

## **SMS FORM AND LANGUAGE CHOICE AMONG THE STUDENTS OF FCE (T) UMUNZE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This study is an attempt to examine the form and factors of language choice in text messaging among the students of Federal College of Education (T) Umunze. Some variables responsible for the wide use of English were identified. The study concluded that age, sex, ethnicity ease, time and swiftness of writing have an effect on the form and language choice in text messaging.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

This study seeks to examine the SMS pattern and language choice among the students of Federal College of Education (T) Umunze. SMS is a generic part of a phone, web or mobile communication system that supports the exchange of short messages between discussants. Text messaging is very popular among tertiary students and in their text messages "texters" use a specific language which has no set of features that make it different from the language of standard writing (*Ling. 2005, Thurlow, 2009*) It is used in place of voice calls in circumstances where it may be impossible or inexpedient. Generally speaking, texting is considered more economical and cheaper compared to placing a phone call to another mobile phone.

Text messaging has a distinct pattern in terms of syntactic, lexical and typographical forms that fulfils young people's needs as well as providing for new technology. (*Doring 2002*). The language of texting has its own style and the dominant features in the SMS language are the use of abbreviations syntactic reductions, slang, deletion of parts of speech, especially pronouns, prepositions, articles, modal or auxiliary verbs and contractions (*Ling 2008, Doring 2002*). The language of texting has feature from both the written and spoken forms, hence Crystal (*2001*) suggests that SMS language is more than just a hybrid of speech and writing which must be seen as a new species of communication called 'a third medium'. SMS is quite unique with regards to language selection since it resembles the written form of speech which is interactive and dependent on shared space, time and background knowledge. Like normal speech, text messages are structurally simple, fragmented, concrete and conditional on situation dependant reference.

There is a bit controversy as to who actually invented the SMS. In some quarters, credit is given to Neil Papworth, a 22 years old test engineer for Sema Group (now Airwide Solution) who is said to have been the first to invent the service in 1992, using a personal computer to text "merry christmas" through the Vodafone network to the phone of one Richard Jarvis (*wikipedia, 2010*). In some other quarters, credit is given to Matti Makkonen, a pioneer in Finnish mobile communication (*Dogberi, 2008*). Today, text messages is considered the most widely used mobile data service. Its use around the globe can simply be described as pervasive.

Language choice refers to the selection of a particular language for communication which can be influenced by identity, international comprehensibility and commercial success.

Collaborating to the above, *Hashim (2010)* sees it as the selection of language for different purposes in different context, and this means an individual who speaks two or more languages has to choose a language to use in a given context. Almost all the students of Federal College of Education (T) Umuze are bilinguals as they can speak at least two languages. The first language speakers of Igbo have no choice but to become bilingual because English is the formal language of instruction at the school. Whenever speakers of English and Igbo come together, a choice has to be made about which of these languages is to be used. In most cases many bilingual speakers of Igbo and English are able to switch codes with ease sometimes in mid sentences.

### **SMS language Technique or Style**

Besides manual strategies employed to reduce the number of characters used in mobile communication, there are many automatic techniques readily available.

*Lansky and Zemlicka (2005)* suggested compression techniques based on frequent syllables used. *Rinaldi and Ario* cited in *Zemlicka (2005)* proposed a technique based on code number. This technique according to them automatically reduces the number of characters to be sent for message.

Stephen Rein, Clemens Guhmann equally suggested text data compression model, This technique is based on low complexity arithmetic coding. It requires 128 Kbytes of RAM for data compression. It can be used both in wireless and wired networks (2006).

In view of the above techniques and styles, the researcher found out that every person has a different choice, so SMS should be sent according to the particular user's choice. This is sequel to the study carried out by *Meurant C. Robert (2007)* on the resources used by Korean students in the learning of a second language; (the resources of SMS, mobile application, computers and other electronic services). They found out that the English language is the second language of most Korean students.

### **Forms of Texting**

Text messaging mostly involves the use of pictograms and logograms. Words are either shortened through the use of symbols to represent the word, or using symbols whose names sound like syllable of the word. A text may consist of words or an alphanumeric combination, for example, texting the word 'thought' could be rendered as 'tot'; for you and for me as '4 u nd 4m', 'to whom it may concern' as 'twimc' (*BBC.focus on Africa 2004:25*)

It is also possible to use numbers alone to communicate whole passages. This is evident in character based languages like Chinese and Japanese. For instance, '8807701314520' and Chinese is literally translatable as "hug hug you, kiss kiss you, whole life I love you" (*Wikipedia 2010:12*). The SMS technology allows up to 160 characters in length for each short message composed with Latin alphabets and 70 characters in length for those composed with non-Latin alphabets. like Arabic and Chinese.

### **Why texting works. Distinct Features and Advantages**

The success of text messaging as a form of communication in higher institutions are often attributed to two primary factors: the medium's features and its relevance among college students.

Text messaging services on college campuses possess several unique advantages and capabilities in comparison to other mediums. Fundamentally, text messages are

highly accessible and convenient for students as a form of communication. The ECAR 2018 report on undergraduate students and information technology indicates that 95% of college students have access to a smart phone, making mobile phones the most widely accessible electronic device among college students (*Galanek, 2018*).

SMS messaging does not require an internet connection and it is a 'permanent fixture on everyone's phones', which saves students the extra step of having to download an application to utilize their school's messaging service (*Deshpande, 2017*)

The high open rates associated with text can also be attributed to their delivery method. Texts have the unique advantage that they are accompanied by alert notifications by default, so each message captures student's attention, at least for a moment in time" (*Castleman & Meyer, 2020*) Campaign monitor (2021) reports that the average college student can receive up to twenty emails per day which makes it easy for email from college to get lost in the shuffle.

Additionally, text messaging services outperform other platform with their unique features and customization options. Texting platforms allow schools to segment their contact lists into different group ensuring that relevant messages reach correct audience. "Engineering students, do not want to receive psychology department updates, and alumini shouldn't be bothered with new student orientation schedules... the segmentation features increase student satisfaction (*Wright, 2021*): While segmentation is possible via emails the segmentation process is streamlined by texting platforms by using the keyword features. "A keyword is a word or phrase members of the student body can text to your number to sign up for information on a particular topic. For example, if the student is looking for more information on financial aid you could create the keyword 'FINANCE'. When a student text the word 'FINANCE" it sends them links to relevant information on how to apply for financial aid at your university (*Dodd, 2021*). The Keyword feature not only makes segmentation easy, but it gives student, the freedom to customize or update the content they receive from their school at any time.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The examination of text messages in this study is based on the literacy studies (*NLST*) *Barton (2007)*, *Barton and Hamilton (1998)* and *Gee (1996)* argued that reading and writing are more than decoding letters and words but rather human activities in context. Texting is integrated in people's everyday lives and according to *Selfe and Hawisher (2004)*, it is not isolated from other forms of human activity in society since what texters want to do with their texts is partly shaped by what their linguistic resource can or cannot do for them. Many students use text messages to stay in touch with friends, relatives, to discuss homework and to set up weekend activities. Such informal everyday use and exchange of text messages fosters the development of texting as a social practice associated with sets of values that influence students to use texts in specific ways. The patterns and factors of language choice in the text messaging of Federal College of Education (T) Umunze students can be understood as 'text making practice' which are considered a sublet of literary practice within a social theory of literacy or what is called the New Literacy Theory (*Barton 2007*), *Barton and Hamilton (1998)*.

The NLS is relevant to this research because it brings together aspects of people, texts, literacy events and literacy practices. The NLS enabled the researcher to study text messages in terms of pattern and language choice as literacy practices associated with

'cultural ways of utilizing literacy' and their 'associated values, attitudes, feelings and social relationship.

This study is specifically concerned with patterns and language choice in text messages which is closely related to NFLT 'Text-making practices' (Bazerman and Prior (2004).

Language choice highlights the idea that each and every language is used in a particular context for a certain reason. In text messaging when a speaker of more than one language is sending a message, a language has to be chosen and the choice of language is determined by various factors. When a speaker has a range of languages within which to choose, that choice helps to define the occasion and purpose of that particular choice.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this study is to find out the SMS pattern and the language choice among the bilingual/ multilingual students of the school of languages FCE (T) Umunze. The data was collected using three different data collection techniques.

Firstly, the participants were instructed by the researcher to make and send three different text messages to three different categories of people – parents, friend, course mate.

Secondly, was the use of an open-ended questionnaire to elicit demographic information, text messages on language patterns and choice. The third method was semi-structured interviews with 20 of the students who had completed the questionnaire. All the participants signed consent forms agreeing to participate in the research and they were assured that the data submitted were going to be used for academic purposes only.

The data for the study was collected from 50 randomly selected students of the English language department of the College. A total of 115 messages were forwarded by the participants from 28 students (15 females and 13 males) and 88 messages from 22 participants (15 females and 7 males) using the questionnaire making it a total of 205 messages.

Qualitative and semi-structured interviews were constructed and concluded around the interview topic in the researcher's office. In analyzing the data, all messages were first separated by gender, then into the following categories, messages to friends, relatives and to course/class mates. Lastly, the messages were grouped into two groups namely; messages in native language (Igbo) and messages. Code switching (English to native or vice-versa) was analyzed through what Al-khatib and Sabbah (2008) refers to as 'bulkiness'. The concept of bulkiness can be utilized to examine whether switching took place from native language to English or vice-versa. 'Bulkiness' means that if the bulk of the texts are written in native language, then the switch will be in the direction of English and if it is in English the reverse is true. Bulkiness is measured by counting the number of occurrences of native words, phrases or sentences in each text against those used from English collectively and working out a percentage score for the instances of each language and the language which scores higher would be treated as the base language.

## **Discussion of Findings**

The researcher's findings are presented on the basis of some factors that were important in shaping the choices and creative uses of language and writing systems in text messaging.

Total number of messages collected in numbers and percentages.

<b>Language used</b>	<b>Females</b>	<b>Males</b>	<b>Overall percentage</b>
English	53	37	44
Igbo language	27	15	21
English and Igbo	40	31	35
<b>Total</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>100</b>

The table above shows that students prefer to write text messages in English, code mix and code switch in some cases and finally in their native language. The results show that students have different language choice patterns depending on the recipient and situation which can either be formal or informal and factors such as age, ethnicity, sex, ease and velocity.

### **Age**

Text messages written shows that age is a contributing factor to language choice. A good number of students, pointed out that their native language where used in texting their parents as a sign of respect and uses English in texting their friends, colleagues and young relations. This could be attributed to the fact that students are exposed and grounded in the English language more often and they regard it superior and prestigious.

### **Ethnicity**

The result here shows that ethnicity equally determines the language choice. Students from the same ethnic group code-mix and code-switch while chatting and texting with relatives, friends and colleagues from the same geographical locations.

### **Sex**

The sex of a recipient is equally a factor in choosing the language to use. The result shows that female students code-mix and code-switch in texting their other female counterparts, likewise the male but most often text exclusively in English when chatting with their opposite sex. This from the oral interview is to maintain sophistry and prestige. The summary results indicate that the English language seems to serve the communicative functions of young people more than the native language. The researcher equally found out that female students tend to use longer and more complex sentences than those of male students. These findings are consistent with those of *Colley and Todd (2002)* who noted gender differences in language use.

### **Ease, time and switches of writing**

The researcher found out from the students that SMS is easier and faster and less time consuming to compose in English than in native language. This assertion is confirmed in *Segerstd's (2002)* findings that mobile phone users prefer to send mobile text messages because they are quicker, cheaper and easier to use.

The students also pointed out that keyboard characters of cell phones make text messaging in native language (Igbo) difficult. The above assertions are in line with

*Bautista (2004)* who point out that it is less time consuming switch to the other code (English) which provided the fastest, easiest and most convenient way of saying something with the least waste of time, effort and resources available.

The researcher equally found out that students unconsciously switch codes when they try to explain certain concepts that are considered complicated to be explained in English, hence the code-switch and code-mix.

## **CONCLUSION**

The study showed that the contact of English and the native language (Igbo) has led to language choice and has resulted in the Federal College of Education (T) Umuozuwa students, becoming bilingual. The study equally revealed that language choice in text messaging of the students of the aforementioned school is determined by factors such as age, ethnicity, sex, ease, time and swiftness of writing in a language.

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