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**Impact of Social Media Language on Writings of The Undergraduates of
University of Nigeria, Nsukka**

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Abstract

This paper investigated the impact of social media language on writings of the undergraduates of University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The aim of this paper was to identify the extent to which SMS language has influenced the writings of undergraduates. Also, to confirm or refute the arguments and counter-arguments that had raised dust in the academics over the presupposed negative effects of this form of media discourse on students' academic writings. This study draws insights from Corder's Error Analysis. The corpus of this study was gotten from an eight-item-questionnaire and confirmatory essay test administered to forty students selected at random. Data elicited from the questionnaires were

analyzed quantitatively using the simple percentage and represented in bar charts and lines respectively; while the students' essays were scanned for linguistic features of SMS. The findings revealed that students' use of SMS is pervasive but it does not significantly impact writings negatively. The researchers, therefore, concluded that SMS language does not pose major threats to students' formal writings. Thus, they suggested that users of SMS should try as much as they could to always check their works carefully in order to avoid committing errors in formal writings.

Key Words: Error Analysis, impact, linguistic features, social media language, and writing.

Introduction

The pervasiveness of texting among the Nigerian university students is a matter of serious concern. As Cullington (2005) and Yousaf and Ahmad (2013) observed, these students are so obsessed with typing on smart phones, laptops and other portable devices in the name of browsing the internet or chatting with friends and family online. While some Nigerians had praised the development because it facilitates and encourages discreetness in communication; others frown seriously at it because it poses threats to students' literacy skills.

Crystal (2008) argued that the language of social media or what he technically refers as "textism" does not in any way constitute threats to students' academic writings. To him, "textism" is an evolving variety of language in its own right. This is because the linguistic property of the language is distinct from other language varieties; therefore, a bi-language user should be able to tell the difference. Mohammad (2011) agreed that texting does not pose significant problems to students' written communication. Even though he consents that there are few instances where students deploy textisms in writing but they are not sufficient enough to be called a problem. In a similar way, Agbedo (2015, p. 44) asserted that Internet Linguistics (social media language) is an "evolving subfield of Linguistics which studies new language styles and forms that have arisen under the influence of the internet and other web-mediated platforms. Similarly, Otagburuagu, Obah and Ogenyi (2010) establish that the language of text messaging is a different variety of English. According to them, code switching, code mixing, lexical contractions, neologisms and abbreviations are common linguistic features of text messaging. However, Agbedo and Otaburuagu et al. did not state whether textisms have influence on the writings of students or not. On the contrary, Dansieh (2011) and Okafor (2014) attributed morphological and syntactic errors committed in academic writings to the students' over exposure to social media content. They base their argument on the resultant negative effects of language contact. They strongly believed that internet language is addictive in nature and users are capable of transferring the linguistic idiosyncrasies of this media discourse in formal writings. In the mind of Faleye (as cited in Bankole & Ogunrinde 2017), language teaching is clearly entering a new and uncharted phase as a result of Electronic English. Following Faleye's line of argument, Bankole and Ogunrinde (2017) concluded that many times, more than half of the text messages are done in a new language. They went a bit further to give these two examples:

1. On d route 2 destiny, dea a meni paths 2 travlon, smoth or rouf, drk or brite.
Don't 4get LIFE IS SWIT.
2. Gud 2 c u. u r Gr8. Sum 1 luv u. Am w8 4 ur repl, (p. 90).

In their words:

Thus, within a few years of sending messages on SMS especially, 'students' formal writing including long essays and in fact examination papers have come to be riddled with this written language of GSM and Email (Bankole & Ogunrinde 2017, p. 90).

Conversely, texting is convenient in time and space because it allows users to comfortably but speedily communicate in writing using condensed language; considering the fact that some social media platforms such as Twitter etc. restrict users to certain number of characters. Therefore, the English language is

highly modified to perform communicative functions in this context. It is no falsity to say that textism is a 'revolutionary' language that evolved to simplify the problems of communication in our social settings. It is also worthy to note that short messages shared or posted on various social media platforms are usually different from the conventional English writings. The most notable difference is in the area of spellings. May be that is why Crystal (2008) referred to social media writings as a new language variety that emerges as a result of the user's manipulative dexterity. In online English for instance, the morphological and syntactic structures of such a discourse are so simplified that the interlocutors need not to struggle to decipher the intents of the message sender. By simplification, we mean that the morphology and syntax of the discourse are greatly altered; grammatical rules are violated; neologies are imported and strings of ill-formed sentences are generated. It is, therefore, worthy to note that English, just as Greek and Latin, is rule based which has its theoretical underpinning on traditional and Transformation Generative Grammars respectively. Violation of these rules in an online discourse could pose some threats to formal writings as some scholars had observed.

Meanwhile, it is obvious that Short Message Service (SMS) is at the moment displacing the conventional English writing system speedily in online conversations. Lecturers and other language instructors in Nigerian Tertiary institutions had expressed worries over the perverseness of texting among students and they feared that these same students might transpose the linguistic properties of the discourse in academic writings as observed by Ngonebu (2008), Dansieh (2011) and Okafor (2014). Owing to this problem, a study in this area will be attempted to examine the extent to which media discourse has impacted writings of students of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, so as to confirm or refute the claims of these scholars; also, to see how this study can mitigate this problem if any.

Social Media and Written Communication

Morphology is a branch of linguistics that studies the internal structure of word and how morphemes are combined to form words in a language (Tomori, 2004; Anabogu, Mbah & Eme, 2010, Agbedo, 2015). Word formation processes follow organized morphological rules in any language, including English. However, it is observed that there are no stringent rules governing the formation and use of words in SMS language (Nweze, 2013). It is against this background that Nwodo (2011) conducted a research on the language of SMS usages among secondary school students in Nsukka urban. She found that students do not always follow morphological rules in the formation of English words in their essays as a result of the frequent SMS use. This leads to the transfer of unrecognized abbreviations and acronyms in their formal writings. In a similar study conducted in Zaria metropolis, Okafor (2014) found that students commit morphological blunders in their essays due to influence of SMS language. Dansieh (2011), in a different study, explored the language of SMS texting and its potential effects on students' written communication skills. The study aimed at examining whether the incessant use of SMS 'textese' has possible negative effects on students' communication skills. The results showed that SMS could also heighten the tendency among students to adopt non-standard uses and short forms of English words in their classwork, reports, examination and long essays. It was concluded therefore that SMS texting could significantly pose a threat to students' written communication skills.

In contrast, it is altruistic that every living language undergoes series of changes. English, as one of the world's famous languages, is constantly changing. Dynamism is the most glaring characteristics of language; this is because language changes over time. Language contact has, over the years, encouraged borrowing. English is one of the languages that has recorded high level of borrowing from other languages of the world, especially, Greek and Latin; therefore, the evolution of SMS language has started to lure English lexicographers to accept some forms of 'textisms' as standard. For example, abbreviations such as OMG (Oh My God) LOL (Little Old Lady) are now found in the English dictionaries. At the moment, these same abbreviations are understood to mean 'Oh My Gosh' and 'Laugh Out Aloud' respectively in online discourse. Sequel to this submission, Crystal (2008) averred

that the effects of social media have generated one of the most idiosyncratic varieties in the history of language. "I call it textspeak". In the opinion of Okodo (2015), social media language does not have any negative effects on students' communication skills; rather, it is seen as a motivating force which helps in the building of English lexicon and this tends to create a positive revolution in the use of English.

The two paragraphs above contain contradictory views on the influence of social media language on students' writings. This study is similar to ones reviewed in that they all seek to investigate the influence of texting on the formal writings of students but the current study departs from others in that it seeks to specifically examine the impact of texting on the literary skills of students of the university of Nigeria, Nsukka; so as to confirm or refute the claims of these scholars.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

The study is anchored on Pit Corder's Error Analysis (EA). This theory was propounded in the late 1970s by Corder and his associates. This approach became very popular in describing L2 errors. Error Analysis came as a reaction or the constraint of Contrastive Analysis (CA), hence; there was a shift of focus from potential errors to the actual errors committed by L2 learners (Al-khreshen, 2016).

Error Analysis cannot be said to exist without the presence of errors. Agbedo (2015) defined error as a learner language form that deviates, or violates a target language rule. Agbedo further notes that 'accuracy' is just one of the three ways of describing learner language (accuracy, complexity and fluency). "Accuracy occurs when learner language conforms to the rules of target language; error occurs when it does not" (p. 95). Onuigbo and Eyisi (2008, p. 96) argue that "the presence of errors is a welcome development in the process of learning a language." Ultimately, Mahmoodzadeh (2012) defined Error Analysis as a procedure used to identify, categorize and explain the errors committed by FL/L2 learners. As earlier stated, Error Analysis involves a systematic description and classification of L2 errors contained in speech or writing. Error Analysis has the assumption that L2 learner's error cannot only be caused by inter-lingual interference from the L1, but they might also be caused due to intra-lingual interference of the target language itself. Secondly, social and physiological factors could also be sources of errors in ESL, EFL and SLA.

There are five basic steps that researchers employ when analyzing students' errors. These steps, according to Corder (1967), are: Collecting samples of learner language, identifying the errors, describing the errors, explaining the errors and evaluating or correcting the errors. It is our intention to scan the samples of the students' writings in order to examine if the features of SMS language are pervasive which could result to errors. Corder's Error Analysis will, therefore, be suitable for the analysis of this study.

This study adopts a descriptive survey method. This method is considered most appropriate for this type of study because it is used in investigating and describing phenomena in their natural settings so as to examine the true nature of the problem under study. Forty students were randomly selected from four departments of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka to complete an eight-item-questionnaire and also write a brief confirmatory essay on the topic: "My First Day on Campus". However, thirty-five questionnaires and scripts were returned successfully. The essays were scanned for features of social media language (textisms); while the questionnaires were analyzed using the simple percentage represented in bar-charts and lines respectively.

In addition, a total of 20 pages of the students' raw text messages on Facebook and WhatsApp was collated for the cross examination of the inherent linguistic features of social media writings. This would enable the researchers to adequately compare and contrast the features of social media writing and the conventional English writing.

Data Presentation and Discussions

1. Features of Social Media Writings Extracted from Students' Text Messages

A. Acronyms, Initials and Abbreviations

Acronym, according to Longman dictionary online (2009), is a word that is made up of the first letters of the name of something such as an organization. In a similar way, it defines initial as the first letter of someone's first name. What these three-word formation processes have in common is the act of shortening lexical or sentential items. These features are preponderantly used in online written discourse to save time and space. Some instances extracted from the data are:

- LOL___ Laugh Out Aloud
- HBD___ Happy Birth Day
- I J N___ In Jesus Name
- ASAP___ As Soon As Possible
- LMAO___ Laughing my Ass Off

B. Multifarious Shortening of Lexis

One of the most glaring features of social media writing is shortening of lexical items in many different ways.

Instances are:

Social Media	Conventional English
• Thnks , tanks, fnks, tnks	Thanks
• Pls, plz, pliz, plis	Plesase
• Wlcm, welcm, welcum	welcome
• Mornin, morn, mrnin	morning
• B, bi	be
• U, y	you
• Wich, wch, wc	which
• Bk, bak,	back
• Whr, wher	where
• Nva, nvr, never	never
• Bro, br	brother
• Wl, wil	will
• Jorni, jorny	journey
• Litl	Little
• Gd, gud	good
• Hrt, hart,	heart
• Ryt now, rite nw, ryte now	right now

C. Elliptical Sentences

Kadiri and Ekwueme (2018) viewed an elliptical sentence as a sentence whose subject or the predicate is omitted but it is understood in context. Here, social media users deploy more of this sentence type to facilitate communication. Some linguistic examples selected are:

Social Media

Conventional English

- | | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| • Good | [I am] good. |
| • Caling but not pikin | [I was] calling but [you were] not picking. |
| • I tire | I [am] tired. |
| • Hope reading in progress | [I] hope reading [is] in progress. |
| • Beautiful u've got our back | [It is] beautiful [that] you've got our back. |
| • Still on break | [We are] still on break. |
| • Fynoo | [we are] fine |
| • Just lock up | [you] just locked up |
| • Not realy | [I do] not really... |

D. Inflectional and Derivational Morpheme Substitutions

Morpheme, according to Anabugu et al. (2010), is a unit of morphology that is used to refer to the smallest indivisible form which has a specific grammatical function. Agbedo adds that Derivational morpheme is primarily concerned with the processes whereby new words are formed from the existing word. It involves the addition of an affix or affixes to a root or stem. Agbedo also citing Robertson (1954), defined an inflectional morpheme as the process of varying the form of a word to differentiate related meanings or uses.

As we have already noted that time and space constraints constitute the major reason why users tend to shorten words and sentences in online communication, it is also true that these factors necessitate the substitutions or sometimes, deleting of inflectional or derivational morphemes in online discourses. Some instances have been selected for discussion:

- 'a' is used to substitute 'er'- gender-genda, ever-eva, clever-cleva, prayer-playa etc.
- 'f' is used to substitute 'ph' as in pharmacy-farmacy, phone-fone, laugh-laf
- 'd' is used to substitute 'th' as in the-de, they-dey, then-den etc.
- 't' is used to substitute 'th' as in thing-tin, think-tink, teeth, teet etc.
- 'I' is used to substitute 'ea' as in read-rid, dream-drim etc.
 'ee'- keep-kip, seen-sin, green-grin etc
 'ey' money-moni, journey-jorni
 'ie' believe-believe
 'y' happy-hapi
- 'o' is used to substitute 'a' as in want-wont, what-wot
- 's' is used to substitute 'ce' as in assistance- assistants
- 'u' is used to substitute 'oo' as in school-skul, food-fud, good-gud etc
- 'x' is used to substitute 'ks' as in thanks-tanx
- 'z' is used to substitute 'as' as in was-wz
 'ese' as in these-dz
 'ce' as in rice-riz
 's' as in busy- bizy

E. Lexical Items' Substitution with Letters of Alphabet

- 'are' is replaced with 'a'
- 'be' is replaced with 'b'
- 'see' is replaced with 'c'
- 'the' is replaced with 'd'
- 'he' is replaced with 'e'

- ‘for’ is replaced with ‘f’
- ‘morning’ is replaced with ‘m’
- ‘and’/ ‘in’ is replaced with ‘n’
- ‘your’ is replaced with ‘r’
- ‘you’ is replaced with ‘u’
- ‘with, which or we’ is replaced with ‘w’
- ‘times’ (as in cald 3x) is replaced with ‘x’
- ‘as’ is replaced with ‘z’ (as in hz-has)

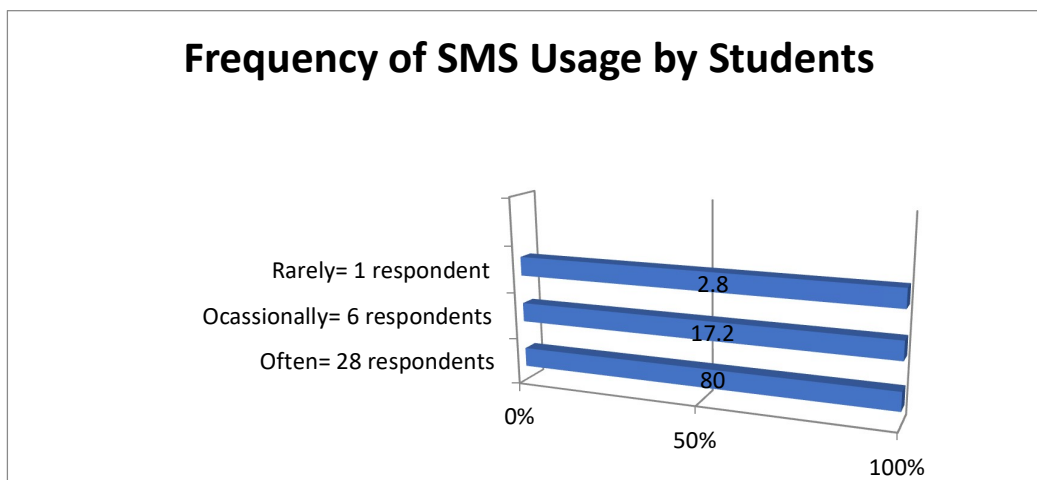
Source: Bankole & Ogunrinde (2017)

F. Items’ Substitution with Arabic Numerals and Alphabet

- ‘one’ is substituted with ‘1’
- ‘eye’ is substituted with ‘I’
- ‘To’, ‘too’ is substituted with ‘2’
- ‘for’ is substituted with ‘4’
- ‘form’ is substituted with ‘4m’
- ‘thank you’ is substituted with ‘10q’
- ‘before’ is substituted with ‘b4’
- ‘between’ is substituted with ‘b2’
- ‘late’ is substituted with ‘L8’
- ‘therefore’ is substituted with ‘T4’
- ‘mate’ is substituted with ‘m8’
- ‘great’ is substituted with ‘gr8’
- ‘latter’ is substituted with ‘L8r’
- ‘gate’ is substituted with ‘G8’

Data Elicited from the Questionnaires:

Chart 1: Frequency of SMS Usage by Students



In the chart above, 28 respondents, representing 80% of the sample agree that they send and receive SMSs frequently while the remaining respondents, representing 20% send or receive SMSs occasionally or rarely. The statistics, therefore, shows that students’ SMS use is pervasive.

Chart 2: Textism is a Way to Explore the Creative Attribute of Language

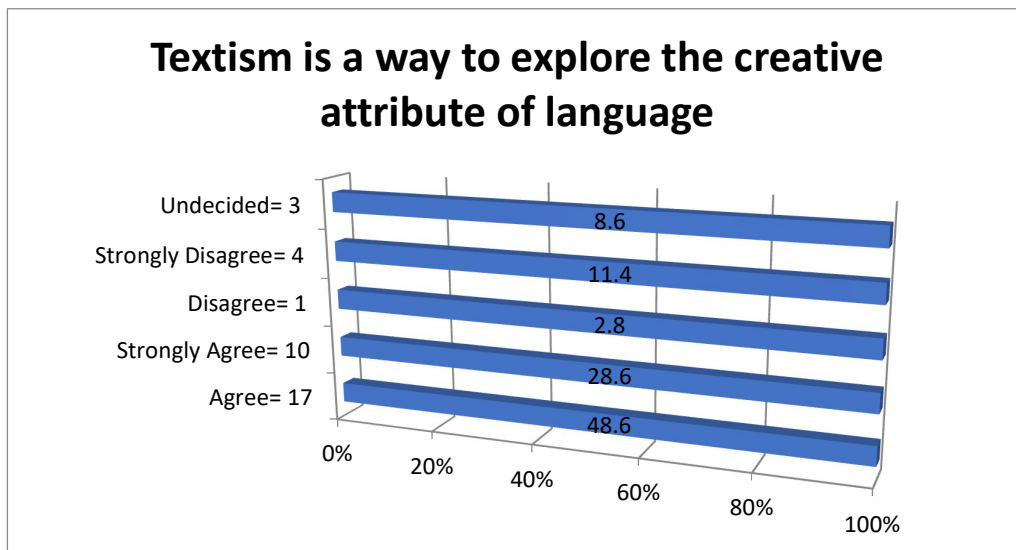
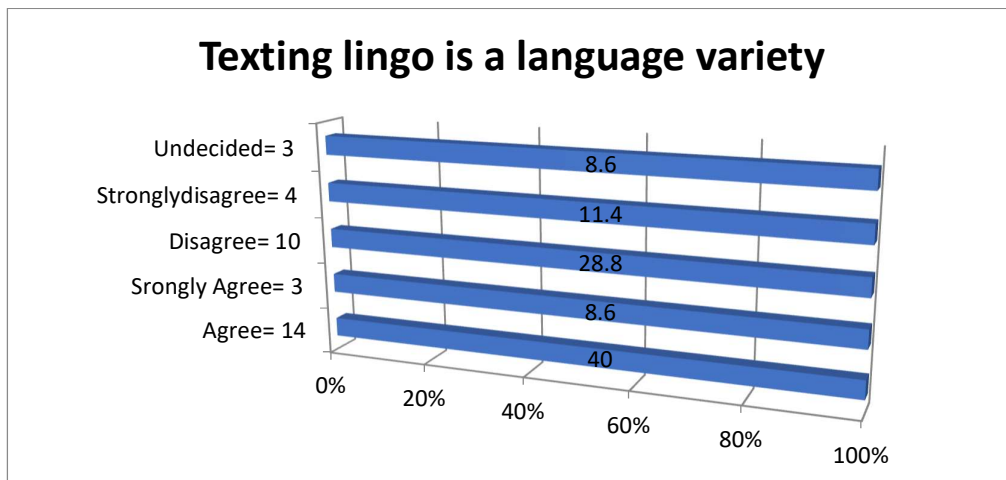


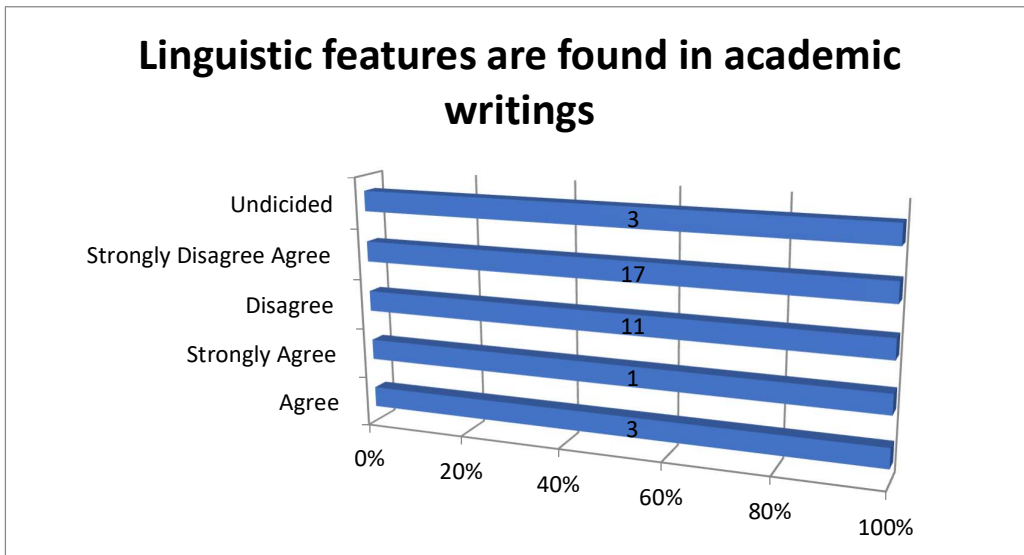
Chart 2 shows that seventeen respondents, representing 48.6 percent and ten respondents, representing 28.6 percent agree that texting lingo or social media language is a creative exploration of language. Four disagree while three are undecided. So, the majority see textism as a way to explore language borne out of creativity.

Chart 3: Texting Lingo is a Language Variety



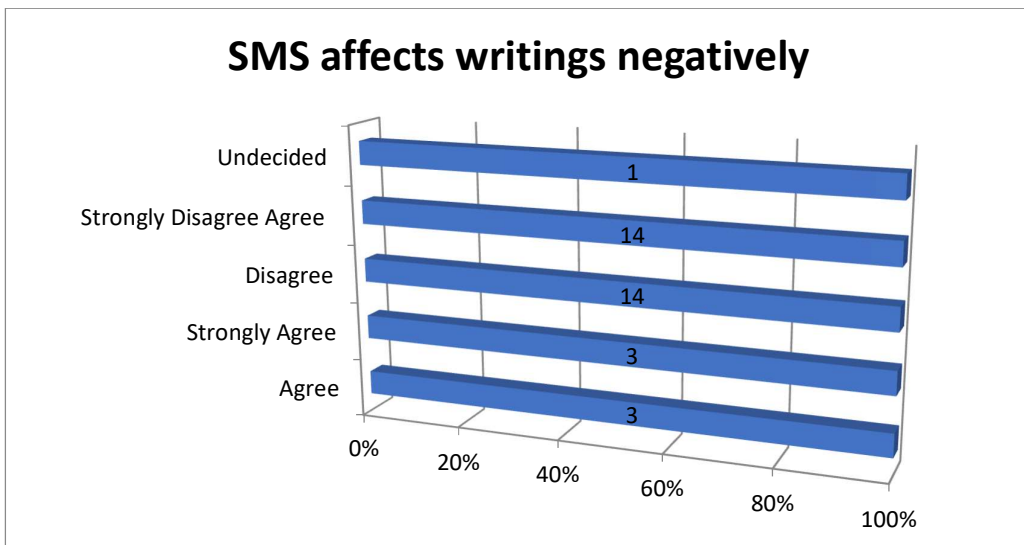
From the above, it could be deduced that the majority believe that texting lingo is a language variety because the majority comprises 48.6 percent. 40 percent of the respondents disagree; while 11.4 percent remains neutral.

Chart 4: Linguistic Features are Found in Academic Writings



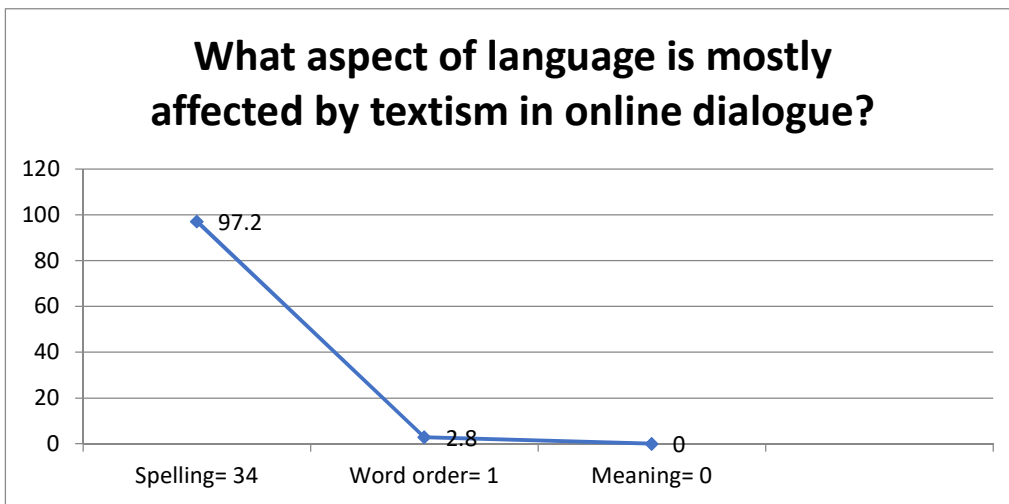
In chart 4, twenty-eight respondents, representing 80 percent agree that the features of SMS are not found in students’ writings; while four respondents agree to the proposition. Three respondents, however, remain undecided. So, features of textisms are not always found in students’ academic writings.

CHART 5: SMS AFFECTS WRITINGS NEGATIVELY



Twenty-eight respondents, representing 80 percent disagree that SMS texting affects their writing skill; six respondents, representing 17.2 percent agree; while 2.8 percent remains neutral. So, from the foregoing analysis, SMS does not have detrimental effects on the writings of students.

Chart 6: What Aspect of Language is Mostly Affected by Textism in Online Dialogue?



In the above chart, virtually all respondents agree that spelling is the most affected aspect of language in online dialogues. Other aspects such as word order and meaning are not so affected on online conversations.

Chart 7: Do You Sometime Transpose Social Media Spellings in Your Essay?

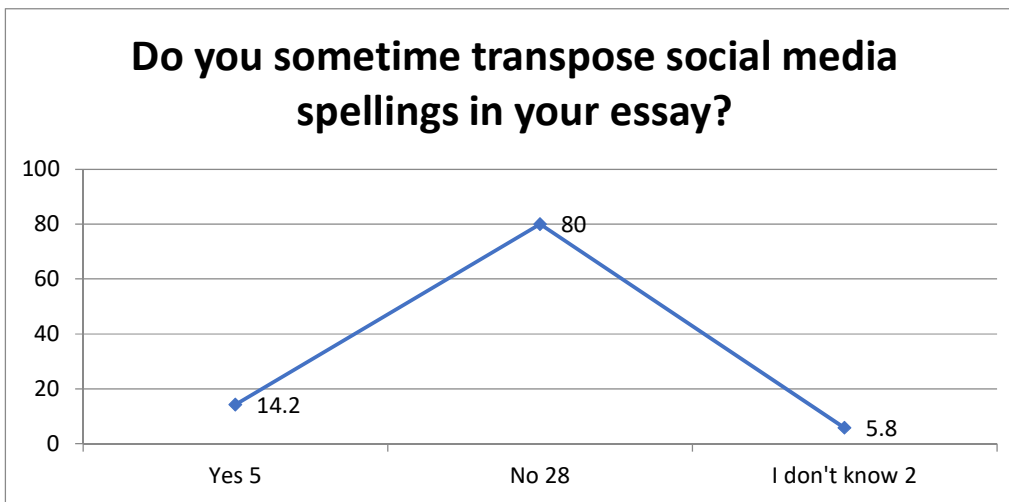
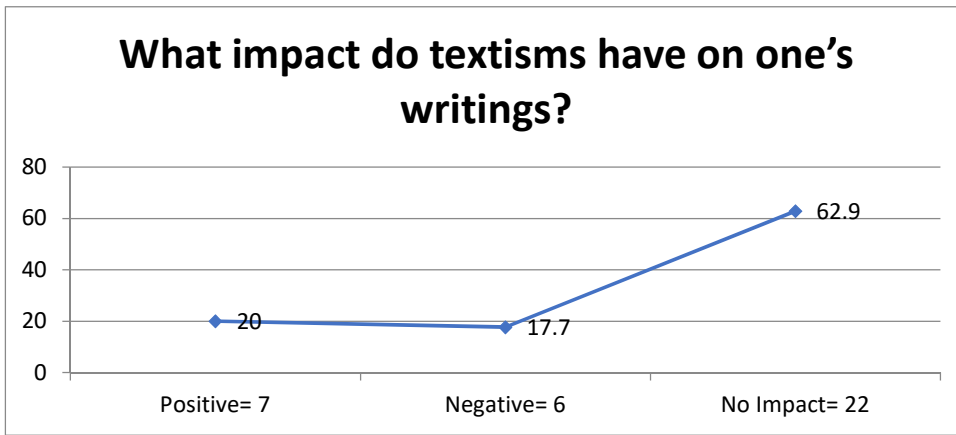


Chart 7 reveals that students do not always transpose social media spellings (textisms) in academic writings. This is because twenty-eight respondents, representing 80 percent argue against the proposition. On the other hand, five respondents, representing 17.2 percent agree that they sometime do; while two respondents, representing 2.8 percent are undecided.

Chart 8: What Impact do Textisms have on One’s Writings?



The chart above show that 20 percent of respondents are positively affected by SMS language; 17.1 percent are negatively affected; while 62.9 percent feels no impact.

Errors Found in the Students’ Essays

Table 1: Tense Errors

Errors	Corrections
... this has been the moment	This had been the moment
The school was a school I always long for	The school was the school I always longed for
...which I ask	... which I asked
... before the exams sets in.	... before the exams set in
... I have heard earlier.	... I had heard earlier
I am going	I was going
My first day on campus is...	My first day on campus was

Table 2: Spelling Errors

Errors	Corrections
Bt	but
Abt	about
Grad	graduate
live	leave
recify	rectify
begining	beginning
heard	heard

Table: 3 Grammatical Errors

Errors	Corrections
...as I watched my mother leaving	...as I watched my mother leave
... but been the first time	... but being the first time
It is been organized initially	It is being organized initially
... people was older than I was	... people were older than I was

Discussion

The findings from the students' raw text messages have shown that the linguistic features of social media consist of acronyms, initials and abbreviations, elliptical sentences, multifarious shortening of words, substitution of morphemes, substitution of lexical items with letters of alphabet and Arabic numerals (Alpha-numeric) etc. The researchers, however, observed that these linguistic features are idiosyncratically used in online written discourse for the purpose of convenience.

In another dimension, the findings from the questionnaires reveal that texting is indeed pervasive among students of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka and of course, other universities across the country. This revelation cannot be separated from the fact that texting is relatively simpler and cheaper than other methods of written communications. As the newest method of communication, texting has come to stay in Nigerian academic environments for now until another method of communication is invented.

The study also unravelled that textism or social media language is a social variety of language in its own right. This is because the lexis and structures of such a language is unique and mostly used in online dialogues; thus, their application in other forms of writings is rare. Students who use social media in Nigeria are believed to be either bi or multi lingual users. This is because Nigeria itself is a heterogeneous society. Since these students have always been careful not to mix their indigenous language codes with English in academic writings or essays, it is then feasible that these same students would be meticulous not to deploy textisms in formal.

More so, the questionnaires show that students deploy standard spellings in academic writings unlike the kind of spellings they use in online dialogues. In fact, spelling constitutes the aspect that makes social media language distinct. According to Otaburuagu et al (2010), users of social media use lexical contractions, coinages or abbreviation such as "tanx" for thanks, "d" for the, "n" for and, "U" for you, "@" for at etc. This could probably be the reason why Agbedo (2015) sees internet language as a new variety of the English language that is mostly use on social media and other web mediated platforms. It is in line with these arguments that the respondents vehemently disagree that textism has negative effects on writings; instead, they agree that textisms, a variety of English which is borne out of the users' creativity, has no impact at all on academic writings. They, however, see textisms as a form of language (register) strictly used in online conversations for the sake of cost, time and space constraints.

Comparatively, the written samples of students' essay correlate with all the items in the questionnaires, which confirm that texting does not have detrimental effects on students' academic writings. This is because out of the thirty-five recovered essays, all but two contain features of textisms. This is noticeable in the following spellings ("bt", "abt" and "grad") as contained in table 2 above. This simply confirmed that the application of textisms in formal or academic writings is minimal as opposed to what some scholars had previously argued. This is not significant enough to be used to draw generations that textisms impact negatively on students' essays. Others spelling errors such as "live" (leave), "recify", "begining" and "heard" could not be said to be caused by the influence of textisms. Research has shown

that these forms of error had been in existence before the invention of texting lingo as argued by Crystal (2008). For instance, “begining” and “recify” are known as errors of omission because ‘n’ and ‘t’ are omitted in the spelling of the words respectively. These errors could have been caused as a result of the slip of the pen; so, it is linguistic fallacy to attribute this error to the influence of the language of the social media. In the same vein, the words “live” and “leave” have always posed problems to the second language users; therefore, it is common to come across this type of error in students’ scripts. Learners should always strive to use the correct form of the spelling with help of their dictionaries. So, attributing the error to social media influence could be wrong as well. Other items in the questionnaires showed significant correlation with the findings in the students’ scripts.

Furthermore, grammatical errors and tense errors are also found in the students’ scripts as shown in table 1 and 3 respectively. As second language users of English, error commitment is inevitable. This perhaps explains why Onuigbo and Eyisi (2008) contend that “the presence of errors is a welcome development in the process of learning a language” (p. 96). These errors are, however, not internet-based because they exhibit no visible features of textisms. They are familiar errors in language learning; therefore, the internet or social media language could not have caused them.

Conclusion

We admit that there are few instances where the linguistic features of social media language or textism are found in students’ formal or academic writings; but the evidence is not strong enough to be used to make generation. We, therefore, wish to state that social media language does not impact the writing skills of students negatively. In other words, the extent, to which social media language affects or impact writings is very minimal. This study, therefore, agrees with the findings of Crystal (2008) and Mohammad (2011) that SMS language does not pose serious threats to the writings of students of the Nigerian universities. Consequently, we advise that students should always find time to check their compositions over and over again to be sure that they are error free. Secondly, students should always know that textisms should only be used in online discourse as a distinct variety but they should be careful not to deploy them in formal writings. As we have earlier stated, social media language (textism) has come to stay vis-à-vis other language varieties, until the invention of another method of written communication.

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