

The ‘SMS’ Style of Communication: Effect on Language and Communicative Skills of students of a Ghanaian University

William Kodom Gyasi
University of Cape Coast
Dept. of Communication Studies
Cape Coast –Ghana

Abstract—*This paper examines the use of SMS style of communication among Ghanaian University students and the effect this practice has on their linguistic competence. The basic design used in this study was descriptive survey. The subjects of the study comprised first year students of the Department of English, University of Cape Coast, Ghana. The sample of the study comprised 110 students from a population of 368 students. The instruments used were written and oral tests developed and implemented by the researcher. The study revealed that students who practice SMS style of communication in their day-to-day communication improved their linguistic competence.*

Keywords: Language, Messaging, Texting, Style, Communication, Ghana, Mobile device

1. INTRODUCTION

Several studies have shown that language is unique to man. In his book, *Language: The Basic*, Trask (1999) stated: “human language is based on a dual code, where a finite number of meaningless elements (e.g. sounds, letters or gestures) can be combined to form units of meaning (words and sentences)...and can only be acquired through social interaction.” Presently, social interaction is being seriously affected by the advent of information technology. Supporting this view, Grinter and Eldridge (2001); Rheingold (2003) affirms that the “ubiquitous mobile phones technology is rapidly changing the way we communicate, interact in the physical world, and coordinate our social activities.”

It is noteworthy that the introduction of mobile cellular phones in Ghana brought with it several features essential for communication. Cell phones and smart phones are used for both sending text messages and, conversation, however it should be noted that many of the millions of messages exchanged between these high-tech devices are, not in the form of speech, but in the form of the written word. Instead of speaking into the handset, a growing number of mobile-phone users—especially youths between the ages of 18 and 24—are using a facility called the Short Message Service (SMS). This service allows them, at relatively little expense, to type and send brief messages to each other. Because communicating in this way requires typing a message on the phone’s tiny keypad, SMS devotees use an abbreviated form of language that combines letters and numbers to make word sounds. Due to the ubiquity, terse and fast mode 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 Ghana.

Before the advent of computer, language use in Ghanaian communities (mostly bilingual) was restricted to the context of speech. However, with the introduction of computer mediated styles of communication in the mid-1990’, several individuals are inclined to write than speak. This mode of communication was well received by Ghanaians because according to CIA World Factbook (2012), about 21.4 million Ghanaians are mobile phones subscribers, in effect; over 80% of the citizenry are cell phones users. Providing a veritable platform for communication is the SMS system of communications. Despite the inconvenience of composing and typing a message as opposed to speaking with the recipient, worldwide, “more than 360 billion text messages are sent annually, reports the International Herald Tribune. That’s roughly one billion short messages each day.” (cited in Awake! July 8, 2005). The predominance of SMS style usage among phone subscribers in general and youth (including university students) in particular actuated the desire of the researcher to investigate the resultant effect on students in their academic and communicative endeavors. It would be pleasing therefore to investigate issues concerning the ‘SMS’ style of communication and its effect on language and communicative skills of the first year students at the English department of the University of Cape Coast, Ghana.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

2.1 Language, Style and Communication

Intertwined and interdependent are the three concepts listed above because human ideas, feelings, emotions, intentions and interactions are expressed through these mediums. The importance of language cannot be overemphasized because it is regarded as the source of human life and power. In fact, possession of language enables the individual to have human essence, the distinctive qualities of mind that are unique to man (Chomsky, in Fromkin et al. 2003:2). Also, according to Peng (2005) language is behavior which utilizes body parts; the vocal apparatus and the auditory system for oral language; the brachial apparatus and the visual system for sign language... such body parts are controlled by none other than the brain for their functions". In another vein, Nordquist (2006) sees language as a human system of communication that uses arbitrary signals, such as voice sounds, gestures, or written symbols. The obvious connections between the two definitions regarding the characteristics of language are stated below:

- a. Language is conventionally used by humans
- b. Language defines people's habits and behavior
- c. Language is a means of communication
- d. Language operates in a planned system

In terms of the conventional usage of language by humans, I mean it is generally accepted to be used as a form of communication in particular community, having a code of law enforced by necessary regulatory body. Language defines people's habits and behavior in the sense that as soon as one embraces a particular language the individual forms habits relating to that language which cannot be easily given up. Such habit once formed becomes a self identity. In language behavior voice is used, this starts from a child's first cry, hence, language acquisition is primarily oral (speech), which is a stepping stone to writing skills. Language is a means of communication because through this medium we convey pertinent information, ideas and thoughts to others. Language enables us to actualize our essence as the concomitant result of communicating with others. Finally, referring to language as operating in a planned system means that it has some internal plans or principles governing its use. These principles enable a user to fasten acquired knowledge in a systematic way, small units of sounds into larger ones and be able to assign meanings to them. By style we are referring to the mode of expression which could be written or oral. In his book, *Style: The Problem and its Solution*, Gray (1969) provided a summary of various scholars perception of style. For example, to the psychologist, style is a form of behavior, a rhetoric sees style as the speaker, while a critic conceive style as individuality. A philosopher considers style as an implicit speaker, though the linguist defines it as formal structures in function". A notable linguist, Trask (1997:201) however, defines style as "any particular and somewhat distinctive way of using language". Style can also be referred to as "a system of interrelated language means which serves a definite aim in communication" (Galperin 1977:33). Giving his opinion on the definition of style, Crystal (1987) refers to it as "a situationally distinctive use of language". The connecting ring within this definition, is that style reflects individual or group, beliefs and socio-cultural orientation. Style also relates to language and interprets the individuals or groups language habit which may make the users unique.

Several attempts have been made to describe, predict, and understand communicative phenomena both explicitly and implicitly in literatures for use by scholars and practitioners. According to Nordquist (2006), it refers to the process of sending and receiving messages through verbal or non-verbal means – speech (oral communication), writing (written communication), signs, signals, or behavior. However, McLaughlin (2006:3) defines it from a theoretical perspective as "a process of sending and receiving messages that serve to transmit information between person or groups." In effect, when someone successfully transmits a message that is understood by someone else, communication has occurred. Developing his point from a linguistic framework, McLaughlin (2006:3) further defines communication as "a rule-based mental system of language codes for expressing and understanding thought, feelings, and ideas". By codes he meant a system of rules for arranging arbitrary symbols in an orderly, predictable manner that allows anyone who also knows the code to interpret the meaning.

The obvious conclusion from the definitions stated above, is that communication is a two-way, continuous process which breaks down when either the sender or receiver fails to do what people use language to do. This means according to Motley (1990), communication process must fulfill the following: firstly it is characterized by information transfer, processing takes place in communication systems, both sender and the receiver are actively involved in a communication system and the quality of communication varies. This suggests that the participants should be knowledgeable in the language development and change so as to achieve fidelity in line with the conception of varying situations individuals interact. Bloor and Bloor (2004:228) succinctly illuminate the varied condition in which we communicate, when they stated: "since language is a human social phenomenon, it develops and changes as people use it

for social purposes”. In other words, to a large extent, our understanding of the world and activities we involve ourselves in depend on language. On this basis, for an interlocutor to communicate effectively, attainment of both linguistic and communicative competence in a specific language used in his environment such that he could express intelligible thoughts or ideas through the appropriate language and in the suitable context is primarily important. At this juncture, the study will focus and thoroughly examine the Ghanaian use of the English language and its concomitant problems.

2.2 English Language in Ghana

Undoubtedly, colonization is an important factor responsible for bilingualism in Ghana. Of the many languages spoken in the country, English has historically enjoyed pre-eminence in the Ghanaian society. This dominance in the linguistic ecology of Ghana is as a result of the desire of the British to give a sense of cohesion to the separate political units they had annexed. Hence, English was imposed as the official language of the Crown Colony (Albakry & Ofori, 2011). As Boadi (1971) puts it, the English language was perceived “as a unifying language for the distinct ethnic and linguistic groups [the British administration] had colonized and was administering” (p.17).

In the pursuance of their policy of political integration, the British introduced English to Ghana through education, which explains the later association between the classroom and facility in the country’s official language (Nartey 1982; Dakubu 2000). As Adjaye (2005) points out, “in Ghana ‘being educated’ means being literate and having the ability to speak English” (p.10). Obeng (1997) also argues that there is such a close connection between formal education and English in that the number of English speakers directly depends on the extent of education. Similarly, Mazrui (1966) contends that, “although English did have a status independent of its role as a vehicle of literacy, there is no doubt that a connection did exist between the prestige of the English language and the prestige of education at large” (p.18), as one’s ability to speak the language has consistently been used as a measure of one’s level of education. Finally, Nartey (1982) observes that because of the close connection between English and education, “all educated Ghanaians are bilingual in English and at least one Ghanaian language” (p.183).

Today in Ghana, the dominance of the English language cannot be over-emphasized, as it is the only language used in formal contexts of national life, including government business, the judiciary, the legislature, and education (Gyasi 1990; Bamiro 1997).

2.3 The Problems

According to Ghana’s Official webpage, (<http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/tribes/languages.php>), the Ghanaian government sponsors nine indigenous languages and recognizes about twenty-eight other indigenous ones. This multiplicity of native languages in Ghana actually created a problem of understanding in communication among the different ethnic groups. After the British occupation, it became a problem for Ghanaians to adopt any of the native languages as their official language. English came as a ‘panacea’ to this urgent but divisive language difficulty, hence, its adoption as the country’s lingua franca and official language. As soon as English language became the L2 (second language) Ghanaians reshaped it with a distinctive flavor to suit their experiences, Dako (2002) referred to such flavouring as Ghanaianism. In her book, *Ghanaianism: A glossary*, she compiled over 2500 Ghanaianism detailing an extensive borrowings of indigenous lexical items in English in Ghana, and it reveals numerous lexical creations and uses of English words that are distinctive to English use in Ghana. The glossary comprises of systematic notion of Ghanaian vocabulary in written English over a ten year period. Presently, due to the multiplicity of languages and the relatively underdeveloped condition of the nine indigenous languages and the Ghanaian attitude that proficient use of the English language meant prestige, honour and food on the table, the English language has gained supremacy over indigenous languages and it is used for official purposes, education, commerce, administration, the media and for national and international communications. This paper will now examine the SMS style of communication and its implication.

2.4 The SMS Style of Communication and its Effect

As stated earlier, language is about people’s habits and behavior and such habits once formed are entrenched in the individual. This is applicable to the short messaging habit. Statistic presented earlier, demonstrated many youth are in the habit of text messaging; this includes students in secondary and especially tertiary institutions in Ghana. Most students in the universities had formed the habit of using text messages frequently in their communications due to the fact that it is cheap, quick, does not adhere to the rules of English grammar, more convenient, used in establishing new and oiling old relationships, also allows for creativity, etc. However, some students are reluctant and not actively involved in ‘SMS’ style of communication perhaps due to being too busy with their school work or not being technologically oriented.

3. METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

The descriptive research design was used for the study. The choice of this research design was informed by its appropriateness and suitability. This is because according to Babbie (2001) it is useful “for generalizing from a sample to a population so that inferences can be made about the characteristics, attributes or behavior of the population.” Also, it

assisted the researcher to observe, describe and document aspects of the study as they naturally occur so as to report the way things are.

The population of this study consisted of the total number of first year students of the Department of English in the University of Cape Coast (368). A sample size of 110 students was used for the study. The selection of 110 students was done based on Neuman’s criteria for determining the sample size for a given population that is less than 1000. He recommended 30% of the population. Using the proportional stratified sampling technique the researcher selected 110 students. The researcher developed a sampling frame which consisted of an alphabetical list of names of each student. The names listed in the sampling frame were substituted with numbered pieces of paper so that each paper corresponded to a name of a student. The papers were put in a container and mixed thoroughly and were randomly removed one by one without replacement. The number of any selected paper was registered to correspond to a name of a student. This process continued until the required number of students was reached. This method of selection helped the researcher to generalize over the entire population because the sample selected possess desirable characteristics as well as the information needed for the study (McMillan (1996). The sampled students were divided into two groups: “SMS Users” and “Non SMS Users. Those who are frequent users of SMS were grouped as “SMS User” those not using SMS are grouped as “Non-SMS Users”. The grouping was based on the result of the oral test.

The instruments for the study were two test items. The researcher involved the sampled students in a “dialogue” based on real-life issues. After the dialogue, each student was given a grade (out of 20) for his performance on the interview. The students were also required to respond to a test prepared by the researcher on SMS.

The validity and reliability of the two instruments were constructively criticized and approved by a number of seasoned linguists (4 linguists). Analysis was done by employing an independent sample t-test to find the concomitant effect of practicing SMS style on students’ communicative skills.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The researcher calculated the means and standard deviations for both the SMS and Non-SMS groups at a significant difference of ≤ 0.05 . The mean for the SMS style students is found to be (15.6) while the means for Non-SMS style students was found to be (13.0). The standard deviation of the SMS style students is (2.09) while the standard deviation of the Non-SMS style is (3.25) as shown in Table A1 below

Table A1: Means and standard deviations of the two groups on the written text

Group	N	Mean	St. Deviation
SMS Users	55	15.60	2.09
Non-SMS Users	55	13.00	3.25

n=55. $p \leq 0.05$

Source: Field Survey Data, 2012.

The researcher employed independent sample t-test to find if there are statistical significant differences between the mean scores ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) of the two groups. Table A2 below clearly shows that there is a statistically significant differences between the means scores of the two groups ($\alpha \leq 0.01$) which is less than ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) in favor of the students who practiced English SMS.

Table A2: T-test independent sample results for written text

Group	T	Df	Sig.
SMS Users	4.99	108.00	0.05
Non-SMS Users	4.99	92.08	0.05

n=55. $p \leq 0.05$

Source: Field Survey Data, 2012.

II. Results Related to Dialogue Test:

The researcher also calculated the means and standard deviations for both the SMS and Non-SMS groups at a significant difference of ≤ 0.05 . It was found that the mean scores of the students who practice the SMS style is (15.49)

and Non-SMS style students is (13.00) and the standard deviation of the SMS group is (2.06) and (3.25) for the Non-SMS group as shown in (Table A3) below.

Table A3: Means and standard deviations of the two groups on the oral text

Group	N	Mean	St. Deviation
SMS User	55	15.49	2.06
Non-SMS User	55	13.00	3.24

n=55. p≤0.05

Source: Field Survey Data, 2012.

Independent sample t-test was also used to find if there is a statistically significant difference ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) between the means of the two groups. The significance was found to be ($\alpha \leq 0.01$) which is less than (0.05) in favour of the students who practice the SMS style as shown in (Table A4) below.

Table A4: T-test independent sample results for oral test

Group	T	Df	Sig.
SMS Users	4.80	108.00	0.01
Non-SMS Users	4.80	91.45	0.01

n=55. p≤0.05

Source: Field Survey Data, 2012.

The results clearly demonstrate that the students in the habit of using the SMS style of communication had scores much higher than that of the students who are less prone to using the SMS style of communication. This may be due to the following points:

- a. Students in the habit of using the SMS style of communicating with friends and relatives use English more frequently than their counterparts, the Non SMS style students. This fact is well supported and substantiated by Hoogvliet (2009) who states that new media pushes writing to new levels. Of course it is important to teach in academic writing, together with new media, student academic writing improves, by the simple fact that practice makes perfect.
- b. Also, SMS style students can create and find more ideas than those who do not practice the SMS style of communication.
- c. “SMS Users” students can spell English more correctly. In connection with proficiency in English spelling, Wood (2010) states that children who text regularly may be better spellers and readers. Also, certain parents and teachers, who believe that text messages can often destroy the ability of a child to write properly, will have to rethink again. Most of us were surprised to learn that not only was the association strong but that textism use was actually driving the development of phonological awareness and reading skills in children, texting also appears to be a valuable form of contact with written English for many children. This enables them to practice reading and spelling on daily basis. Children’s reading ability and communicative skills is strongly determined by exposure to written language and it is another platform for children to encounter words and play around with spelling and word choice.
- d. Students in the habit of using the SMS style are more confident when writing than those Non-SMS students.
- e. SMS user students can pronounce English more accurately. Coughlan (2010) posits that pupils who regularly use text language – with all its mutations of phonetic spelling and abbreviations – also appear to be developing valuable communicative skills in the more formal use of English.
- f. SMS Users students have the ability to organize their ideas and text precisely.

The major findings in this study are highly consistent with many of the results of some previous studies on the significant and positive effect of regularity in the use of SMS style of communication on language skills. This includes Brown, Owens, Eason, and Lader, (2003), Wallace (2003), Tinto (2004), Owen (2005), Librero, Lambert (2007), Al.Qomoul (2011).

5. CONCLUSION

The study has explicitly explicated the impact of one of the unique features of mobile phones – Short Message Service (SMS). Major findings of the study revealed the following:

- a. Students practicing the SMS style of communication shows more confidence in using English in writing and speaking than students who are not conversant with this mode of communication

- b. The SMS style students have the ability to express themselves in several real-life situations better than those who are not familiar with the SMS style of communication.
- c. By consistently texting to express oneself, the SMS style students have over time developed valuable writing and speaking skills crucial to succeeding in the academic arena.

Undoubtedly, the introduction and facilitation of the mobile phone technology with its unique feature – Short Message Service (SMS) to university campuses and the world in general is a great leap in technological, phonological, linguistic and communication breakthroughs.

5.1 Recommendations

In view of the findings of this study, the researcher recommends the following:

Texting is unlimited, several people enjoy texting better than talking, hence it would be appropriate to encourage both the first year and other university students who are still reluctant to utilize this avenue of communication to do so. Students not yet in the habit of texting regularly should be helped to consider the cost, speed and quality of staying in touch with friends, families and colleagues with traveling or sending a courier because according to Roos (2012), while it takes 90 minutes for the average person to respond to an email, it takes **90 seconds** for the average person to respond to a text message.

Finally, in view of SMS privacy and inherent advantage of helping users to develop valuable communicative skills, the researcher recommends that those who are afraid of embracing this new and ubiquitous style in communication repertoire should check it out because it offers a platform for communication that is incredibly practical, reliable and affordable.

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