to use the fewest number of characters needed to convey a comprehensible message. The model adopted in this study is based on Goffman's work (1981) and Cadhain's (2005). Therefore, the present study aims at finding out what type of language is used in texting through the SMS and its characteristic features. Also it aims at identifying to what extent students violate such a language when they text. The analysis showed that 34% of the students did violate spelling intentionally rather than arbitrarily while the rest of the students wrote full words and sentences and this was done at the expense of brevity- the key word in texting.

لغة الـ SMS كوسيلة للاتصال

م. نوال فاضل عباس

ان لغة SMS نشأت من خلال مزيج متعدد الجوانب لاثنين من انواع الاتصال وبهــذا يمكن ان تعرف هذه اللغة على انها اسلوب منطوق بشكل مكتوب. يعد اختراع اجهزة الهـــاتف النقال بمثابة المصدر لمثل هذه اللغة. ان هدف ارسال الرســـالة عبــر خدمـــة ال SMS هــو استخدام اقل عدد ممكن من الرموز المطلوبة لايصال رسالة مفهومة. النموذج الذي اعتمد فــي هذه الدراسة مبني على اساس عمل Goffman (1981) وعمل Cadhain (2005). لذلك فأن هدف هذه الدراسة هو معرفة اي نمط من انماط اللغة مستخدم في الارسال عبر خدمـــة الـــــ SMS وخصائص هذا النمط. كذلك تهدف الدراسة الى معرفة الى اي حد يخرق الطلاب هـذا النمط عندما يكتبون الرسائل (بمسجون). التحليل في هذه الدراسة يوضح بأن حوالي 34% من الطلاب قد خرقوا نظام الاملاء بشكل مقصود وليس اعتباطيا بينما بقية الطلاب كتبوا كلمـــات وجمل تامة وهذا تم على حساب عنصر الاختصار – الذي يعد الاساس في كتابة الرسائل.

SMS Language as a Means of Communication

What is an SMS?

SMS (short message service) was created during the late 1980s to work with a digital technology called GSM[1] which is the basis for modern cell phones. The Norwegian engineers who invented it wanted a very simple messaging system that worked when users' mobile phones were turned off or out of signal range. Most sources agreed that the first SMS message was sent from a personal computer to a mobile phone on the Vodafone GSM network in the UK in 1992.

SMS is defined as the ability to send and receive text messages to and from mobile telephones. The text can comprise of words and numbers or an alphanumeric combination. SMS was created as part of GSM phase standards. Each short message within this system is up to (160) characters in length when Latin alphabets are used and (70) characters in length when non-Latin alphabets are used (Cited in www.gsmworld.com).

To Michael Nilsson (2006), an SMS is simply a digital network facility that allows digital phone users to receive text messages on their digital phones. In other words, an SMS is the transmission of short text messages to and from mobile phones.

With time an SMS has come to be identified with the message itself; therefore, for many SMS refers to the message rather than the facility itself.

Advantages of SMS Messages:

Text messages do have some unique properties and instances where they are particularly useful. These include the following:

- **An SMS message is personal:**

Unlike an e-mail, an SMS is much more likely to be sent or read by a person at any time, since the majority of people have their mobile phones at arms reach 24 hours a day.

- **An SMS message is instantly recorded**:

Unlike a phone call, an SMS is automatically stored where it can be re-read at any time by the user.

- **An SMS message is discreet:**

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[1] GSM means Global System of Mobile Communication.

Unlike a phone call, you do not have to run out of the restaurant where you are eating to field the call. The discreet nature of the text messaging ensures you stay in touch with minimal disturbance.

- **An SMS leads to smaller phone bills:**

An SMS is far cheaper than a phone call, yet in most instances you will convey just as much information as you would have if you had called.

- SMS messaging is not intrusive making it the ideal form of communication when you do not want to be overheard.
- SMS is a convenient way for the deaf and hearing impaired people to communicate.
- It is used by companies to contact groups of employees or by online service to distribute news and other information to subscribers.
- It can be used to send a message to a large number of people at a time.
- SMS messages can be sent to an offline mobile phone (cited in Wallace, 2007 and in Wikipedia, 2007).[1]

Language of SMS:

SMS language (also known as chat speak, txt, txtspk, texting[2] language or txt talk) is the English language slang used in mobile phones. It is an abbreviated form of English derived from rebus(wikipedia, 2007).

SMS short hand language is not new, almost 20 years ago. So what is the short language of SMS? One can see the emergence of communicating system based on condensed letters and numbers. Everything is simple, designed to save space and effort, for example

"Try2rite" (8 characters) instead of "try to write" (12 characters) and "b4 comin univ" (13 characters) instead of "before coming to university" (27 characters), Cinman, (2007:5).

This language developed out of short hand used in internet chatrooms where users would abbreviate some words to allow a response to be typed more quickly. However, this became much more pronounced in SMS, where mobile phone users do not have generally an access to a keyboard as computer users do, more effort is required to type each character and there is a limit on the number of characters (ibid).

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[1] Wikipedia , the free online encyclopedia ,is built and edited by users.
2 Texting to Johnny Batina is itself slang (Batina, 2007)

To Daring (2005), The character limit of the service plus the troublesome text entry on mobile phone and the limited size keyboard encourage text messages to be kept short. The nature of text messages is thus often in the form of greetings, invitations, congratulations, jokes, or love letters. With prompt response times from communication partners, temporary and thematically coherent conversations are possible. The language used however varies. While many people specially teenagers write out full words and sentences, many others ensure that their messages are as economical as possible by using their own language conventions and short cuts. The technical restrictions of text messaging have led to the development of language short forms in SMS communication.

To define SMS simply as a written language because of its written medium would be to ignore a large portion of characteristics that differentiate the language of SMS from the language of Standard English. This is on one hand. On the other hand, since the language of SMS is in a written medium and, therefore, cannot possess many features of spoken language, it cannot be defined as spoken anymore accurately than it can be defined as written because of its written medium. Where then does this leave SMS language? Text messages use the medium of sight, like writers; however their situation, though not face-to- face, is interactive rather than isolated, like speakers. The language of SMS, therefore, is born of a combination of numerous aspects of two very different types of communication and at this point can only be described as a spoken mode in a written medium (Grinter & Eldridge ,2001 as cited in Cadhain, 2005).

Goffman (1981:30) lists some differences between written and spoken **prose and as the following:**

1.) Readers can reread a passage, whereas hearers cannot rehear an utterance except from a tape. Also, spelling (and punctuation) helps to disambiguate what in speech would be homonymous (or otherwise ambiguous).

2.) Print conventions for laying out a text provide for coherence in ways unavailable to oral delivery.

3.) Ordinarily, liberties that can be taken with an audience cannot be taken with a readership…For (the speaker) can rely on people he can see getting the spirit of his remarks, not merely the literal words that carry them.

The written text of text messages rarely conforms to these characteristics of written language however. As a result of this, correct spelling and punctuation are largely optional for many users.

Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1978:85) set out the characteristics of spoken communication, many of which are easily apparent in SMS such as turn-order is not fixed, but varies, talk can be continuous or discontinuous, overwhelmingly one party talk at a time, etc. As Rintel & Pittam (1977) state that like normal speech, text messages are structurally simple, fragmented, concrete and conditional on situation development reference. Many parts of spoken speech are eliminated through the process of abbreviation (use the shortest, easiest to type, phonetic equivalence of a word), and utterances often lack a subject or predicate for brevity's sake, brevity as will be shown in this paper is the key to SMS (cited in Cadhain, 2005)

Rebecca Hughes (1996:123), as cited in (ibid), states that SMS retains both written and spoken language characteristics. Speech and writing usually take place in very different contexts. These contexts can be described both in terms of the context of production and the influence of the context of reception. Through developing an understanding of the properties of both written and spoken language and then applying them to the language used in text messages, we will be able to see how this new vocabulary has formed and why users make use of the linguistic short-cuts.

In spoken English, transient conversation is as vital to our communication with others as any actual information we pass on to one another. SMS also allows users to eliminate the transient, "hello…how are you …nice day …isn't it …any way the reason I was calling was …thanks a lot …talk to you soon" and get straight to the point "wat time r we meetin 2moro?". In this way, you can avoid the other person going "off topic" and making the conversation even longer than planned (Gadhain, 2005).

Because SMS messaging is created in a written medium, it has some features of casual printed communication. The most understandable way users create written characteristics in their language is through the way of standard spelling, punctuation, and capitalization in order to make their messages recognizable as entire sentences. SMS also allows users to abbreviate words without losing any meaning, e.g. October and November can be shortened to Oct/

Nov, etc. Similarly, punctuation, such as the full stop is often unnecessary, as the end of the line will signify the end of the utterance. The resourceful use of punctuation appears to be a personal stylistic choice. Users often take advantage of the presence of both written and spoken aspects of SMS. One way a text message might reflect this would be to combine features of a written medium with features of a spoken medium but this combination is usually not intentional (ibid).

Semiotics[1] is considered important to understand the language that is entirely unique to SMS e.g. "BHME@2" (I will be home at two o'clock). This vocabulary can consist of single letters, numbers and symbols placed together to form a new word or phrase. The term "semiotics" stands for the study of signs". It investigates the way in which signs are arranged and fashioned and the medium in which these signs are transmitted and then interpreted. This is the natural place to begin when discussing text messages and how each texter interprets the language code received on their tiny screens.

A code, for Crystal (1991), is a set of conventions for converting one signaling system into another.

Moreover, the features of SMS normally depend on the application that the service provider offers. At a minimum, such features include the following:

* Delivery of notifications and alerts.
* Guaranteed message delivery.
* Reliable, low-cost communication mechanism for concise information.
* Ability to screen messages and return them in a selective way.
* Increased subscriber productivity.
* SMS messages can be sent and read at any time.
* SMS messages can be sent to an offline mobile phone.
* SMS messages are capable of carrying binary data besides text.
* Shorter than 160 characters.
* Often quite urban. (Cited in Plester, 2005)

The objective of texting is to use the least number of characters needed to put across a comprehensible message. Therefore, punctuation and grammar are largely ignored and spelling is violated to a large extent.

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[1] For more about Semiotics see Paul Bouissac (1998).

To many workers in this field, texting is characterized by the use of one or more of the following points: [1]

- **Single letters can replace words like:**
  be ………......b
  see ……….c
  are ………..r
  you ……….u
  why ……....y

- **Single digits can replace words like:**
  ate …………..…8
  for …………….4
  to or too ……….2

- **Individual syllables can be replaced with a single letter or digit like:**
  Ate becomes 8, so….
  Mate …………….m8
  Great …………….gr8
  Plate …………….pl8
  Later …………....l8r

- **More miscellaneous adaptations of characters include:**
  ss ……………..$
  oo ……………..%

- **Vowels are removed from a word such that the sequence of consonants remain and the word is still recognizable:**
  between ………….....btwn
  text ……………….....txt
  always …………….alwz
  forget ……………....fgt

- **Other transcriptions of slang or dialect terms can be used if shorter than the original words:**
  because ……………….........cos,coz
  want to ……………….…..wonna
  going to …………………....gonna
  what ……………………….....wot,wat

- **Replacements are written representations of the sounds that one would make when saying certain words:**
  Katie ……………….kt

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[2] These points are taken from many web sites or links.

Okay ……………........ok

I see ……………….....ic

See you …………….cu

- **Intialisms like:**

Oh, my God ……………………….OMG

As soon as possible …………………asap

- **Whole words may be omitted, specially articles.**
- **Combinations of the above can be used to shorten single or multiple words:**

sorry I forgot to call you …………….sory I 4gt 2 cal u

I will see you tomorrow ……………….i cu 2moro

Are you a boyfriend or a girlfriend? …….. bf o gf

Another point to mention is that of emoticons, or smileys, such as :-), :-(;-) which are representations of body language, which would otherwise be missing from non face-face communication. These can change the meaning of a text message just as much as body language can change the meaning of verbal communication in spoken discourse. The word emoticon is, according to popular etymology, a partmanteau of emotion and icon.(Fahman. 2007:5).

Analysis of the Students' Messages:

Text messages serve to tie together any group of people through the development of a common shared knowledge. The fact that only a tiny space is available to communicate has meant that the texter has to condense as much meaning as possible into a tiny message. This has led to a skilled form of communication with arguably, almost as much expressiveness as verbal intercourse in the hands of the right person.

Daring (2005) believes that:

> **Abbreviation and acronyms fulfill a collective identity Function[1] whereby it requires a special shared knowledge to be able to understand the language and consequently be able to use it. The adept use of these personalized language short forms is an indicator of a group affiliation and a component of group identity.**

This supports the researcher's view point that people outside the circle of friends, for instance, or even those fond of SMS messaging find it difficult, if not impossible, to understand this type of language.

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[1] Daring (2005) distinguishes three main functions for short forms of language in SMS communication: time function, identity function and interpretation function.

Samples of SMS messages of fifty students from the Department of English, College of Education for Women / Baghdad University have been studied and analyzed.

The language used in sending SMS messages over cell phones shows that there are no rules and that the students' spelling does not get worse as a result; i.e., spelling is not at risk. There are no rules, although there are fashions. For example the word "because" popped out among the students' messages with more than four different spellings: cos, coz, bcos, bcoz.

Spelling will get worse if it is already bad. Students usually use simple English in their writing- so we do not expect them to be away from the correct spelling; i.e., their distortion of the words is intentional rather than arbitrary due to the element of brevity, and as mentioned before.

What is really nice, interesting and surprising at the same time is that students mostly borrow rather than compose the text messages from the friends' circle, internet links[1] and sometimes they modify what they get on their mobile phones to make them suitable for the people they are addressing. Accordingly, you can find the same message being written in different ways according to the students' ability to modify. For example:

fifty years from now,
i'd be so old I might
forget you. I might
not remember ever
knowing you, or
might forget I once
cared for you. I
might … but I won't (157 characters)
Is written differently by different students and as the following[2]**:**
50 yrs frm now
id b so old I mite
4gt u.i mite
nt rememb ev

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[1] منتديات عالم نوكيا/ منتدبات الميديا/ قسم المسجات / www.wikipedia.org.com, and English Messages والوسائط المتعددة

[2] All the changes done by students are shown in this abbreviated form of the text message, for there is no room to show all the messages written by students.

nowin u,or
mite 4gt I once
cared 4u.i
mite…bt i WONT (115 characters)
Another example will read like this:
Good friends are hard to find,
harder to leave and impossible
to forget. Miss you   (80 characters)
It is also written differently by different students and as follows:
gud frnz r hard 2find
hard 2leav n impossible
2 4gt.MISS u   (56 characters)
The third example is the following:
If you open my heart,
guess what are you
going to see? It's you.
True friends are hard
to find, so I kept you. (107 characters)
　　　Applying some of the rules of writing short text messages will make the above example read:
if u open my hrt
ges wot r u
gonna c?its u
true frnz r hard
2find so I KEPT u   (73 characters)
The fourth example is this:
I have a pen which is
blue, I have a friend
which is you.
flowers will die,
waters will dry, but
our friendship will
never say goodbye (134 characters)
It can be translated into:
I hav pen wich
blu,I hav frnd
wich u
flowers wil di
wat z wil dri,bt

our frnshp wil
nev say guby   (90 characters)

This is a further example of how SMS language conventions resemble speech in many of its prominent characteristics:

I have three parts of my heart,
the first is for my Allah,
the second is for my family,
the third is for my friends,
but I have no part for you,
 because you are my heart :-)   (163 characters)

When spelling is violated, the result will be:

i hav 3part of MY hrt
1ˢᵗ 4my Allah,
2ⁿᵈ 4my family,
3ʳᵈ 4my frnz,
bt no part 4 u,
coz u r MY hrt :-)   (95 characters)

In other cases, students compose some urgent notifications for one reason or another and like the following:

"Hi mate. Are you okay? I am sorry that I forgot to call you last night. Why don't we go and buy something tomorrow?" (120 characters)

This is the typical standard English in which we have the regular use of spelling, capitalization and punctuation marks, but when written as a short text message, it will read:

"Hi m8 uk? sry I 4gt 2cal u lst nite.y dnt we go bi sth 2moro"   (60 characters)

Another example is the following:

"Hi Noor, how are you? Sorry for not phoning. Please forgive me. Call you back later. Hugs and kisses." (95 characters)

As an SMS text, it can be written like this:

"Hi nur hru? sry 4nt fonin,PLZ 4gv me.cub l8r.H&K" (47 characters)

Looking at the students' examples thoroughly, one can find the following points:

• **Single letters replace certain words as in:**

be ……b ; you ……u; are ……r; and ……n; why ……y.

• **Single digits replace certain words as in:**

for ……4; to ……2; fifty ……50.

* **Single digits replace individual syllables as in :**

forget ……4gt; tomorrow ……2moro; later ……l8r; mate ……m8

- **Vowels are removed from words such that sequences of consonants remain and the vowels are still recognizable:**
years……yrs; from ……frm; but ……bt; sorry ……sry;
last ……lst; do not ……..dnt; heart ……hrt; please …..plz;
text ……txt; friend ……frnd; friendship ……frnshp.

- **Whole words are omitted (specially functional words):**
is, the, a, plural(s), I, have, are, and.

- **Some texters took advantage of different phonetic spellings (though sometimes partially done) in order to create different types of verbal effects in their messages like:**
good friends ……gud frenz; ever ……ev ; never ……nev ;
remember ……rememb ; guess …..ges; harder ……hard ;

- **Capital letters are used to emphasize certain words as in**:
MISS; MY ; PLZ ; WONT; KEPT.

- **Slang language is also used though examples are limited as in:**
what …..wot; going to ……gonna.

- **Punctuation marks are largely violated specially capitalization, the full stop, the comma etc.**
I'd ……id; do not ……dont &dnt; won't …..wont.

- **Intialisms (though not to be confused with replacement):**
Hugs and Kisses …...H&K; miss you ……m u; see you later ….cul;
Love you ……l u; love you too ……l u2; call you back ……cub;
As soon as possible ……asap; boyfriend ……bf; girlfriend ……gf;
Facec to face ……f2f; where are you ……wru; keep in touch ……kit.

- **Very few students used the emoticons (limited to 5 students):**
:-) …… happy (repeated twice),
XXX …… kisses (repeated thrice)

- **Also very few students used interjections[1] to show certain emotions and feelings like:**
wow, eh, hehe.

All these points will be shown in the following table (Table 1) except for the feature of punctuation since we agreed from the beginning that punctuation and grammar are largely ignored in writing SMS messages. This table shows the violation in spelling in particular.

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[1] For more information about interjections see Quirk et al. ,1985.

Table 1 : Distribution and Percentage of Violations of Spelling in SMS Messages

Characteristics / student	Single letters	Single digits	Single letter and digit for syllable	Vowels removed	Words omitted	Phonetic spelling	Capital letters	Slang language	initialims	emoticons	interjections
Student 1	5	2	1	3	1	3	1	0	1	1	0
Student 2	2	2	0	5	5	2	1	0	1	0	0
Student 3	3	2	1	4	0	2	1	2	0	0	0
Student4	3	4	1	3	0	2	0	0	1	1	1
Student 5	3	4	2	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Student 6	5	2	1	3	1	3	1	0	1	1	0
Student 7	5	0	1	3	2	1	2	0	2	0	1
Student 8	1	2	3	2	1	1	2	0	0	0	1
Student 9	1	0	1	2	2	0	1	0	2	0	0
Student 10	2	0	1	1	3	0	0	0	0	0	0
Student 11	2	0	1	1	3	0	0	0	0	0	0
Student 12	1	2	0	1	1	2	1	0	2	0	0
Student 13	2	2	0	2	0	2	1	0	2	0	0
Student 14	3	0	2	0	3	0	0	2	0	0	1
Student 15	4	4	0	3	5	0	1	2	0	1	1
Student 16	5	4	0	2	1	0	0	1	2	0	1
Student 17	5	2	1	2	1	1	1	1	2	1	1
Total	52	35	18	38	29	19	14	8	16	5	7
Percentage	1.57%	4.52%	7.46%	5.76%	2.03%	7.88%	5.80%	3.31%	6.63%	2.07%	2.90%

Just because we have shown some of the students' products concerning the abbreviated form of language used by students in their cell phones, it doesnot mean that all students were professional in using such a form of language. To the researcher's surprise, only 34% of the students were skilful in using short forms while the rest of them 66% wrote a full form of text messages regardless of the length and the 160 characters that specify any written text. Once again, this is due to the fact that these abbreviations and violations of the system of spelling are intentional rather than arbitrary and also because the art of writing short forms of language is not an easy task for all, only for those who have got used to such a thing. When you write a short message, you have to decide and choose the appropriate character you have in mind rather than thinking of what to do.

Even those 17 students 34% who did use short forms were not at the same level of writing;i.e., some of them were limited to two or three types of violations. So we do not have a specific standard of violating the rules of spelling.

The students who did most of the violations and short forms were the best at spelling, while those who are really weak, have clear weakness in their writing full words and sentences which in turn have real spelling mistakes like:

1. Stop calling me, enagh is enagh.
2. Don't be effected by your law mark, dear friend.
3. I can't come to univercity.
4. Pleaze don't forget to call Alia.
5. Tell me wether you like to come with me tomorrow.

So the shorthand use of language is not an indicator of being good or not. It is a matter of experience without which the whole job of texting is time consuming.

By a closer view of the above table, it can be said that single letters instead of whole words constitute the highest percentage 21.57% since the seventeen students used about 52 letters instead of 52 words. Once again, if there is no agreement or shared knowledge among students, reading such letters will not be an easy task. This percentage is followed by 12.03% for the vowels removed from words, i.e, words are recognizable from the consonants they have; consonants are considered the bones of words. On the other hand, emoticons constitute the lowest percentage, only 2.07%. The use of emoticons is limited to five students only; three of them used the

emoticon :-) which stands for "happiness" and the other two used the emoticon xxx which stands for "kisses", though "kisses" was referred to above within the field or feature of initialism H&K (Hugs and Kisses). The use of slang language, on the other hand, is limited to about five students 3.31% mediated between "wonna", "gonna", and "wot". This feature in particular needs a good command of language and a great deal of practice to let the tongue get used to such a type of language. Students of the sample of the present study are not professional enough to master the language to the extent of using slang forms.

To sum up, SMS messaging is a quick way to drop a quick note to a friend, a teacher or a family member. This way of communication has developed a lot during these years and a new language spread among young people; the present sample is part of. It is also known as chatspeak, txtspk, texting language or txt talk. This language has evolved from the shorthand use in Internet chatrooms to accommodate the small number of characters allowed (early SMS permitted only 160 characters) and as a convenient language for the small keyboard on mobile phones. Without practice, sending SMS messages can be time consuming. Moreover, the users use the English slang in their mobile phone messages.

In addition, shortcuts and abbreviations play a greater part in writing SMS messages but not at the expense of the language itself; i.e., only when the distortion of the language is intentional but not arbitrary.

One needs not go through the trouble of trying to get the right spelling. The only rule to framing the sentences is that there are no rules and this is quite clear when looking at Table 1 to see that students vary in their violation of spelling from one feature into another. That is why vocabulary, syntax and style of electronic text communication is much more fluid than that found in formal writing and may also be highly personalized.

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♦ Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia(2007) in URL:http:// www.wikipedia.org.com

♦ منتديات عالم نوكيا ﴿منتديات الميديا › قسم المسجات والوسائط المتعددة › English messages﴾.