

THE SOCIOLINGUISTICS OF TEXTED ENGLISH AMONG BILINGUAL COLLEGE STUDENTS IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

University students in Malaysia are avid texters and are reinventing English to accommodate the 160-character limit of short messages. They are more interested in getting their messages across and becoming less concerned about correct spelling, grammar and punctuation. Since texting has become a way of life of many students, the research was initiated to examine the three sociolinguistics maxims of English text messages among university texters and the orthographic forms of English text messages of Malaysian university students. 264 students of UiTM Perlis were selected as participants. They were 94 male texters and 170 female texters aged between 18-22 years old who studied three different English courses. The participants' SMS messages were analyzed by using measuring instruments of Orthographic forms (Shortis, 2001) and maxims of sociolinguistics (Grice, 1975). The findings reveal that the texters fulfill the three maxims of pragmatics and the orthographic forms are the combination of English and their first language.

Key words: University texters, texted English, typology, maxims of sociolinguistics

INTRODUCTION

Texting has become a popular medium of communication among university students since most of them own and use mobile phones in their daily life. Text messaging is a popular tool among undergraduates to send jokes, riddles, invitation to parties and other information to their friends. These undergraduates adapt languages to accommodate the 160-character limit of short messages which has implications for communication and language use. In addition, phone calls are considered as an interruption to their activities so text messaging is preferred and mobile phones are part of their identities. This phenomenon has created a new text dialect which influence grammatically correct sentences and correct spelling of the language being used. This is because avid texters usually delete vowels, substitute letters for number or symbols and deliberately misspell words using the phonetic spelling. Texters are more interested in getting their message across and less concerned about the correct spelling, grammar and punctuation. At times texters do use SMS language in their academic writing particularly in their written examinations as texting is considered as a form of writing by university students. In a study conducted by Grabill (2010) on writing behavior of 1300 college students in United States of America reveals that writing is texting.

In Malaysian context, undergraduates in the local universities are still having difficulties in expressing themselves well in English as their first languages could be Bahasa Malaysia, Mandarin and Tamil. In this multi-lingual country, most of the university students would be bi-lingual students. Due to lack of proficiency, most university students lack of confidence as they are laden by anxiety, self-conscious and uncomfortable, automatically making communicating in English a dreaded task. This might be because the undergraduates do not have a strong foundation in the rudiments of basic grammar and therefore are unable to put down their ideas or points effectively in written form. In addition, good acquisition of one skill such as writing does not automatically guarantee good performance in other skills. As for the participants, all of them are bi-lingual and their first language is Bahasa Malaysia. Thus it is imperative to investigate the linguistic nature of texted English; the maxims of sociolinguistics and the orthographic forms of texted English of bilingual participants in Malaysia. There are not many researches on the influence of text messages on English in multi-lingual Malaysia even though English is considered as the second language.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Spellings and grammar are at risk of being abandoned by text messaging as texters spell words phonetically and construct sentences telegraphically. Texters are concerned on getting their message across.

A rough analysis of the snippet of Text Language reveals a syntax and lexis similar to that of English. The morphology of the language is a simpler condensed form of English which cause other linguistic structures formed and used due to technical requirements and possibilities (Bergs, 2006). Limited message lengths and tiny user interface of mobile phones induce SMS users manipulate extensive use of abbreviations, particularly the use of numbers for words, for example, “4” in place of the word “for”, and the omission of vowels, as in the phrase “txt spk”. Computer mediated communication(CMC) is communication produced when humans interact with one another using computers(Herring,2001).Computer based communication(CMC) encompasses of e-mail, online discussions, instant messenger, forum discussions, text messages, blogs, chat rooms, social network sites and any web-mediated communications which can be asynchronous, synchronous or the combination of both. CMC is similar to spoken language than written language (Crystal, 2006). Humans tend to humanize and adapt the technology they use. The adaptation to this technology influences the birth of varieties of formal properties of the language used (Halliday, 1990).

University students with low proficiency in English are using English without being ridiculed for their misspellings and incorrect grammar being corrected. They are successfully communicating in English as these errors are acceptable norms in text messages. The net result is that people are gaining confidence as they enter the English-speaking domain, and they may even end up using the language fluently in the long run. Are all these pointing to an entirely new trend in English Language? Will this lead to a distortion of the language or is it just another fad of the youth? Kasesnieme & Rautiainen (2002) reveal that text messages often bear more resemblance to code than to standard language which is inaccessible to outsiders as young people’s text messaging is becoming increasingly dialogic which resembles online chat in its conversational structure such as turn-taking and message length. This unique writing style provides opportunities for creativity (Grinter & Eldridge, 2001). Thurlow (2003) studies 544 text messages which resulted in the language of SMS is determined by maxims of sociolinguistic (Grice,1965) which determine the principle of sociality; brevity and speed, paralinguistic restitution, phonological approximation.

Crystal (2001) warns the decline of language skills of young people. Most of the teenagers believe computer mediated communication (CMC) is not writing as these technology tools are considered as channels of communication. Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith and Macgill (2008) in their survey of The Parent & Teen Survey on Writing reveal that teenagers know the difference between academic writing and casual writing yet informal writing do appears in their academic writing. Furthermore, users in Myspace use a lot of profanity words (Hinduja and Patchin, 2008). A survey carried out by English Spelling society to investigate the impact of the chat rooms and social network sites on English language to 18 to 24 years old reveals that these online sites have encouraged users to misspell (2010). CMC demands easier and faster communication so the conventional practice of CMC is not to conform to the rules of the language. This has raised a lot of concerns from the public about the standard of English among the youth. Baron (2009) emphasizes that digital media influence people to be more tolerance on language change as people pay less attention to language rules as they are empowered with more control on their communication.

However, other findings have shown CMC influences students to be more creative. Bergs (2006) indicates that younger users experiment with different language variants in online communication than face-to-face communication. CMC is situational communication which offers rich linguistic diversity (Androutsopoulos, 2006) which is consistent with the findings in Tagliamonte and Denis’ (2008) study of 72 teenagers and their instant messages which were compared with their spoken corpus. The findings reveal these teenagers possess adequate linguistic ability to combine the mixture of colloquial and non-standard features with standard register in their instant messages. Plester,Wood and Bell (2008) show that text language does not interfere with written language abilities. Dresner and Herring (2010) discuss the importance of communicative functions of emoticons in CMC from speech act theory been used to indicate emotion, non-emotional meaning and illocutionary force indicators which have conventionally used as textual markers. Thelwall (2009) in his research of 173,730 comments of Myspace finds the language is different from formal written language as the language is rich of slangs, non-standard spellings and sentence fragments as the contexts require users to express their emotion quickly. Code-switching is practiced in bilingual and multilingual societies as manifested in other text messages studies. There are some researches which in code-switching comparing Englishbeing used with other languages. Haggan (2007) investigates texters in Kuwait which reveal some Arabic texts and show texters frequently transcribe Arabic texts using English alphabets in their English texts.

Deumert & Masinyana (2008) reveal in their study of 22 bilingual South Africans texters (English/isiXhosa) that bilingual texters rely on their extensive vocabulary and sentence structure and knowledge about the languages to overcome constraints imposed by text messages. ALX Zarate(2010) investigates 104 Mexican university students and created 42 text messages. The study suggests the participants use code-switching (Spanish/English) so they could economize their text messages and it is the habit they practice in face-to-face communication.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study involved 264 texters of UiTM Perlis. Their L1 is Bahasa Malaysia. Their age range was between 18-22 years old. There were 94 male students and 170 female students. The sample was purposive sampling. The research was conducted in a duration of one semester. The participants were avid texters. Thus this habit allowed the researchers to compile the corpus of texted English which the participants used daily throughout the duration of the research. The typography of texted English was constructed from the corpus collected. 2640 English SMS messages (sent or received) were retrieved and transcribed as accurately as possible. The participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. This was important given the personal nature of the message. They were also asked to refrain from sending in any repetitive messages. Qualitative data were used such as analyzing documents such as SMS messages. The data was evaluated through text messages collected:

- a. Orthographic forms according to Shortis (2001)
- b. Maxims of sociolinguistics – Grice (1975), Thurlow (2003)
 - i. brevity and speed
 - ii. paralinguistic restitution
 - iii. phonological approximation

Findings

This study attempted to investigate whether the texters executed the sociolinguistics maxims of SMS. The chapter analyzed the results from document reviews such as the texters' 2640 actual text messages. The discussion that follows would be guided by the research objectives.

Sociolinguistics Maxims of SMS Language

Grice's (1975) three key maxims of sociolinguistics which serve the principle of sociality embodies Texted English (SMS language).

Brevity and Speed

According to How & Kan (2005), SMS allows texters to send and receive text messages up to 160 characters. Furthermore, messages are produced on the tiny keypad of the phone; the messages are read on the small screen and must be scrolled through to read the entire messages (Hard af Segerstad 2002). Thus, the texts need to be economized. Besides, the SMS communication is brief as this is interpersonal communication between people who know each other as they share pragmatic and shared background knowledge (Grinter and Eldridge 2001; Hard af Segerstad 2002; Ling 2003). The participants in this study as texters regularly abbreviated lexical items and minimized the use of capitalization and standard grammatical punctuation such as commas and spaces between words which were apparent in their text messages (Thurlow 2003). In this study, syntactical and lexical reductions, unconventional and not yet established abbreviations of lexical terms based on Malay, English language shortenings, acronyms and initialisms, misspellings and typos, minimal use of capitalization and standard grammar punctuation were detected. In doing so, the maxim of brevity and speed was realized. The texters' text messages realized the requirements of brevity and speed:

Text Message 1: u 2...wel, r u fasting 2day?

(The Meaning: You too.Well, are you fasting today?)

Text Message 2: klas at 2.30 p.m. I wuz at de lib.

(The Meaning: Class is at 2.30 p.m.I was at the library.)

Paralinguistic Restitutions

The loss of socio-emotional or prosodic features such as stress and intonation is noticeable in SMS language which mainly deals with texts. Furthermore, the non-verbal cues that normally found in face-to-face communication such as facial expressions, eye contact and voice quality were absent.

Yet the need to be expressive led texters to creative and innovative use of trailing dots, bracket, upper case, multiple punctuation mark, emoticons, upper case and abbreviation. This finding is supported by Harlina & Norizan (2004) observe from seven types of paralinguistic cues used in the e-mail in their study, only abbreviation, trailing dots and brackets were commonly found. Each message of the actual text messages was examined for any evidence of paralinguistic restitution. Table 1 represents frequency of paralinguistic cues identified in this study.

TABLE 1: FREQUENCY OF PARALINGUISTIC CUES IDENTIFIED IN TEXT MESSAGES

No	Paralinguistic restitution	No. of message
1.	Abbreviation	2640
2.	Trailing Dots	1408
3.	Bracket	9
4.	Capitalization	334
5.	Multiple Punctuation Mark	862
6.	Emoticon	144
7.	Asterick	27

The most common paralinguistic restitution was in form of abbreviation. According to Zubaida (2000), abbreviated forms were normally used among e-mail users to show informality between peers who had no social distance. The finding was supported by Harlina & Norizan (2004) as abbreviations were heavily applied in e-mail communication between students and instructors. In this study, abbreviated forms were a necessity to SMS language. All the actual 2640 messages were abbreviated.

In addition, famous emoticons; a borrowing from netlingo, were used as paralinguistic restitution. Emoticons such as smiley, winking, crying etc were used in text messages to enhance the intended meaning of the text messages engendered playful, informal style, intimacy which accentuated relational orientation of text messages (Thurlow 2003). Emoticons enabled text messages to become less rigid and assist expressing feelings that words alone could seldom describe. Accent stylization, non-normative use of punctuation, non-alphabetical graphical means (emoticons, astericks, dashes etc.) were utilized to replace stress and intonation in text messages:

Text Message 3: Elo, Miss!

(The meaning : Hello, Miss!)

Text Message 4: Hee..u 2 ..wel, ar u ok 2day? Ops! Jus kiddin☺

(The Meaning : You too.Well, are you okay today? Just kidding)

Text Message 5: hop u wil njoy it n gve hig mak!!hehe, tq.Nite ☺

(The Meaning: Hope you will enjoy it, and give high mark! Thank you.Good Night)

Table 2 represents the frequency of symbols and emoticons that were identified in this study .

TABLE 2: FREQUENCY OF SYMBOLS AND EMOTICONS

X n= 1	:-(n=1	=p n=2
☺ n=13	:0(n=1	(.) (.) n=1
* n= 5	=0(n=2	<.>(> n=1
;) n=1	=] n=2	(;) n=3
⊗ n=9	=[n=1	;-) n=1
:-) n= 6	=(' n=1	: -)) n= 2
@ n=6	>> n=1	=> n=1
^^ n=2	=0 n=1	T-T n= 2
:-~ n=1	=(n= 1	=) n= 10
:p n=2	(“,) n= 9	=)’ n=1
:l) n=1	(‘,,) n=1	:) n=4
zzzzz n=2		

Nevertheless, it should be noted that capitalization (e.g. WHY) was not widely used as paralinguistic restitutions. Only 18 messages contained capitalization. Capitalization in SMS just like its function in e-mail was used to display the emotion of anger as capitalization was deemed as shouting or being rude (Zubaida 2000):

Text Message 4: WHERE R U??? I’M AT BUS STOP NOW!!!

(The meaning : Where are you? I am at the bus stop now.)

In Text Message 4, the sender included a sense of urgency, impatience and anger in his text message by capitalizing the whole text and multiple punctuations like question marks and exclamation marks. Meanwhile in Text Message 5, the sender included instruction and the receiver knew that it was imperative for the receiver to follow the instruction by reading capitalization and punctuation used in the text message.

Text Message 5: WOI!! COOK RICE!!
(The Meaning : Cook rice!)

Phonological Approximation

Texted English was phonologically approximated in most of text messages of the participants as vowels were omitted.

Text Message 6: *Pls infm d rst.*
(The Meaning: Please inform the rest.)
Text Message 7: *Thnks a lt. We wll mt in nxt clss*
(The Meaning: Thanks a lot. We will meet in next class.)

In text message 6, vowels such as e, a and o were missing while consonants were retained to make the message comprehensible to the receiver. Similar to text message 6, text message 7, vowels like a, o, i and e were omitted whereas consonants were retained. Ello, goin, bin and unconventional spoken-like spelling which were revealed in non-standard orthographic forms of SMS language.

Text Message 8: *Akum..miss 2moro I goin 2 c u at 3.30pm*
(The Meaning : Assalamualaikum, miss. Tomorrow, I am going to see you at 3.30 p.m.)
Text Message 9: *Ello frenz, miz u so much. =p*
(The Meaning : Hello friend, miss you so much.)

The Typology of Texted English

Shortis(2001) classifies the typology of text messages into six categories; shortenings (missing end letter), acronyms and initialisms, letter/number homophones, misspellings and typos, non-conventional spellings and accent stylization. Thurlow (2003), Bodomo and Lee(2002) and Kasesniemi(2003) support the features of language use in SMS such as shortenings, contractions and clippings, letter/number homophones, non-conventional spellings, accent stylizations, omission of punctuation and word spacing, excessive use of punctuation marks, emoticons, inflectional endings reduced. Creative new abbreviations in analogy with unconventional abbreviations of English words were found, based on Malay words. Table 3 represents the frequency of non-standard orthographic forms of texted English.

Table 3: The frequency of non-standard orthographic forms of texted English.

Features	Frequency
Shortenings (missing end letter)	68
Contractions (missing middle letters)	422
G clipping (dropping final -g)	21
Other clipping (dropping final -g)	66
Acronyms	0
Initialisms	3
Letter/number homophones	212
Misspellings and typos	181
Non-conventional stylization	378
Accent stylization	114

The texters frequently used contractions by shortening words or expressions as a common form to economize time in typing text messages. The participants used contractions of phonemes such as omissions of the middle vowels such as 'askd=asked', 'atnd=attend' and 'aftr=after' where middle vowels were omitted. Moreover, the participants used contraction by deleting syllables. For example by deleting consonants in the first syllable between phonemes such as 'clas=class', 'rgtones=ringtones' and 'u.stand=understand'. In addition, some texters added extra consonant in the last letter such as 'missz=miss', 'reallyz=really' and 'stars=stars'. According to Jin(2006), consonant clusters added to the end of syllable to express special characteristics of oral speech, such as personality markers or to soften expression.

Meanwhile the nasalized sound to express a sense of cuteness like ‘hallow=hello’ and ‘sowi=sorry’ gives the feeling of softness and mildness. Moreover participants elongated some syllables such as ‘meee=me’ to represent a more feminine style by adding a vowel to the last syllable. The study has found that the texters manipulated new lexical items that are used to represent certain emotions or styles unique to texters such as ‘kekekeke=expressing delights’, ‘woit=expressing surprise’. The texters also displayed morphological creativity as they mixed English with Bahasa Malaysia(their first language) such as ‘slmt birthday=happy birthday’.The word ‘slmt=selamat’ means happy in Bahasa Malaysia.texters also manipulated numbers and symbols such as ‘2nite=tonight’, ‘b4=before’, ‘@=at, and ‘*dy-study’ to indicate playfulness and to economize typing.Such forms had become conventionalized among sms users from this particular group.In texted English, texters have their own preferred spellings of words when they type their own text messages.thus in texted English, there are many variants of the same word such as the word ‘assignment’ can be in several forms in texted English such as ‘asg’, ‘asgmt’, ‘asign’, ‘asignmnt’, ‘assgmt’, ‘assgn’ and ‘assignt’.

CONCLUSION

Texters implement three maxims of sociolinguistics such as the maxim of brevity and speed, paralinguistic restitution and phonological approximation. In this study , syntactical and lexical reductions, unconventional and not yet established abbreviations of lexical terms based on Bahasa Malaysia, English shortenings, acronyms and initialisms, misspellings and typos, minimal use of capitalization and standard grammar punctuation are used to realize the maxim of brevity and speed. Creative and innovative use of trailing dots, bracket, upper case, multiple punctuation mark, emoticons, upper case and abbreviations acted as paralinguistic restitutions. The orthographic forms are the combination of English and their first language (Bahasa Malaysia). Contraction is a common form as shortening the word or expression saves time in writing and typing. Contractions were widely being used by deleting and adding weak vowels. Numbers, foreign words and symbols were used to indicate playfulness in text messages and to economize time in typing texts. In texted English, texters had their own preferred spellings of words in their text messages as texted English consists of many variants of the same word.

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