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**Short Message Service (SMS) as a Variety of Written  
English**

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**Abstract**

*SMS (Short Message Services) has become one of the most frequently used means of communication in Nigeria; which is an e-mediated form of communication inherent in mobile phones. It has gained currency, for quite some time in linguistic fabric of English in Nigeria. And has a kind of simple sentence structure marked with shortening of words. These shortenings overlook the orthographic forms of words and lay emphasis on the written sounds for its lexical and syntactic variants (2 for to, too and two). These variants are the unique linguistic elements that make SMS a peculiar lect or variety of English.*

## **Introduction**

Language is an organic phenomenon that has its functional reality on the social forces and societal demands for effective communication. This reality has made language a basic tool in communication and social interaction which responds easily to societal communication needs (Mgbemena 110). Therefore, any language that fails to meet effectively the recent communication challenges of its users stands the risk of going extinct. So, as a matter of fact, according to Aitcheson, language alters as the needs of its users alter (124). Mgbemena stresses further that English as a dynamic language has a sustained experiences of variability and changes in L<sub>1</sub>, L<sub>2</sub> and foreign situations and these changes reflect the needs of the users. As a result, these varieties or changes and norms for use develop in response to local community needs (Hernberger and Mckay 4).

Indeed, in the historical development of English, there are certain developments that leave significant linguistic marks on the language; these usually make it easy to identify a scientific or social development through the identification of some language element with such development (Baugh and Cable 10). In this vein, Chilwa says, “as the world witnesses new developments and cultures, new worlds and coinages and new styles of expression evolve as part of those development processes (95). He further says that users learn easily these new terms and styles to update their knowledge express their thoughts in their new experiences (95). These developments are expressly seen in the new linguistic style associated with the global system for mobile communication (GSM) revolution in the world.

As new developments and cultures evolve in the globe, new words, coinages and styles of expression emerge as the reflection of those development processes (Chilwa 95). He stresses further that people learn these to help them improve their knowledge and to express their new world views. However, this trend has opened a floodgate of the new linguistic styles, associated with the Global System Communication network (GSM), since its introduction in Nigeria.

So, the introduction of Global System for Mobile Communication gave rise to the contemporary challenges to languages, especially as it affects English globally as a second language for communication. It brought about another form of electronic mediated discourse, popularly known as Short Message Service (SMS)/text message” (Mgbemena 110). SMS being a written

medium of communication, it involves graphic symbols of letters of the alphabet (110). It provides both oral and written medium for communication.

The language of Short Message Service (SMS) tends to develop a new language that has infiltrated into the linguistic fabric of the world multilingualism. It tends to develop a kind of simple sentence structure for communication. The SMS syntactic and lexical devices used by the texters are not truly different from conventional language. In addition, SMS language overlooks orthographic and syntactic rules of a language with a great emphasis on written sounds and compressions, for example ‘8’ for ‘ate’, ‘2’ for ‘to’, two and too. ‘f’ for, four and for, be, bcoz, bcos for “because” and so on.

### **GSM (SMS Messaging) in Nigeria**

Despite the fact that English occupies an enviable position and also a language of the imperialists in Nigeria, there is therefore the need for its users to acquire relative proficiency in more than one language to be part of the emerging revolution in electronic communication (Ezenwa–Ohaeto 29). She notes that this linguistic situation has compelled Nigerian undergraduates to become simultaneous or sequential bilinguals. And this has equally equipped them to communicate with their friends and the global community effectively, through the common shared linguistic affiliation. More still, it is an opportunity for them to explore their linguistic creativity and “employ their knowledge on the two languages to create virtual language which is characterized by peculiar morphological, phonological and semantic features” (29).

In Nigeria, it has changed a number of things in communication which has relatively affected the morpho-syntactic structure of English in Nigeria (Chiluwa 95). In fact, GSM evolves with a type of English that is Situation-specific and context-sensitive. Chiluwa posits further that its style is dependent on the speech event and as discourse (95). In addition, Awonusi affirms that it is “because, it is based on a particular linguistic domain and at the time explicates different relationships between interlocutors” (45).

GSM revolution came to Nigeria in August 2001 (Chiluwa 95). But within 15 months an estimated 1.11 million had acquired it. This was presumed to be the highest phenomenal increase in mobile telecommunication in

African Chilwa states further that many subscribers chose text- messaging as cheaper alternative (96)

So, this phenomenal increase brought about the phenomenal growth of the industry in Nigeria, with attendant growth in *teledensity* in Nigeria from 0.38 percent in 1999 to 3.92 percent in March 2004 (Nwosu & Nkamnebe 293-294). This implies, according to them , that 130 million estimated population figure about 4.7 million were using telephone by march, 2004 and 3.8 million of these telephones are mobile phones (294). The indices show that there is some relative indication that these figures will appreciate in near future, despite the present low figure. The table below represents the estimated figures of the steady growth of telecommunication in Nigeria from 2001 to 2003 since the introduction of GSM (Nwosu and Nkamnebe 294).

### Growth Trends in the Telecommunication Industry in Nigeria

	Dec. 2000	Dec. 2002	June 2003	Projection to Dec. 2003
Number of Commercial fixed lines	450,000	702,000	724,790	1,200,00
Number of Connected mobile line	None	1.6m	2.05m	2.9m
Number of National carrier	1	2	2	2
Number of cooperating ISPs	18	30	30	35
Number licensed mobile operators	1	4	4	4
Number of km microwaves links	16,000km (est.)	31,200km (est.)	Not available	37,000km (est)

**Source:** Management in Nigeria, October 2003 to March, 2004

### **Pseudo-Deviation of English Syntactic Form**

It is nascent variety of English that subverts letters and numbers to produce ultra-concise words that has a few hieroglyphs and a range of face symbols. Although, it is faster to write, it takes time to read than normal English. SMS communication uses the fewest number of characters needed to convey a comprehensible message. Hence, punctuation, grammar and capitalization are largely ignored.

Text message do not always confirm with the standard written discourse or grammar, especially in forms: in addition, the words used in the system are not found in standard dictionaries or recognized by language scholars. Therefore, no standard rules for writing SMS language and a lot of words are shortened by the texters arbitrarily to suit their linguistic oddness. Nevertheless, texters are very effective in describing written sounds in what they want their receivers or readers to understand, in their messages. The language of SMS has evolved its own unique style as applied in chat-room and e-mail languages, for example, 'gd mrnin, hv nt had 4rm u, hw r u? hp u'll b in ur hse (Rafi 1).

### **Features of SMS Language**

Textese or SMS language (a.k.a. chatspeak, txt, spk, txtk, texting language or txt talk) is the technical restrictions of text message which has led to the development of language short forms in SMS communication, for example, because of limited space. In addition, this is a term for the abbreviations and slang that are commonly used as a result of the necessary brevity of mobile phone text messaging.

Moreover, SMS often helps to manage the interface and the fact that communications with close friends, partners and family members; enables one arrange messages pragmatically as common background exists. So, the groups are tied together by the messages, through the development of shared history (Ling 8). Owing to these, Doring said that SMS communication makes relevant use of lexical and syntactic short forms that can save character space or touches of the handset keys, as compared with using the full forms of words (7). This method of texting saves money, time and equally effort. Therefore, texters are more likely to use the service for other subsequent messages. He further asserts that abbreviations and acronyms fulfill collective identity functions, so texters require a special shared knowledge to understand the language and be consequently able to use it.

Doring points out that the language-specific to SMS usually has no relationship to standard language, and thus that the mass media tag SMS communication as the youth secret code or the big SMS linguistic rebellious action against long sentence (10).

Texters abbreviate words without losing their meaning e.g. ‘you’ for ‘u’. Most texters usually remove the vowels from a word, especially those which do not have common abbreviation. So, the receiver is compelled to interpret a string of consonants by ‘re-adding’ the vowels (dictionary for ‘dctnry, or keyboard for ‘kybrd’). The abbreviated words are interpreted by the reader based on the ‘context-specific’, for there are other examples of words or phrases that have the same abbreviation (‘lol’ could mean ‘laugh out loud’ or ‘lots of love’ and ‘cryn’ could mean ‘crayon’ or ‘crying’). Similarly, punctuation, such as the ‘full stop’, is usually unimportant, because the end of a line is the end of an utterance.

### **Contra-Spelling Convention**

The common facts in SMS communication are compressions and the shortening of sounds e.g. ‘tk kia’ for ‘take care’. The choice to evolve a verbal illustration of this word is an indication that, at least in part, the texter might take this utterance in its spoken form, though all other parts of text message can be well-formed within a written framework. In fact, the spoken version of SMS is indeed not spoken at all rather emoted. Texters emote by creating a written representation of what they do physically as they text. For example, emotions: (, :-) and :-), these are written representation of body language, which are as a result of non face-to-face communication. As body language can effect a change of meaning in verbal communication, these can equally do the same in text messages. In addition, users take advantage of different phonetic spellings to evolve different shades of verbal effects in their messages, such as ‘hehe’ for laughter or perhaps ‘muaha’ to express a frightening laughter, as Rafi (4) states. He states further that for compression and convenience, numbers and letters are usually used solely or combined, e.g. ‘see you’ can be texted as ‘cu’ e.t.c. These compressions can be stable and become popular over a period of time, if SMS has related properties to e-mail (Grinter and Eldridge 17).

### **Mode of SMS Language**

SMS retains both written and spoken attributes, as regards electronic-mediated discourse. In her assertion, Hughes (123) states that ‘speech and

writing usually take place in very different contexts. Written language is more prescribed than spoken language, so writers have the opportunity to edit the words they write. Texters make different word choices, in writing than speaking, research shows that all informational discourse has a high lexical variety in contrast to interactive and effective types of discourse (Biber 112). By studying language variations and uses, much of the conventions of text messaging language, a blurring of written and spoken discourse, can be better understood. SMS is unique with regard to language selection, more of a written form of speech. In this vein,

Biber states in terms of linguistic characteristics, stereotypical speech is interactive, and dependent on shared space, time and background knowledge; stereotypical writing has the opposite characteristics (25). Text messages, however, tend to be more akin with the former.

### **Conclusion**

SMS messaging or communication has evolved as a variety or dialect of English; it has sustained influence on formal language situation, which may not be easily determined. This trend in language-use cannot be seen as negative, but rather a productive creativity in language-use, which helps to widen the English lexicon to express contemporary experiences, and adequately meet the user's aesthetic needs of language.

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