

THE IMPACT OF SHORT MESSAGE SERVICE (SMS) LANGUAGE ON LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY OF LEARNERS AND THE SMS DICTIONARIES: A CHALLENGE FOR EDUCATORS AND LEXICOGRAPHERS

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ABSTRACT

The language is achieving new colours and tones in the world in which we live. Technology has become the buzzword in communication circles. The requirements in language versatility, which are universally understood, are overcome by the new short message service (SMS) language that is emerging rapidly. The cellphones that are conveniently used for social communication and in business transactions are invaluable helpful but can equally be extremely detrimental to the learning and development process of learners of other languages especially foreign language learning. The short message service (SMS) language that is used by cellphone users and the advertising industry has also been discovered to be abundantly used by the learners in their written work. This discovery has prompted one to investigate the impact of this prevalent use, for it is believed that the SMS language is influencing the language proficiency of learners in a negative way.

The purpose of this paper is to explicate how the SMS language affects the language proficiency of learners, and the role dictionaries can play in the improvement of learners' language proficiency.

KEYWORDS

Language, Technology, Cellphone, Short Message Service (Sms), Sms Language, Language Proficiency, Communication, Dictionary, Lexicographers, Learners, Educators, Advertising, Metalexigraphy

1. INTRODUCTION

Technology plays a very important role in communication today. The cellphone is one of the most effective, convenient and widely used technological instruments used for communication globally. It uses a communication facility known as the short message service (SMS) which is relatively cheaper both in terms of time and money spent during the process of communication. One uses fewer and shorter words compared to direct communication over the cellphone.

Notwithstanding the myriad benefits provided by the SMS in enhancing communication and improving global business generally, the SMS has been found to be of detrimental effect on the language proficiency of learners. Learners use it as if it is an officially accepted and standard language. They mix it with the standard language they learn at school, especially the English language and consequently commit numerous errors ranging from incorrect spelling to ungrammatical sentence constructions.

The aim of this paper is firstly, to show how the SMS influences the learners' English language proficiency. Secondly, to highlight the challenge the SMS language is posing to both educators in their

endeavour to help learners master the English language, and the lexicographers, of the need to develop an SMS dictionary.

Evidence of the influence of the SMS language on learners' language proficiency especially in English is realised in the learners' official written work such as tests, assignments and reports. The use of this SMS language affects the learners' performance since it does not observe grammatical and syntactic rules of a standard English language. It is neither an official nor a standard language.

An example from a test script of a tertiary learner registered for a module in Communication reads:

*"if we do get the money how **shud** it be used?"*

The learner used 'SHUD' instead of 'SHOULD'. The pronunciation of these two words is the same, and it is advantageous to use the first spelling from an SMS message, because it saves space and time. It is even simpler to write because it is spelled like it is spoken. This simplified spelling would also affect words like 'WOULD and COULD'. Nevertheless, the simplified spelling is not acceptable according to the English grammar rules. Ultimately the learner becomes a victim of the SMS language in the hands of the educators as he is punished for wrong spelling.

2. SHORT MESSAGE SERVICE (SMS)

The Short Message Service (SMS) is a service that a cellphone service provider provides to his clients for ease of communication. Cellphone users can communicate with one another using symbols and or abbreviated form of words and sentences to save space, time and money.

The following table resembles the SMS dictionary that Vodacom provides to its clients when one purchases a cellphone.

Table 1. Vodacom SMS dictionary

WORDS IN FULL	ABBREVIATIONS OR SMS LANGUAGE
As far as I remember	AFAIR
Love	LUV
Thanks	THNX
Today	2day
Before	B4
Have a nice day	HAND
see you	C U
SWYP	So what's your problem?
At	@
Tears in my eyes	TIME
Sealed with a kiss	SWAK
Keep it simple, stupid	KISS
Such a laugh	SAL
At a moment	ATM
Parents are watching	PAW
Random act of kindness	RAK
Please reply	RSVP
Second	SEC
You're on your own	YOYO
As soon as possible	ASAP
Hugs and kisses	HAK

Some of the above SMS words are semantically confusing because of their dual meanings, that is, they have both the conventional meaning and the SMS meaning. This situation arises where the SMS word has the same spelling as that of the English or the Afrikaans word. For example,

- (a) **Hand** (English) – part of your body at the end of your arms (Collins Cobuild English Dictionary)
- (b) **Hand** (SMS) – have a nice day
- (c) **ATM** (English) - automated teller machine

- (d) **ATM** (SMS) – at the moment
- (e) **Swak** (Afrikaans) – weakness, weak (Pharos Bilingual Dictionary)
- (f) **Swak** (SMS) – sealed with a kiss
- (g) **Rak** (Afrikaans) – rack, shelf (Pharos Bilingual Dictionary)
- (h) **Rak** (SMS) – random act of kindness

More English and Afrikaans examples appear in the tables below.

Some words like the SMS word 'AFAIR' meaning "as far as I remember" do not have the same spelling as the English word but may be mistaken for the misspelled English word 'AFFAIR' which means "an event or situation; a sexual relationship" thereby creating confusion of meaning.

There are abbreviations from the SMS glossary which are acceptable English words and Afrikaans words, which are explained differently from the SMS glossary in the above Table. Such words can also confuse the learners.

The actual meanings are as follows:

English: The meanings will be provided from Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners. [2002]

Table 2. English meanings of the SMS words

HAND	-SMS: Have a nice day. - <i>the part of your body at the end of each arm that you use for picking up and holding things</i> - <i>help</i>
TIME	-SMS: Tears in my eyes - <i>quality clock measures</i> - <i>period</i>
KISS	-SMS: Keep it simple, stupid - <i>to touch someone with your lips because you love them or have sexual feeling for them</i>
ATM	- SMS: At a moment - <i>automated teller machine</i>
PAW	- Parents are watching - <i>the foot of some animals such as a cats, dogs, and bears</i> - <i>informal 'a person's hand'</i>
YOYO	-SMS: You're on your own - <i>a toy consisting of a round plastic or wooden object on the end of a string that you can make rise and fall by tying the string to your finger and moving your hand up and down</i>

Afrikaans - English equivalents will be provided from Bosman et.al. (2003) Bilingual Dictionary.

Table 3. Afrikaans – English equivalents from Bosman et.al. (2003) Bilingual dictionary

HAK	SMS: Hugs and kisses - <i>heel</i>
SWAK	SMS: Sealed with a kiss - <i>weakness, weak</i>
SAL	SMS: Such a laugh - <i>shall</i>
RAK	SMS: Random act of kindness - <i>shelf</i> - <i>rack</i>

Every cloud has a silver lining. The following are the abbreviations which are not tempered with.

Table 4. Abbreviations not tempered with.

RSVP	-SMS: Please reply - <i>please reply</i>
SEC	-SMS: Second - <i>second</i>
ASAP	- SMS: As soon as possible - <i>as soon as possible</i>
ESP	- SMS: Especially - <i>Especially</i>

Likewise, the frequently used SMS word “LUV” for “Love” which appears many times on the television screens especially during “phone-in” and “send your SMS” programmes confuses learners to the extent that they may believe that both spellings are correct. This kind of language therefore hampers learners’ language proficiency, in particular, grammatical and spelling skills especially in English. For example, the following quotation was recorded from the programme ‘PLAY TV’ on SABC3 on Monday, 12 July 2003, at 15:30, in which viewers were asked to phone-in or SMS a greetings message for a prize. The SMS messages appeared on TV as supplementary information. The message read:

“we luv u 2”

The learners love watching the TV. They take the language used in the media as acceptable, official and standard especially that this language is being watched and used nationally, and in some cases internationally. Besides appearing on our national television screens, the SMS language is also used abundantly on cards and artifacts that are used as memorabilia for the celebration of popular days marking social events such as Mother’s Day, Father’s Day and Valentine’s Day. One such message reads:

I LOVE MY MOM.

The word ‘love’ is replaced with a symbol of a red heart.

The SMS language has an influence even on the academics in the sense that they also use it when they write official documents such as circulars and memoranda. They regard it as easy and convenient to use as it saves time, space and it is less expensive to implement. The sad part of this practice is that learners read those circulars and believe that the language used is acceptable because it is also used by the educators. An example of such circulars from one tertiary institution reads:

To: All lecturers
From: HOD-Applied Languages
Date: 13 October 2003
REMINDER
SPEECH AND POSTER ELIMINATIONS
WHEN? 15 OCTOBER 2003
TIME? 9:15-11:00
WHERE? LF119
C U THERE!

MH DOLO (HOD)

Educators should lead by example. How would an educator convince a learner that it is wrong to write c u there in a formal school context when such language is used by the head of a department of applied languages who is supposed to be the expert in the field?

3. ADVERTISING

Erasmus-Kritzinger et.al. (2000:103) define “advertising” as:

a controlled, non-personal outward communication regarding a need-satisfying product, service or idea which an identifiable sponsor addresses to a specific target audience or target market for the purpose of informing and/or reminding it and/or persuading it to take the appropriate action.”

SMS language is also affecting the language of advertising. In advertising, short sentences are preferred as they tend to be most appealing and they save space and money. Dr Peter J D’Adamo and Catherine Whitney market their book in this manner:

**the individualised diet solution to staying healthy,
living longer and achieving your ideal weight
EAT RIGHT
4
YOUR TYPE**

Theo and Cutter (1971:16) affirm the notion that the SMS language is appealing and evocative to the reader in this manner:

Small words are gay. And they can catch large thoughts and hold them up to see, like rare stone in rings of gold, or joy in the eyes of a child. Some make you feel, as well as see: the cold deep dark of night, the hot salt sting of tears.

Indeed, some authors use the SMS language to create book titles that would appeal to and draw the attention of readers. One such title of a book about HIV/AIDS written by Conlon et. al. (2004) reads:

How 2 b Aids Aware

It would be difficult for a person who is not conversant with the SMS language to read the above title of the book. The SMS language is therefore not sympathetic to the learning process of young and even adult learners of English as a second language since it does not observe grammatical and syntactic rules of English language usage.

4. LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

Language researchers acknowledge that there is no consensus yet on the definition of language proficiency (Vecchio and Guerrero, 1995; Cummins, 1984; Oller and Damico, 1991). Cummins (1984) further states that some researchers indicate that language proficiency consist of 64 language components whereas Oller and Damico (1991) contend that “the nature and specification of the elements of language proficiency have not been determined” yet.

Valdés and Figueroa (1994) as quoted by Vecchio and Guerrero (1995) explain language proficiency in this manner:

...what it means to know a language goes beyond simplistic views of good pronunciation, “correct” grammar, and even mastery of rules of politeness. Knowing a language and knowing how to use a language involves mastery and control of a large number of interdependent components and elements that interact with one another and that are affected by the nature of the situation in which communication takes place. (p. 34)

The above dilemma on the exact language proficiency definition notwithstanding, most language researchers including the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) (1992) agree that language

proficiency could be assessed in at least four modalities or language skills, namely, reading, listening, writing and speaking. CCSSO elaborates further on these modalities in this manner:

1. *Reading* – the ability to comprehend and interpret text at the age and grade-appropriate level.
2. *Listening* – the ability to understand the language of the teacher and instruction, comprehend and extract information, and follow the instructional discourse through which teachers provide information.
3. *Writing* – the ability to produce written text with content and format fulfilling classroom assignments at the age and grade-appropriate level.
4. *Speaking* – the ability to use oral language appropriately and effectively in learning activities (such as peer tutoring, collaborative learning activities, and question/answer sessions) within the classroom and in social interactions within the school. (1992, p 7)

Language proficiency therefore entails the ability to listen, speak, read and write with comprehension observing grammatical, syntactical as well as semantic rules governing that language. These basic language skills cannot all be learnt effectively and efficiently when using the SMS language. For example if a learner encounters a problem of understanding the meaning of an SMS word which appears in an SMS text and the language of advertising, he will not find the meaning of the word anywhere as this language is not documented in general standard dictionaries of English language which are supposed to be sources of help. It is however acknowledged that some cellphone service providers like Vodacom have limited SMS glossaries available to their clients although not all cellphone users have access to those glossaries.

4.1 Indicators of Language Proficiency

Indicators of language proficiency are as many and varied as definitions of language proficiency are. Nonetheless, many language researchers would agree on the following indicators since they interface with the four basic modalities of language proficiency mentioned in the preceding paragraph:

- ❖ Skills to express oneself eloquently through writing and speaking.
- ❖ Skills to listen and read with comprehension.
- ❖ Skills and ability to use words appropriately in context.
- ❖ Ability to communicate in highly predictable common daily situations with previously learnt words.
- ❖ Ability to combine learnt elements of language creatively.
- ❖ Ability to initiate, sustain and close basic communication tasks.
- ❖ Ability to ask and answer questions in discrete sentences and strings of sentences on topics.
- ❖ Ability to converse fluently and in a clearly participative fashion.
- ❖ Ability to participate effectively in both formal and informal conversations, practical, social, professional and abstract topics.

5. How the SMS Language affects Language Proficiency of Learners

Mostly, the SMS language affects two aspects of language proficiency stated above, namely, skills to express oneself eloquently through writing and skills and ability to use words appropriately in context.

Learners have a tendency of using SMS language as if it were a standard language when they write tests, assignments and reports. They are therefore unable to differentiate the context and situation appropriate for the use of the SMS language. Here follow some examples from the scripts of learners registered for a Communication course at a tertiary institution:

Script 1. “*Checkers wants 2 domestic workers for Saturdays and Sundays, those people must have two years experience*”.

Script 2. “*if we get the money how **shud** it be used?*”

Script 3. "*Choosing a present for a frein can be **difficult***"

*"- **Finaly**, once you have bought the gift, you can ask the Shop assistant to wrap it for you".*

Script 4. "***u** must be at a high level of education, so that **u** know what to say.*"

In all the above examples, the learners have failed to determine the context, which is the school, that the SMS language cannot be used in a formal context as if it was a standard language. Another problem arising from the use of the SMS language is that learners do not only mix words and numbers like writing 2 instead of two but they also learn wrong spelling of words. For them shud, difficult, finaly and u are correct since they see and read these words everyday on their cellphones, television, billboards, books, newspapers and circulars from their teachers.

6. DICTIONARY USAGE

Webster's Third International Dictionary defines the word 'dictionary' in this manner:

It is a reference book containing words which are alphabetically arranged along with information about their forms, pronunciations, functions, etymologies, meanings and syntactical and idiomatic uses.

(1986:627).

Dictionaries are used for different reasons and purposes. Supporting this view, Hartmann (1989) mentions that a study conducted in America by Barnhart (1962) in an attempt to determine the relative importance of various information categories in American desk dictionaries, came up with the following rank-scale indicating in order of importance the purpose for which American students used dictionaries for. The survey was regarded as probably the first large-scale user survey ever attempted. Barnhart distributed questionnaires to teachers at 99 colleges in 27 of the United States to gather data on how 56,000 students rated six types of information in 'college dictionaries' available at the time (circa 1955).

The following rank-scale emerged:

1. Meaning,
2. Spelling,
3. Pronunciation,
4. Synonyms,
5. Usage notes,
6. Etymology.

A dictionary as an authority and also an aid for foreign language learning should be able to unlock the problems learners experience when reading, writing, speaking and listening. Indeed, depending on the type and purpose of such dictionary, a good dictionary should be able to provide users with some of the above information. For example a dictionary for foreign language learning should be able to correct the spelling, syntactic structure, pronunciation and usage of words within a syntactic context. The general dictionary cannot help the SMS language user since the SMS language does not conform to the accepted spelling, grammatical and syntactic rules of the English language. For example, the word "before" is spelled "B4" in SMS language. English grammatical rules prescribe that a word should consist of consonants and vowels and not consonants and numerals.

A linguistic dictionary is, above all, a means of 'First Aid' to fill the gaps that exist in our language competence as it constitutes a source for individual linguistic enrichment. Learners consult a dictionary with an aim of building up a vaster linguistic competence. Learners can improve their language proficiency by recognising the existence of dictionaries and using them effectively and efficiently.

The absence of dictionaries of SMS language deprives learners and the general users of the SMS language, of the opportunity to look for meanings of words and to expand their SMS language vocabulary.

7. THE SMS DICTIONARIES

There are no SMS dictionaries yet, except for the glossary provided by some cellphone service providers such as Vodacom. A challenge for both educators and lexicographers is that SMS language is here to stay and we should deal with it. The question is HOW? Is it necessary to introduce SMS dictionaries and make them available to educators to help evaluate the learners' competency in that language? Or should the educators use the available glossaries from Vodacom as authorities for language learning like any other dictionaries? A challenge to lexicographers is whether or not they should begin to record the SMS language in a form of dictionary. We should be mindful of the fact that one of the major tasks of lexicographers is to record language as it is used in everyday life.

8. CONCLUSION

This paper has highlighted the impact of SMS language on the language proficiency of learners. The SMS language does not conform to grammatical or syntactic rules of the English language, nor does it conform to spelling rules. It has been indicated that the English language proficiency of the learners is negatively affected by learners' exposure to the SMS language both through the print and the electronic media.

Lexicographers record language as it is frequently used by the people and store it in the form of a corpus, and thereafter record it in dictionaries. This new paradigm is seen as a breakthrough in meta-lexicography from the traditional approach of describing what should be recorded in a dictionary. If lexicographers were to advance this position, they should be thinking of how the SMS language can interface with the spoken language since it is frequently used by the public in their daily conversations.

Finally a challenge to lexicographers is whether they should begin to record this SMS language as it forms part of our daily language use and include it in their dictionaries or they should simply ignore it as an unofficial lingo. For educators, should they accept the SMS language as one of the languages that one can communicate with or should it be discouraged at all costs?

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