

## **A Sociolinguistic Study of Varying Level of Formality of Computer Mediated Communication in Pakistan**

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### **Abstract**

*During past few decades the influx of technology has structured our everyday communication with entirely new set of linguistic habits. Present study intends to reconnoitre various speech patterns particularly focusing upon varying level of formality, manifesting themselves in CMC via social networking websites and mobile text messages in Pakistani society. It aims at exploring the deep rooted physical, social and behavioural factors in shaping the particular register of social media language used in our multilingual society. To serve the purpose, randomly selected 100 short text messages by various mobile users and 100 wall posts/comments by social media bloggers all belonging to different age, gender, educational groups, were analysed by applying content analysis model. The results thus gathered were expected to highlight the emergence of conversational and less formal style of communication even in relatively formal context. The study will help in developing insight into implicit factors behind explicit and now everyday phenomenon of computer mediated communication.*

**Key words:** Computer mediated communication, formality, Register, Social media

### **1. Introduction**

Computer mediated communication (henceforth, CMC) and especially synchronous type which involves instantaneous 'real time' interaction (Baker & Ellece, 2011) in the form of chat groups and Short message services has replaced telephonic conversation to the larger extent. It is generating a new domain of written-spoken form of conversation which can be explored from multifaceted dimensions of usage and users. In post-colonial society of Pakistan where imperialistic imprints were very obvious till very recent in the form of highly formal English language, speech patterns are taking entirely new shape. Present study adjusts itself within wider sociolinguistic framework with emphasis on new linguistic variety in the form of SMS or internet language in multilingual society of Pakistan.

### **Research Questions**

1. What dimensionality of formality is taking shape in computer mediated communication in Pakistan?
2. What are certain indicators to highlight this new linguistic phenomenon of CMC?

Last few decades have seen rapid growth of telecommunication companies in Pakistan with highly affordable SMS packages. Moreover use of social media has gained significant popularity during last few years. Over a six month period from 2010 to early 2011 the number of Facebook users doubled from 1.8 to 3.6 million (Kugelman, 2012). This increase coupled with other social, political and international factors has initiated new era of freedom of expression which has resulted in more liberal, compressed and informal language specially devised for the purpose. Code-mixing is common phenomenon in CMC which facilitates the process of free expression, exploiting the whole linguistic repertoire.

'Electronic discourse is writing that very often reads as if it were being spoken as if the sender were writing talking' (Davis & Brewer, 1997:2). In Pakistan, some features of this electronic discourse are inherited by global community as it is but a number of factors are quite indigenous taking their root from local social scenario. Form and content of electronic language, both are shaped and necessitated by a number of factors which are specific to Pakistani culture. Apparently Pakistani texters and bloggers use language which is similar to their counterparts in any other country but underlying factors are not the same. For example omission of vowels in orthographic representation of words is prompted partly for the sake of brevity and partly because of unease of Pakistanis with English vowel system. The dominance of Roman Alphabets in CMC is tackled by Pakistani user by omitting vowels thus representing words in form of consonant cluster for example 'exprsn', 'bz', 'nccery' etc and by replacing English sounds with Urdu versions like 'kal' in place of 'call'. Content of the SMS and social media posts also is strongly influenced by our social patterns. CMC and specially SMS saves face to face conversation and this newly earned freedom of expression has allowed texters to exchange views, jokes and political ideas which would not have been used in face to face conversation in most of the situations. It is this indigenous nature of this informal style which is topic of interest of this study and ample empirical data supports the point.

Web content analysis paradigm illustrated by Susan C Herring which combines discourse analysis and social networking analysis, is used to analyse data gathered for the purpose of study. (see Herring, 2010). Sampling technique used was random selection of 100 SMS and 100 wall posts/comments on the post on Facebook. Data was analysed by calculating word category frequency and F-measure adapted by Heylighen & Dewaele (1999).

### **1.1 Objective of the Study**

A number of studies have been conducted on analysing linguistic patterns and styles of either SMS or internet language but the present study has wider perspective which encompasses both because of inherent similarities in the language of both the medium. At the same time it also intends to explore differences found in morpho-syntactic structure of SMS and social media language. Moreover this study is mainly concerned with stylistic expression of informal language use manifesting itself in the form of slang expressions, loose orthographic representation, and excessive use of taboo words and free exchange of immoral content.

### **2. Literature review**

Interactive networking is very recent phenomenon when in 1960's in USA this technology was launched in interest of national defence (Levy, 1984). First SMS was sent in late 1990's. With its popularity in coming years, a number of researchers felt the novel nature of its language and a number of researches were made to explore unique linguistic patterns which were named as NETSPEAK by David Crystal. In his book *Language and the Internet* (2004), he has highlighted the impact made by internet on everyday language. He, by elaborate examples, rectifies the common belief about negative nature of NETSPEAK and affirms his positive faith in linguistic revolution. He sees non-standard formations, jargons and slang as mechanism for affirming group identity (Crystal, 2004). Herring (2000) has also traced down the history of computer mediated discourse in *Handbook of Discourse Analysis*. She elaborates the relation of CMD to spoken and written languages and analyses structural properties at the level of orthography, typography, word choice and grammar. Baron (2010) asserts his belief that Instant messaging language is more like speech however gender distinction is there which may create difference in style.

Face to face interaction is supported by proximity and paralinguistic features which compensate for any kind of communication loopholes. Face to face interaction is 'rich media' (Herrings 1999) while CMD is 'lean media' (Daft & Langel, 1986) however this physical absence is compensated by introduction of smileys and emoticons which are combination of ludic shapes and sequence. (see Crystal, 2004).

Researcher has emphasized this novel and novice nature and have gone to extent to using the title of 'text-speak slang' for SMS/internet language (Williams & Gilchrist, 2011). They believe that this spoken-written form is unique and customised which sufficiently fulfils the requirement.

Researchers' increasing interest in one or more area of CMC corresponds with increasing influence of technical communication in our lives. In social media domain researchers are intrigued by a number of aspects of its language for example word formation through acronym word blending and acronym compounding (Abdullah, 2012). Caulfield (2012) through a case study of Irish language bloggers and twitter users has studied communities in clusters in multilingual web. Darics (2012) has highlighted the ever changing nature of CMC because of new technological inventions with every passing day. She believes that norms of text-based interactions are still under process of formation. Though it will be appropriate to see this in the light of minor adjustments still taking place otherwise norms are more or less established in their entirety. Spilioti (2012) has dealt with issues of social presence in mobile technologies with focus on referential practice of deixis in text messaging.

A number of researchers have ventured to explore various dimensions of social media and SMS language in Pakistan with relatively larger work on prolific phenomenon of text messaging. In NOREF REPORT furnished by Michael Kugelman in August 2012, role of social media in Pakistan is described as catalyst for communication rather than agent of change. Kugelman (2012) reports five different ways in which social media serves as strong tool of communication. He believes that social media has the capacity to amplify stories which mainstream media fails to address. Moreover it serves as platform for protest campaigns. The recent trend is political communication.

William and Gilchrist (2011) have investigated the range of technical options available for SMS-based options of communication in Pakistan. They have used the term 'viral texting' for current practice of sending and receiving forward messages without knowing the identity and authenticity of the text generators. The study highlights the factorial picture of rampant used of cell phones in all demographic locations and illustrates how members of illiterate class are also included in text circle by relying upon literate friends to read and write texts for them.

Social and ethical effect of this wave of computer mediated communication is also considered by a number of indigenous researchers. Hussain (2013) has taken into account the sociocultural and ethical concerns about SMS discourse in Pakistan. The obnoxious use of SMS by Pakistani youth is related with global trends however religious and social background of Pakistan demands greater and more serious concern about the prevalence of the issue. University graduates are indulging in the use of corrupt and foul text language as their everyday phenomenon. Social media and SMS are extensively employed to construct ideologies and identities. Ali and Khan (2012) have elaborated the explicit use of SMS discourse to generate female identities as stereotypes with negative personal traits. SMS discourse has been used to build negative portrayal of females as deceitful, materialistic and loathsome partners.

Rafi (2010) in his article on language, gender and current practices has highlighted the text language from gender perspective. Female gender is associated with sophisticated and conscious language use which is confirmed by Rafi by comparing SMS texts of male and female users. Ali and Aslam (2012) have also traced marker of gender identity through frequency of learned words of English in Pakistan. Their study explains the presence of code switching in text messages because of learned English words.

The overall picture of research history about computer mediated communication encompasses the multidimensional issues relating new language trends however among this constellation the present study seeks to inquire about the stylistic variations in the formality/informality of language with particular emphasis on observable and perceivable structures and their underlying effects and factors involved in the construction and propagation of these structures. Moreover the study tries to link and associate various dimensions in social network. The observable change in language outside the boundary of this text based interaction is also area of interest as to how this on screen change is permeating through actual social fabric.

### **3. Method and Procedure**

Formality of language can be understood as surface formality which is characterized by attention to form for its own sake or deep formality which is attention to form to extract meaning (Heylighen & Dewaele, 1999). It is the concept of deep formality propagated by Heylighen and Dewaele this study has got affinity with and combines qualitatively focused analysis and some practical quantitative calculations.

Baker and Ellece (2011) have pointed out six indicators of informal style which include shortened terms of address, contracted forms used for negatives and auxiliary verbs, use of active rather than passive sentences, frequent use of slang/colloquial expressions and self-disclosure. These indicators are used for qualitative discussion of results while F-measure suggested by Heylighen and Dewaele (1999) to count formality of language statistically is adapted for quantitative analysis. They suggest that formal language is context independent and least fuzzy while informal language is mainly context dependent and fuzzy. Rampant use of deixis and pronouns is characteristic of informal style while nouns and adjectives belong to non-deictic categories so their presence may be indicator of formal style. The formula thus enumerated is statistical calculation of F-measure which can be stated as below.

$$F = (\text{noun frequency} + \text{adjective frequency} + \text{preposition frequency} + \text{article frequency} - \text{pronoun frequency} - \text{verb frequency} - \text{adverb frequency} - \text{interjection frequency} + 100) / 2$$

Frequency is percentage of words in an excerpt which is modified in the study into percentage of words in collection of 100 SMS or 100 wall posts. F-measures of SMS and Social network are measured separately to compare and contrast formality level of both the mediums. Higher F-score is indicative of higher formality of language.

### 3.1 Data Collection

Sampling technique is random selection of 100 SMS out of the corpus of 500 SMS compiled not only from researchers' personal inbox but also from inboxes of five different persons to broaden the spectrum of inclusion. 100 Wall post/comments were also selected following the same process of random selection. The selection thus made has fair though not equal representation of all age groups and genders. However no distinct representations are made based on male/female gender or teen/adult age group as the purpose of study is to depict overall structure that is not associated with particular class or age group.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Quantitative analysis

In order to calculate F-measure frequency (percentage) of each category was measured (see Figure No.1) and the findings were then put in the formula mentioned in procedure and method section. F-Score for 100 messages is not calculated as a whole rather they are distributed in sets A, B, and C containing 18, 27 and 55 messages respectively. Set A included the messages which are written purely in English while Set B is composed of messages which use URDU as their main language. Set C has Code mixed messages. Value of F-Measure for set A is 49. F-score for Urdu SMS remained 37 as it did not have article frequency included in the count. The value of F for set C is 48. Average value for 100 SMS is 45 which prove informal nature of SMS language.

Similarly 100 wall post/comments were also analysed for their F score this time collectively and the score it had was 49. It shows that SMS contains more informal language when compared to Social media language.

Punctuation is also ignored in this informal style. Out of 100 SMS it was found that only 22% of the messages were properly punctuated while rest of 78% messages contained no or incomplete punctuation.

### 4.2 Qualitative analysis

The focused analysis of the data inquiring the stylistic variations as mentioned by Baker and Ellece (2011) reveals that language use is conversational and informal carrying all the signal of informality.

#### 4.2.1. Contractions

Contractions are a common phenomenon even on social networking website where there is not restriction on word limit, which may be labelled as the core reason for contracted SMS language. Contractions are not only conventional or legitimate conventions which English language allows for example contracted auxiliaries and negative. Texters have devised their own set of short forms which save number of presses on key board or touches on screen. So text becomes 'txt' and message has become 'msg'.

#### 4.2.2. Abbreviated forms

Contractions are heightened to the extent of abbreviations where the whole long phrase is codified into an acronym which is understood as matter of convention. Such forms which are understood only within SMS/social media community create group identity. Purely Islamic expressions are also being used in their short forms. Abbreviations are not formed only by using Alphabets but numbers and symbols are also used. (See Table 1)

#### 4.2.3. Single Letter Usage

In speech a single word can replace whole sentence as context sufficiently supports the meaning but in SMS and Social media language this phenomenon is even more defined as single alphabet replaces the sound of complete word. So 'C' is used in place of See, 'K' for OK and more specifically Urdu sounds are also being replaced by single roman letter, for instance 'a' for aa, 'g' for Jee and 'I' for aae. Out of 100 messages 4 contained single letter only. Sometime this single letter is replaced with smiley or emoticon. This is more frequent as in corpora of 500 SMS 22 were comprised of an emoticon representing some emotion however these were not included in final selection to fully understand written content of the text. Similarly many of the comments comprise of emoticons or linguistic emoticons like hmm or lolz.

#### 4.2.4. Terms of address and greetings

Former formal terms of address and greetings can rarely be seen in this new text language which marks the shift from 'Respected Sir' culture to 'dear sir' and elaborate and high sounding greetings are replaced by informal 'hi' and 'wassup' etc. Highly colloquial and sometimes offensive words are used to address thus representing frankness between communicators.

For example note this conversation carried out through SMS.

A: Kiasa hai farigh insan.( How are you Idler????)

B: 'All well salay....chronicle of Narnia k bachay!!! (All well, you son of chronicle of Narnina)

#### 4.2.5. Colloquial /Slang/taboo Expressions

The data reveals the elaborate use of slang/colloquial words even when communicating with elders or seniors or in cross-gender communication which is marked difference with previous practices in local culture. However this phenomenon is comparatively rare in social media in which more than one recipient of messages have free access to the messages posted but in SMS sharing use of offensive and taboo words is extensive. Forward messages containing sexually abusive language form conspicuous proportion of total messages exchanged every day and this exchange is at times between the members which were previously considered distant and respected relations and were addressed by using careful speech.

#### 4.2.6. Self-disclosure

Self-closure is herald of informalization of language. It is expression of personal emotions in public setting. In comparison to SMS, social media provides greater platform for self-disclosure where people freely discuss about their moods, share their joys and worries and express their emotions. Data collected for the study confirms that status updates are mostly one or another form of self-disclosure. For example see these status updates.

"Sun raha hai na tu.....Ro raha hun main" (Are you listening? I am crying.)

"xyz is sad"

#### 4.2.7. Code Mixing/Code Switching

Code-Switching/Mixing is most rampantly used in SMS and as well as in social media. Out of 100 SMS collected for the purpose 55 are code mixed. English and Urdu are generally mixed but use of regional language is also very common. The close analysis reveals that presence or absence of code-mixing is not prompted by any context but by ease of texters to communicate their message. Another trend is Urduization of English in which English constructions are applied to Urdu words. For example "whats up..soing ya jaging?"

### 5. Conclusion

The qualitative and quantitative data has confirmed that stylistic expression of CMC are more inclined towards informality which may in turn be associated with a number of socio-cultural and political factors.

For example if colonial impacts were responsible for “ I beg to state” type of expressions ,then democratic freedom has allowed people to state “ in my august opinion” like phrases which are indicative of individual freedom and self-confidence. Cultural and traditional interface is also changing because of decrease in generation gap which has not only made intra- generational communication more frank but has also removed barriers in inter-generational exchanges as well. However once cannot say that this is one way process that social scene is shaping language .It is two way procedure in which both are affected by each other. And new communication methods on which the study concentrates, are genuinely contributing towards redesigning social scenario. So the significance of the study not only relies on its contribution towards general understanding of linguistic patterns but also in its implication on constructions of social relations. It finger points the direction to which our society is moving which is free, unhindered and unaffected world of communication. But this freedom needs watching too. Informality may not be allowed to engulf our ethical values and social norms which make us unique and self-regulated nations.

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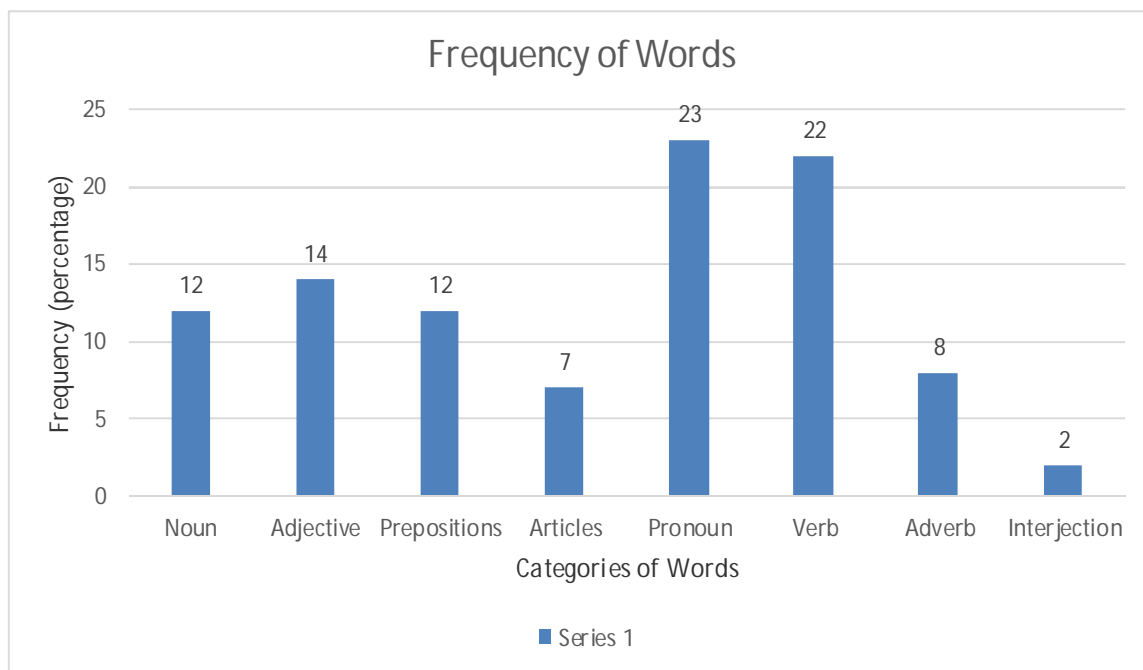
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**Table No.1: List of common abbreviations used in CMC in purely Pakistani culture.**

Abbreviations	Phrases/words
ASAP	As soon as possible
Btw	By the way
Imao	In my august opinion
Lol	Laughing out loud
Thnx	thanks
I.A	Inshallah
M.A	Mashallah
Hru	How are you?
B4	before
Ni8	night
AOA/AA	Assalam O Alaikum
Gr8/G8	great
TC	Take care
@	At



**Figure No.1: Frequency of word categories**