The Short Message Service (SMS) Texting Style of Communication and Its impact on Kenyan University Students’ Written Communication Skills

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ABSTRACT
This paper seeks to examine the transformative impact of SMS text messaging on written skills among Kenyan University students. The use of the SMS style in communication is a language style which is formed intentionally by means of conscious, systematic patterning and implementation. SMS as a type of new technological communication has brought with it different forms of language use, which break away from the standard language as we know it and has led to a form of new orthography. With the emergence of the SMS communicative style, attention is no longer given to the grammatical rules of the English language. Using the survey method, the paper examines how pervasive the use of SMS texting is among Kenyan university students; SMS styles and its possible effects on students’ writing skills; and what lecturers and students themselves think about the phenomenon. Based on responses from selected participants, the paper concludes that the use of SMS texting is pervasive, SMS text styles messaging could heighten the tendency among students to adopt non-standard uses and contracted forms of English words in their class work, examinations and research reports. The paper concludes by re-affirming that the frequency of SMS style will influence students’ writing skills and the use of standard British English in their academic environment.

Key word: SMS texting, written communication skills, Kenyan University Students
1. Introduction

Language has always been central to the study of man in his environment. Language is a dynamic construct which has social relevance especially in its environment of usage. The greater value of language lies in its communicability, which is the individual’s ability to use the words in a given context (Njemanze 2012). Prior to the technology age, language use in bilingual communities was restricted to the context of speech. Over the years language use extended to writing and in recent times, especially from the mid 1990s; we have the computer mediated styles of communication. This medium introduced among other styles, the use of the short massage system of communications. The short message service ‘SMS’ is a miniature and abridged style of transmitting written information (Njemanze 2012). This style became prominent in Kenya during the introduction and advent of the mobile phones. The SMS style of communication was initially used for different communication purposes such as exchanging information on events; invitation to religious, social, political, academic meetings, making business contacts and sending goodwill messages (Taiwo 2009:102). Today university students use SMS texting to chat, to pass information concerning meetings, lectures, assignments, politics and social networking. This style of communication makes extensive use of language. This portrays language as an organized activity which uses words to accomplish its designated function. Based on the emergence of the SMS communicative style, attention is no longer given to the grammatical rules of the English language which was adopted as the official language in Kenya. It is a recognized fact today that the emergence and spread of new communication technologies is producing far reaching effects not only on important aspects of communication, but also on students’ language use skills especially the written skills.

Apart from the varieties found on the internet, interest in SMS text messages has also been growing steadily during the last decade. However, it has primarily been focused on issues such as vocabulary, abbreviations, emotions, as well as non-grammaticality (Harper et al. 2005), and the often voiced fear of the negative influences SMS text messaging will have on languages. The predominance of SMS style usage of university students and the observation that less attention has been paid to systematic differences that one finds in the grammatical structures in SMS text messages in comparison with grammatical structures found in traditional written language triggered the curiosity of the researcher to investigate the SMS styles of communication among university students and the possible effects of the use of SMS texting on students’ writing skills.

1.1 Background

According to Goldstuck (2006) mobile phones were introduced to the youth market in the late 1990s and Short Message Service (SMS), more popularly known as text messaging, developed as an initial by product of the cell phone industry. As soon as the mobile phone handsets, network subscriptions and recharging cards became available and affordable in the early 2000s, the SMS immediately became the most widespread communication method. It particularly became very popular among mobile phone users more so Kenyan university students because of its affordability and reliability. The mobile phone networks made it in such a way that an SMS is cheaper than a voice call thus more cost effective, and faster than a letter. In addition, it was very reliable such that if one sends an SMS, it is transmitted and displayed on the screen of the receiver’s phone after a short while. The receiver is alerted of the incoming SMS by a beep or ring tone from the phone. In case the receiver is not in range or if the phone is switched off, then the SMS will keep pending for a number of days until the phone gets back into the network range or until it is switched on. Some networks allow the sender to be notified when the SMS has been received. In cases of failed transmission perhaps due to a nonexistent recipient’s number or insufficient credit or airtime on the sender’s phone, then the sender is
notified that the SMS transmission failed. Moreover, the SMS is the most used mode of communication in that it is less intrusive in that nobody hears you sending. Furthermore it enables direct conveyance of the message without interruption from the recipient and it can be saved for future reference unlike the spontaneous spoken word. It also has more advantages in that it offers a choice to reply, forward, or delete them. The main disadvantages of text messages are that they can be cumbersome to type, are only accessible to literate people, and one has to abide by the limitation.

Conversely as more and more students worldwide acquire and use mobile phones, so are they immersing themselves in text messaging. Such is the situation that some lectures, parents and students themselves are expressing concerns that student writing skills stand the risk of being sacrificed on the altar of text messaging. Lectures have always complained that students writing skills have been compromised by the use SMS text messages and have warned that if this is not arrested it will adversely affect students’ communication skills. It should be noted that we are not saying the use of SMS texting is bad but it is its misuse, especially, the unbridled use of abbreviations, the code mixing and non-standard expressions and spellings and their possible negative impact on student writing skills that must be watched. A major contributing element to the use of SMS language is its limitation of 160 characters per message. Although this limitation has been removed in some networks, its effects are still strong. It has hugely affected the written language with the need for messages to be compacted to fit in this limit while still managing to communicate effectively. One therefore has to think clearly on how to best phrase the message in order to put the point across with the fewest possible number of words so as not to exceed the word limit (Döring 2002). This need has led to creativity in the use of multilingualism and other methods like word shortening, code mixing, abbreviation, use of numerals, graphones, and single pronounceable letters in order to stay within the character limit. This creativity is popular amongst university students who use SMS texting as their main mode of communication. Thurlow (2007) aptly put it that certainly, new communication technologies can empower young people and many do indeed explore and develop imaginative ways of making the technology work best for them. The creativity makes SMS language to be a kind of independent written register that does not necessarily use the conventions of the written language as we know it. SMS language is used in a very free way just like speech between very close friends. It has been labeled as internet slang, webslang, digital English, and so on (Thurlow 2007). Goldstuck (2006) describes this new dynamic English slang in development due to text messaging as English language slang. According to the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (2006) slang is defined as “very informal words and expressions that are more common in spoken language”. Text messaging resembles code rather than standard language (Thurlow, 2007). Standard English is often referred to as standard language. Standard English is the variant of English that is usually used in writing (especially printing); it is associated with the educational systems of English speaking countries worldwide. SMS texting also uses coded language and these text messages are not comprehensible to an outsider. Some clarification and understanding of a governing rule system is needed. For example, single or multiple words are condensed by means of replacing individual syllables and words with single letters or digits. Whole words may also be omitted. It is on this background that this paper examines the implications of SMS texting messages on written communication skills among Kenyan university students.
1.2 Objectives
The main objectives of this study were to investigate
(i) How pervasive the use of SMS texting is among Kenyan university students
(ii) To establish the SMS styles of communication among university students
(iii) To examine the possible effects of the use of SMS texting on students’ writing skills

1.3 Significance of the study
This study is significant to the lecturers, students, parents and the Kenyan society as a whole since poor communication skills in the English language will affect all sectors of life. English is the language for official purposes and for education, commerce, administration, media and for national and international communications hence there is need for Kenyan graduates to have good written and spoken communication skills.

1.4 Research Design and Methodology
As a descriptive survey study, both quantitative and qualitative approaches to the collection and analysis of numerical and narrative data were adopted, and the strands integrated using triangulation (Yin, 1994). This was done to ensure reliability and validity of findings as either approach has been noted to have some shortcomings (Lynch, 1988). Two sets of survey questionnaires (one for students and the other for lecturers) were developed to gather primary data for quantitative analysis. A sample was drawn from students and lecturers from the University of Eldoret, school of education and a total of 200 questionnaires (180 to students, and 20 to lecturers) were randomly administered. With a total student population of 1,800 and academic staff of 55 (school of Education 2015), these sample sizes were considered reasonable enough to enable the researchers do a fair assessment. The questionnaires included both open and closed-ended items. As a means of ensuring reliability of findings and confirming what students and lecturers say about the possible negative effects of the phenomenon, marked examination scripts in two common courses were also sampled for study to establish the impact on student language usage and a total of 250 scripts’ were sampled. Also content analysis was done to establish the SMS texting styles. Samples were taken from 54 students and their SMS texts were analyzed so as to establish the SMS writing styles.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW
With every generation come cries that the youth are destroying the language with their new fangled slang. The current grievances harps on the way casual language used in texts and instant messages inhibit kids from understanding how to write and speak properly. Linguists say teenagers are destroying English language and are innovating a new slang. This paper examines some of the literature on this topic as discussed below.

2.1 SMS text messaging
Short Message Service (SMS), more popularly known as text messaging, developed as an initial by-product of the cell phone industry (Faulkner & Culwin, 2004). According to Wikipedia, (2010) SMS was invented by Neil Papworth, a 22 year-old test engineer for Sema Group (now Airwide Solutions), 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. Text messaging is the practice whereby users of mobile and portable devices exchange brief written messages via cellular networks. It is used in place of voice calls in
circumstances where it may be impossible or inexpedient. Text messaging is the act of composing and sending electronic messages between two or more mobile phones, or fixed or portable devices over a phone network (Wikipedia 2010). Generally, texting is considered more economical. Some people simply text because it is relatively cheaper compared to placing a phone call to another mobile phone. In Kenya it is the most used mode of communication because it is cheap and some networks have free SMS provision whereby a sender can send to another requesting the receiver to call. Additionally, some networks provide packages that enable subscribers to send SMS texts in bulk for example 200 SMS for 10 Kenyan shillings, 500 SMS for 20 Kenyan shillings and 20 SMS for 5 shillings. Today, text messaging is considered the most widely used mobile data service in Kenya. Its use around the globe can simply be described as pervasive. It is on record that by the end of 2007, half of the world’s population (3.3 billion) was mobile phone subscribers. Out of this, 2.4 billion people, constituting 74% of all mobile phone users worldwide, were active users of the SMS (Wikipedia, 2010). Although Africa’s ICT penetration levels in general lagged behind the rest of the world, it defied all predictions in the area of mobile cellular telephony, with subscriptions rising from just 5% in 2003 to over 30% by the end of 2008.

2.2 Forms of texting
Text messaging mostly involves the use of different forms and the universal feature that apparently appears in the different samples of SMS text messages that we have seen is brevity which results in various shorthand forms, whose usage and meaning often depart from the standard usages in various languages. One of the considerations one has to keep in mind constantly when dealing with SMS text messages are the limitations that this communication technology imposes on linguistic and communicative possibilities. Namely, the SMS is constricted by limitations of message length imposed by the ‘soft-ware’ of the technology itself, resulting in limited message length which in average covers 160 characters. The other limitation lies with the sender that the languages that the sender and receiver understand, the nature of SMS, the relationship between sender and receiver just to mention a few. The SMS text messages commonly use words that are either shortened through the use of symbols to represent the word, or using symbols whose names sound like a syllable of the word. A text may consist of words or an alphanumeric combination. For example, texting “tomorrow” could be rendered as 2morrow; “for you”, as 4 U; “to you” as 2u, and “before” as b4. Another form is G-clipping which involves the excluding the end –g letter and hence shortening the word. For example “goin”(going), “doin”(doing), “comin” (coming). The use of letter homophones such as “C” (see), “U” (you) , “d” (the). Also there is the deletion of middle letters such as “aft” (after), “mgmt” (management), “nxt” (next), “tx” (thanks). In addition the use of acronyms and initials is commonly used. For example “LOL” (Laugh out loud), “BTW” (by the way), “OMG” (oh my God). Non conventional spelling is a common form such as “nite” (night), “guday”(good day), “pliz” (please). Also another form of non conventional spelling is writing the words the way they pronounce them for example “klass” (class), “klub” (club), “kam” (come”). In showing emotions, text messages use exclamation marks and full stops. For example Hahaha….., Ah!!!!!!!. In Kenya another form is code mixing and code switching whereby students use English language with Kiswahili and mother tongue. For example “mko wea” (where are you), “niko tao”( am in town).”2mit wapi” (where will we meet).This study investigates the students’ perspectives regarding the utilization of the above-mentioned text messaging types in their written language. The study examines the text message samples collected from the students against the stated text message forms.
2.3 Some uses of SMS text messaging

Text messaging has caught on so well with mobile phone users, partly because of its ubiquity. Today, many are those who consider their mobile phones “first as text messaging devices, and secondly as voice calling devices” (Wikipedia, 2010). Wherever there is mobile phone reception, text messaging is possible. The advantages of using SMS are that it is quick, convenient and affordable. It also allows one to get the message across discreetly and silently. In short, when it is better read than said, use SMS. Text messages are ideal when it is difficult to talk in crowded or public places, when in a meeting, when you want to send a quick note or when targeting masses. By this facility, a sense of connectedness of users is assured even in circumstances where voice calls may not be practicable or acceptable. It also provides users with the convenience of responding to messages when they deem fit. Furthermore, even deaf people are able to communicate with each other better through SMS.

2.4 Some attested impact of SMS texting style of communication on language

The impact of SMS text messaging on language has generated a great deal of debate. While researchers are of the view that regular use of the service can impact negatively on the everyday language of “texters”, linguistic experts like Crystal (2008) refute this stance. Russell (2010) explains that in an unscientific poll conducted by Edutopia.org, out of 1028 respondents, 50% were of the view that texting was harming students’ writing and grammar. 20% thought that text messaging could have some effect on students’ writing; but did not consider it a major problem; while 27% felt it did not have any negative influence. Russell (2010) further reiterates that one respondent was cited to have remarked “...my students’ spelling is atrocious. Texting does not and has not helped”. Conversely, O’Connor (2005) in another study indicates that whereas some teachers were of the view that abbreviations used in text messaging was negatively affecting written English, reporting that papers had been written without due regard to proper punctuation, good grammar, and standard abbreviations, other teachers felt that the more you got students to write, the better. O’Connor furthers states that those who had these views argue that texting even provides an opportunity for teachers to teach about how language has evolved from Shakespearean English to Internet English. They also assert that text messaging is not just writing anything, but that before students send out text messages, they do some editing in order to format the messages into a limited but precise number of words. Other findings show that a third school of thought contends that text messaging has no effect on English grammar. In their view, text messaging could be considered as another language (Dansieh, 2011). They argue that since learning a new language or slang words does not necessarily affect a student’s ability to use English grammar, text messaging as another language cannot either. They state that each generation has its own jargon, yet English grammar has not changed. Therefore, all that students need to do is learn the basics in English class what the distinctions between slang, texting lingo and Standard English are (Russell, 2010). However, following the wide publication of reports dating back to 2002 on the use of text language in university assignment, some lectures have become concerned about the decline in the quality of written communication skills. It is also reported that teachers and professors have started having difficulty in keeping the trend in check (Wikipedia, 2010). This study sought to establish if SMS texting affects students’ language use and the findings are discussed in this paper.
3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS
The results are presented according to the objectives of the study:

3.1 How pervasive the use of SMS texting is among Kenyan university students
The study sought to establish how pervasive the use of SMS texting is among Kenyan university students. The questionnaires were given to the students and the findings indicated that all the 180 (100%) students owned mobile phones and used SMS texting daily. When asked the rate of usage per day it was evident that majority of the students use more than 100 SMS texts daily as shown in Figure 1. This was highly determined by the SMS packages in Kenyan networks whereby for five shillings a student subscribes for 20 SMS per day, for ten shillings they subscribe for 200 SMS per day and for 20 shillings 500 SMS texts per day. The findings in Figure 1 indicated the rate of SMS usage per student per day and it shows that 36 (20%) students send 1-20 SMS texts, 27 (15%) send 21-40, 18 (10%) students 41-60, 7 (3.9%) send 61-80, 9 (5%) students send 81-100, 18 (10%) students send 101-120, 9 (5%) students send 121-140, 5 (2.8%) students use 141-160, 12 (6.6%) use 161-180, whereas 39 (21%) send 181 and above SMS texts. The findings indicate that the use of SMS texting is pervasive among Kenyan university students.

![Figure 1: Students rate of SMS text usage per day](image-url)
3.2 The SMS styles of communication among university students
Content analysis was done on the 200 words collected from the students SMS text messages that were sampled from 10% (18) of the total student population and the findings are as shown in Figure 2.

![Figure 2: SMS styles of communication among university student](image)

The findings indicate that code mixing is the most used style with 50 (25%) words depicting this style. This is highly contributed by the dialectal diversity found in Kenya. The code mixing was mainly the use of Kiswahili, sheng’ and African dialects. This was the most used style as every student seemed to have utilized while writing the SMS text. For example there were texts such as; “mko wea”. This a Kiswahili slang for “where are you” with the word ‘where’ shortened with Kiswahili syllables “wea”. This style was dominant with SMS texts such as “niko tao” (am in Town), “Twende hao” (lets go to the house) just to mention a few. This style was also noted to have affected the students spoken skills in that most of the students do code switch while talking and it is almost impossible to get a student who talks English without code switching especially on casual talk. The other popular style is non-conventional spelling in that 44 (22%) words had this style. This was used so as to save on typing time and to meet the demands of the number of characters. Also alphanumeric was used with 24 (12%) of the words showing this style. Only 24 (12%) of the words were correctly written indicating the extent to which students use different styles to write their SMS texts and rarely use correct English. Deletion of the middle letters was also common with 18 (9%) words. The use of this style had the same reasons as the non-conventional spelling. 12 (6%) words had the G-clipping style and another 12 (6%) had homophones style. The least used style was the acronyms with 2 (1%) words. The reason for this is that this is usually coded language and is only understood by those who communicate in a group and is not used for general messaging.
3.3 The effects of the use of SMS texting on students’ writing skills

The study sought to establish the effects of SMS texting on students’ writing skills and the 20 sampled lectures were asked to state if SMS texting affects student’s writing skills and 11 (55%) indicated that it does while 9 (45) indicated that it does not. Those who stated that it affects writing skills indicated that it affects students spelling when writing essays, also influences grammar and syntactical formations. This has been the case in other research findings in other countries. According to Weiss (2009), several educators and observers are concerned that the abbreviated language style of text messaging is inappropriately filtering into official school writing. Those who stated that it does not affect student writing skills were confident that students use different formats of writing at different scenarios and this comes up like a register and the students tend to know that official work calls for official language and they rarely break the rules. However, Abdullah, (2003) reiterates that text messaging changes what and how students write. Whether these changes are viewed as positive or negative depends on an individual’s beliefs on how closely writing should adhere to accepted conventions of formal writing.

To further establish the effect of text messaging on students’ writing skills content analysis was done on 200 sampled scripts. The researchers were to identify the use of the various writing styles mentioned above and it was established that only 22 scripts showed words with the various forms of SMS texting styles. The forms that were evident include: non-conventional spelling, which was the most identified a spelling mistakes by the marker. The other identified form was deletion of middle letters which were used to write words such as sch (school), Tcher (teacher), lsson (lesson). Also the least used style that was identified was the use of alphanumeric such as “4” (for), “2” (to). The findings agree with an official report published by the largest examination board in the UK which disclosed that examination scripts were saturated with abbreviated words (Henry, 2004). Based on these findings, it is therefore plausible to summarize that Kenyan University students who are used to condensing their text messages will also apply this condensing to their written assignments.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the above findings the study concludes that:

1) There is pervasive use of SMS texting among Kenyan university students.
2) The most used SMS styles of communication styles among university students are: Code mixing, non-conventional spelling, alphanumeric, deletion of middle letters, emotions, G-clipping, homophones and acronyms.
3) The SMS messaging styles of communication are fast becoming a universal phenomenon among university students and are unconsciously being transferred to most formal writing situations.
4) Majority of lectures viewed SMS texting as having a negative influence on the written language skills of university students. The influence was perceived as occurring in the learners’ spelling, punctuation, and syntactical formation.
5. RECOMMENDATION

In view of the observations made in this paper, the following recommendations are made so as to achieve communicative competence in written skills:

1) Students should not rely on SMS texting as the only mode of communication that is easier and quicker to use but should realize its negative effects on their writing skills and eventually on their academic work.

2) Students should adhere to the practice of using correct grammatical conventions when writing their SMS texts.

3) They should imbibe the practice of writing formal letters and essays adhering to grammatical conventions.

4) They should be conscious of their writing so as to separate informal and formal writing and not to use text features in their formal academic work.

5) Lecturers should emphasize the avoidance of text messaging among students by organizing public enlightenment lectures telling them the educational implications of such usages. They should also give assignments and assess student’s work properly.

REFERENCES


