

Text Messaging as a Precursor of Linguistic Decadence for Students in Some Nigerian Tertiary Institutions

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Abstract

Electronic text messaging in Nigeria is an entrenched linguistic behavior which has caught the attention of an enormous youth population and it is adversely affecting the acquisition of linguistic competence. This paper investigated the use of text messages by students in some tertiary institutions in Lagos State, Nigeria in order to examine the various deviant linguistic features and degree of departure from standard variety of English usage. The study utilized extracts from two hundred text messages collected for analysis from male and female undergraduate students between July 2021 and June 2022. Our findings reveal that texting negatively impacts writing skill of students and the noticeable linguistic anomalies are: non-standard spellings, word order violations, disjunctive orthography, anomalous punctuations, vowel deletion, use of slang and colloquialisms, surface diagraphia and others. The paper concludes that since anything goes in texting and it is not regulated, it may wreck the language because it has a pernicious effect on the linguistic competence of students and on the general standard of education. It then recommends that educators should rise to the challenge and instill in students the formal writing skill they need to succeed.

Keywords: *Text messaging, linguistic decadence, linguistic behavior / competence, standard variety*

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I. Introduction

Students bred in this age of electronic revolution of smart phones, camera phones, tablets etc. have become amazingly skillful at using phone keypads and can hold text conversations effortlessly and tirelessly. No generation has ever been so interconnected and sophisticated; hyper-speed, racy lifestyle when old ways are called into question under the surge of civilization, modernization and technological advancement.

Texting which is a cross between writing and talking has been variously described as “new linguistic style” (Chiluwa, 2007) and “method in madness” (Alabi, 2008) has crept into the formal writing system of Nigerian students (Faleke and Ibrahim, 2011). The overall quality of work has declined because their attitude towards writing has changed. Much like texting, students want to get everything written as fast as possible and they don’t want to be bothered with the writing process of planning, drafting, revising and editing. Rusanik, (2006) avers: ‘texting behavior is only a reflection of societal behavior which is driven by fast cars, fast food and education by news briefing’. Texting is an informal communication and it is not permissible in academic writing but unfortunately, many students are unable to distinguish between the formal and informal varieties of contexts. Apart from texting, digital tools such as word suggestion while typing, spell check and auto correct have further eroded students' spelling skills. It is therefore imperative for educators to rise up to the challenge and instill in the students a distinction between the formal and informal styles of writing.

In this paper, we examined the use of text messages by male and female undergraduate students in some tertiary institutions in Lagos State, Nigeria. The linguistic features and stylistic peculiarities of the text messages collected were identified and analyzed. The paper contends that since anything goes in texting and it is not regulated, it may wreck the language because writing is debased and will soon lose its richness. It concludes that in order to avert the looming linguistic decadence, educators and linguistic scholars should rise

up to the occasion by preparing students for the real world and instill in them the formal writing skill they need to succeed.

II. Background To The Study

The advent of Global System for Mobile Communication (GSM) in Nigeria was in 2001 when the administration of former President Olusegun Obasanjo (1999 - 2007) licensed two GSM service providers; MTN and ECONET (now Airtel). This industry has grown in leaps and bounds and more companies have been licensed to provide fixed-telephony services such as: Globacom, Etisalat (now 9mobile), Broad Based Communication and others. Today, Nigeria is inundated with telecom services and teledensity is high. In order to have competitive edge, the operators devised various operational and promotional strategies to enlarge their client base. One of the ways of achieving this is by giving free SMS (short message service) to their subscribers thereby encouraging them to send more text messages. Apart from this, the high telephone tariffs in Nigeria which was once described as the highest in Africa and probably in the world, has made sending text messages to become attractive (Awonusi, 2004:47).

Majority of students in Nigeria have become addicted to texting primarily because it is easy, cheap and there is freedom to use language as they please especially the disregard of orthographic and syntactic rules. It is the permissiveness in language use that is gradually leading to linguistic incompetence among the students because many of them do not distinguish between formal and informal styles of writing, consequently there is a carryover of the informal variety used in texting to more formal academic writing.

III. Objectives

This study aims at examining the use of text messages by students in some tertiary institutions in Lagos State, Nigeria. It seeks to examine the various deviant linguistic features and degree of departure from standard variety of English usage. It also aims to provide answers to questions associated with the informal features of text messages as they are used by Nigerian students for different purposes in varying social contexts. The objectives include the following:

- (a) to briefly explain the perspectives of scholars on text messaging;
- (b) to provide description of the various uses of text messaging;
- (c) to describe the deviant linguistic features found in the text messages collected for analysis;
- (d) to provide answers to questions associated with the informal features of text messages as they are used by Nigerian students in this study.

IV. Methodology

Approximately two hundred text messages dealing with education, sports, politics, relationship etc. were collected for analysis and this spanned twelve months between July 2021 and June 2022. They are text messages sent by Nigerians to Nigerians who are undergraduate students in tertiary institutions in Lagos State. They are male and female within the age bracket of seventeen to thirty years. Our coverage area is Lagos State with the highest GSM teledensity in the southern part of Nigeria.

V. Literature Review

Scholars have done extensive research on text messaging from different perspectives and these have yielded results that have enriched its literature. Njemanze (2012) examined the SMS style of language communication among Nigeria university students with emphasis on its effects on English language usage. The paper contended that the frequency of SMS style will generate greater linguistic confusion if it is not controlled. Nwenz (2013) investigated the aspects of morphology and syntax found in SMS text messages and adopted a combination of Chomsky (1957) Transformational and Silverstein (1976) Meta pragmatic theories. The study discovered that there are morpho-syntactic variations among texters which are problematic to formal English. It also revealed that texters obviously down-play the orthographic and syntactic rules of the formal English language for their convenience. Oha and Anyanwu (2016) examined the creative strategies of word formation found in the morphology and syntax of select SMS text messages using data collected from select SMS of individual users and the service providers of GSM. They argued that these morphological patterns are already becoming standardized forms being adopted by the Nigerian users of GSM since they are understood by the 'texters' (senders) and the 'textees' (receivers) of the message. Oreoluwa and Omotayo (2022) investigated the use of textism by University of Ibadan students as well as the factors that influence use. The descriptive survey research design was adopted and data were collected through an online questionnaire and an observation of WhatsApp chats of the students. The study confirmed that textism was used consciously and unconsciously both in formal and informal discussions. Akintayo and Okunowo (2024) examined the plurality of views on the subject of text messaging among Nigerians and analysed the contemporary trends, informal features and

stylistic peculiarities of the different text messages collected for analysis. The data presented consist of purposively sampled SMS text messages on how users interact and the coverage area is Lagos State, Nigeria.

VI. Why Text Mesaging?

The lure of texting is irresistible primarily because it offers the following advantages. It is easy, cheap and it is fun. Given the high cost of making calls on any network, sending text messages is a rational option and once you are obsessed with texting, it becomes fun. Apart from this, it is convenient and can be done anywhere: in the class, car, church, mosque, even in the toilet. It is fast, immediate and can be done unnoticed allowing some form of privacy. Above all, texting is in vogue and one would be behind the times if he doesn't cultivate the texting habit; you must be texting-compliant to have a class identity. The comment of Crystal, (2009:174) on the rationale for texting deserves quotation: "...It is portable and allows messages to be sent from virtually anywhere. It could even be done with one hand, making it usable while holding on to a roof-strap in a crowded bus. It is personal, allowing intimacy and secrecy, reminiscent of classroom notes under the desk..." This quotation underpins the ubiquity and communicative value of text messaging.

Bellis (2002) opines that GSM was developed principally for communication in business. The truth in this statement holds eternally because many establishments are already using it for various business-related purposes. It is frequently used for bank transactions and information on accounts statements such as withdrawals, savings, fixed deposits and standing orders which are sent to clients through text messages. It is customary for bank account holders who request for 'sms service' to receive the following information from their banks at the end of the month and at all times that transaction - either credit or debit occurs on the account. **Txn: Credit; Acc: 1xx...53x; Amt: NGN 10,000.00; Des: Payment for books; Date: 04-07-2021; Bal: NGN 123,000.00.** Furthermore, information on students' examination, admission, results are sent through text messages; in addition, there are also political, sports, religious and social text messages. It is very obvious that the purposes of text messages are multi-dimensional and it is indeed splendid to observe that communication is faster, more global than ever before and in several ways, the frontiers of globalization have been extended by telecommunication which is spiced with attendant merits.

There are, however, drawbacks to this communication revolution particularly in the education sector. It has been observed that during examination period, students transmit answers to one another through text messages. Akintayo and Okunowo, (2024) rightly observed that 'examination malpractice in tertiary institutions has now attained a high-tech dimension with the use of modern technological devices.' Apart from this, many students who send text messages are never bothered with the grammaticality of their sentences because in texting 'anything goes' since it is not regulated. Nwenze (2013) contends that 'texters obviously down-play the orthographic and syntactic rules of the formal English language for their convenience.' This paper therefore examined the deviant linguistic features found in the two hundred text messages collected for analysis.

VII. Linguistic Features

Many of the SMS text messages collected for this study are couched in informal style and they exhibit peculiar lexico-semantic and grammatical characteristics. The noticeable property that binds them together is brevity or economy of words and this is occasioned by the time and space at the command of the sender of text message. Many of the mobile phones allow a maximum of one hundred and sixty characters including spaces per message; it compels therefore, the use of various indexes of brevity in the writing of text messages. It should be stated that an SMS message can exceed one hundred and sixty characters; in this regard, it will become a 'multi-part message.' Some of the deviant linguistic features in the corpus data for this study are discussed below.

Disjunctive Orthography

The most remarkable feature in the data analyzed is disjunctive orthography which manifests in form of non-standard spellings, total abbreviation, partial abbreviation, vowel deletion, initialisms and use of figures to represent words. Other features are: punctuation irregularities, phonetic representations, code-mixing, pidgin English, slang and colloquialism.

(a) Non-Standard Spellings

There are so many forms of deviant spellings in the text messages collected for analysis and the most striking characteristic is lack of consistency in the spelling model; spellings vary from 'texter' to 'texer' and even within the text of a 'texter' variations are still noticed. Anything goes in texting; it is not regulated or rule-governed. A rule-governed language according to Barber, (1993;203) is one in which acceptable usage is explicitly laid down, for example by grammars and dictionaries or by the ruling of an academy.

Partial Abbreviation

bcuz, bcos	-	because	smthg	-	something
wkend	-	weekend	gud aftn	-	good afternoon
bday	-	birthday	shd	-	should
skul, schl	-	school	provsn	-	provision
dat	-	that	qstn	-	question
smbdy	-	somebody	thot	-	thought
urself	-	yourself	doc	-	document
admsn	-	admission	eng.	-	English
msg	-	messages	maths	-	Mathematics
rmberd	-	remembered	econs	-	Economics

Total Abbreviation

ad, adv	-	advertisement	sec	-	secretary
ex, exm	-	examination	jan	-	January
pls	-	please	com	-	communication
dif	-	different	ft	-	faint
ack	-	acknowledge	prep	-	preparation
tx	-	thanks	tec	-	technology
btw	-	between	intro	-	introduction
lit	-	literature	gov	-	government
wed	-	Wednesday	lab	-	laboratory
mil	-	military	vet	-	veterinary

(b) Initialisms

Quirk, R. and others (1985) define “initialism as a word formed by combining the first letters of several words and it is pronounced as separate letters.” It is the reduction of words to their initials and they are shortened versions of phrases. The first letters of all the words are spelt like a single word and each letter is pronounced separately. The examples below are from the selected text messages in the corpus data.

asap	-	(as soon as possible)	lol	-	(laugh out loud)
omg	-	(oh my God)	kit	-	(keep in touch)
oyo	-	(on your own)	brb	-	(be right back)
yolo	-	(you only live once)	sug	-	(students’ union government)
wip	-	(work in progress)	kiv	-	(keep in view)

Most of the initialisms observed in the data collected are not guided by any rule of word-formation; it is free for all and anything goes. The use of initialism does not aid comprehension of text rather it makes it impenetrable. However, it is not yet a popular practice among the senders of text messages in this study.

(c) Use of Figures to Represent Words

Another noticeable practice is the use of figures to represent words and most of the text messages analysed exhibit this spelling peculiarity but it is fraught with numerous inconsistencies. Some examples are provided below:

10q	-	(thank you)	2 d 4	-	(to die for)
29t	-	(tonight)	gr8	-	(great)
b4 4 2day	-	(before four today)	1daful	-	(wonderful)
2gt8	-	(too great)	3ice	-	(thrice)
2moro	-	(tomorrow)	2ice	-	(twice)
aqr8	-	(accurate)	chokl8	-	(chocolate)

(d) Phonetic Representation

This involves pronunciation spelling or the exploitation of surface diagraphia (Awonusi, 2004:51). There is a phonetic similarity between the letters and the spoken words which is achieved through the use of single or double letters of the alphabet to denote phonetic symbols or indicate pronunciation. The examples below are from the selected text messages for this study.

a	-	are	q	-	queue
b	-	be / bee	r	-	are
c	-	see / sea	t	-	tea
d	-	the	u	-	you
p	-	pea / pee	y	-	why

sa	-	essay	iv	-	ivy
dl	-	deal	xl	-	excel
xs	-	excess	ul	-	you'll

There is no rule governing the use of these symbols, some senders in this study used capital letters while some used small letters. When they are capitalized in text messages, it is probably done to give prominence to them and alert the reader that a linguistic formula is deployed in the context of usage.

(e) Vowel Deletion

This is the loss of vowel within a word, across morpheme and word boundaries. Abiodun (2007) contends that vowel deletion process involves a loss of sound which may be a vowel. Bamgbose (2006) points out that 'such a loss (of vowel) leads to a reduction in the number of syllables in the word or phrase.' In the text messages collected for this study, vowel deletion is very common and it is done primarily for brevity. It is also observed that this is not rule-governed as every texter creates and uses what is suitable for him while sending a message. Some of the examples are listed below.

plz	-	please	tkz	-	thanks
cd	-	could	btw	-	between
shd	-	should	qstn	-	question
msg	-	message	txt	-	text
hsptl	-	hospital	gd	-	good
smbdy	-	somebody	smth	-	something
pts	-	points	rmd	-	remind
bhd	-	behind	yr	-	year
mth	-	month	wk	-	week
act	-	account	bk	-	book

(f) Word Order Violation

Word order refers to the conventional arrangement of words in a phrase, clause or sentence. Appropriate order of words is necessary because it promotes grammaticality, it enhances meaning and text comprehension. In the text messages analysed, there are many examples of awkward sentences replete with arbitrary word order and this leads to ambiguity and general lack of clarity of the messages. Examples abound in the data collected for this study. 'Early I arrived' [I arrived early]. 'Flora we negotiated with' [We negotiated with Flora]. 'Gas and oil company' [oil and gas company]. 'kin and kith' [kith and kin] 'cranny and nook' [nook and cranny]. 'It rained dogs and cats' [It rained cats and dogs].

(g) Punctuation Irregularity

The data collected show that text messages have numerous punctuation irregularities such as; bad capitalization: abuja instead of Abuja; tom instead of Tom; saturday instead of Saturday; december instead of December. Other peculiarities are misuse or complete deletion of comma, colon, semi-colon, full stop and question mark. The reason for this deviant punctuation style may be to achieve brevity because of exigency of space or out of complete ignorance of how to use punctuation marks. A badly punctuated text can lead to a change in meaning; the examples from our data will suffice.

'No male student failed the test' instead of 'No, male student failed the test.'

'It's time to eat Abu' instead of 'It's time to eat, Abu.'

(h) Slang and Colloquialism

The language of texting is slangy, chatty and conversational. There is a preponderant use of colloquial words and phrases primarily because of the informal relationship that exists between the participants in the discourse situation. Usually, there is a shared knowledge between them therefore, the expression used by the sender is what the recipient can interpret. For example:

20k or 20grand	-	twenty thousand Naira
fashi	-	to forget about something
A/C, Aircon	-	airconditioner
pop, popsy,	-	father
mum, mumsy	-	mother
amebo	-	person who gossips
kolo	-	crazy, mad
expo or runs	-	(relating to) examination malpractice
toast	-	talk to or woo a girl

gist	-	light informal conversation
ojoro	-	partiality
orobo	-	fat person
butter	-	rich student / person
jara / fisi	-	extra
abeg	-	please

(i) Code-mixing

Code-mixing refers to the mixing of lexical items or grammatical structures from different languages within a sentence or conversation (Myers-Scotton, 1993). It is a bilingual habit that involves the use of two codes in a single sentence to aid text comprehension. It is essentially intra-sentential mixing which is done within the sentence boundary and it occurs at a point where it does not violate the structural integrity of the participating languages. Some examples from the data collected are given below.

Ur <u>wahala</u> 2 much;	<u>Oga</u> ask of u;
Just bougt a <u>tokunbo</u> ;	Datz al, <u>O d'abo</u> ;
D <u>oyinbo</u> style;	Greet ur <u>ogbonge</u> waif;
U'll be there, <u>se</u> ?	D <u>yeye</u> man neva come.
I will deal wit dat boy <u>walahi</u>	I saw him with my <u>korokoro</u> eyes.

VIII. Implication And Conclusion

The orthographic inconsistencies and deviant sentence structures are now the norm in the 'new GSM writing system' and they are gaining popularity among students in secondary and tertiary institutions as the data collected and analyzed in this study have shown. Texting is an informal communication which is not permissible in academic writing. Experienced writers are able to switch between informal language deployed in texting and formal writing for academic purpose but unfortunately, many students are unable to distinguish between these varieties of contexts. Faleke and Ibrahim, (2011:60) observed that '...candidates were so much used to the reading and writing of SMS that they became confused when faced with the essay writing that required the formal writing of 450 words.' Esimaje, (2011:44) also averred; 'It needs to be noted that the threat of texting to language is unequal...'

It is very obvious that the unregulated language of text messaging has eaten deep into and corroded the writing skill of many students. Given this practice, with the passage of time, valuable written communication tradition will gradually pass into oblivion just as the personal letter is going the way of the wireless telegram. Text messaging is threatening the existence of conventional writing system simply because it is permissive and anything goes. The majority of adult population may not be easily corrupted by this nascent writing system but this may not hold true for the enormous youth population with impressionable minds. If the current trend is unchecked it will debase writing and wreck the language because 'GSM writers' may soon outnumber the cultured and experienced writers and probably influence them to accept their style. It is therefore imperative for all stakeholders; policy formulators, educators, linguistic scholars to halt this imminent linguistic decadence by instilling in the students the formal writing skill they need to succeed. Most importantly, educators should teach students to be context conscious and use the appropriate style when writing formally or sending text messages.

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