MAKING THE CASE FOR FORMALIZING THE LINGO AND ACRONYMS OF VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS COMMUNICATION TO MEET GLOBAL DEMANDS.

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I.   BACKGROUND

There is overwhelming research and anecdotal evidence suggesting that traditional letter writing has significantly dwindled due to the increase use of email, online chats, telephone, and other electronic communication devices. People who became mainly dependent on internet relay chats in the late 1990s found themselves developing a new phraseology at the turn of the century in order to maintain an online conversation that kept pace with oral communication. Researchers have spent considerable time in the last few years investigating this phenomenon (see for example Ashton, 2002; Brewer& Dilger, 2004; Doring, 2002; Hard af Sergerstad, 2003; Hess-Luttich & Wilde, 2003; Lienard, 2005; Lin & Sears, 2005; Rojo-Laurilla, 2002). Most of these studies have focused on the understanding the dynamics of the new computer-mediated communication.

Today, not only are people communicating online on various platforms that support instant messaging, but also more and more people, most of them youngsters, are communicating through SMS (short message service) that use the mobile phone as a primary platform for text communication. SMS is also possible through a variety of modern handheld digital mobile devices. These new platforms, which include various forms of Internet Relay Chats as well as a host of handheld mobile devices, have generated new lexicons essential for rapid communication (Lienard, 2005; Dretzke & Nester, 2005; Jessen, Gfroerer & Koster 2003). For English communicators, the new language includes expressions such as AFAIK (as far as I know), AFK

(away from the keyboard), BRB (be right back), etc. Incidentally, online instant messages and mobile devices' SMS use the same lexicon. It is evident that most avid online chatters, as well as people that communicate through handheld mobile devices, can write the equivalent of a long sentence just a two or three SMS terms. Table 1 contains a sample list of terms used in short text messages (SMS) as well as for instant messages in Internet Relay Chats.

TABLE 1: SAMPLE LIST OF TERMS USED FOR SMS AND INSTANT MESSAGES

SMS/CHAT TERM	TRANSLATION IN PLAIN ENGLISH
AFAIK	As far as I know
AI	As if
BAK	Back at keyboard
BRB	Be right back
CUL8R	See you later
DUR?	Do you remember?
FWIW	For what it's worth
ICWUM	I see what you mean
k	Okay
HT411	Here is the information
LOL	Laughing out Loud
ROTFL	Rolling on the floor laughing
WB	Welcome back
WBS	Write back soon

Like any other modern language, the new virtual environments argot has been growing continuously over the years. New terms are also added constantly. There are hundreds of websites that contain partial lists of terms used in online communication, mainly for instant messages. Conducting a query through any major Internet search engine such as Yahoo or Google will yield a list of some of these websites. One such website is NetLingo

(www.netlingo.com). This website provides definition of terms used on the Internet, including chat or instant messaging terms. Nevertheless, despite the fact that young people and many adult users of instant messages utilize these terms in a daily basis, there is still a great majority of the society that is unaware of these shortcuts.

II.   THE PROBLEM WITH MOST RESEARCH

While the academic field has done a great job conducting research in this area, and making available to the general public a plethora of findings related to short text messages and their applications (Rojo-Laurilla, 2002; Ross, 2003; Sourdot, 2004; Thurlow, 2003; Venturi, 2004; Zic Fuchs, 2002), little has been done to document the potential advantages of embracing the new lexicon, or at least making it part of the cultural establishment. Articles cited in this paper indicate that research has primarily focus on issues such as communications technologies and their influences, sociolinguistic aspects of text messages, conversational styles, and other forensic studies involving text messages. The need to improve the language of online conversations has not been discussed thoroughly by linguists and social scientists.

Consequently, despite the increase and the persistent use of SMS language by not only the younger generation, but also by adults in the business world and within the academe, the formal adoption of the new lexicon as part of the standard academic curriculum still seems a remote possibility by schools and universities. There is no indication that language of short text messages (SMS) will disappear someday. There is, instead, enough anecdotal indication that because of the astronomical access to mobile phones and wireless handheld devices, most people will eventually use the new lexicon as part of their day-to-day conversation. They will also use it as part of their normal business communication when telecommuting. Thus, the need to incorporate the language of virtual environments in traditional academic curricula, and the need

to consider the inclusion of the new lexicon in areas such as the teaching of a foreign language, and reporting in mass communication is evident. At least there is a need for a real debate that could lead to the adoption of the new lexicon as part of the traditional academic curriculum.

III.   THE CASE FOR CURRICULUM REVISION

Colleges and universities take the issue of curriculum revision very seriously. Also changes in a curriculum have to go through a long process where one has to justify the relevance of the proposed course and its suitability in an academic program. Perhaps one of the greatest concerns that one would have in fighting for the standardization of text messaging could have something to do with the inherent advantages in this prevalent communication medium. Just as the teaching of shorthand became integral part of stenography education, the applications of SMS lexicon training can be beneficial for journalism and business students. The National Court Reporter's Association (NCRA) offers a variety of educational programs for the accreditation of its members based on general standards and minimum standards. Good note-taking techniques have always part of this curriculum. However, due to the increased use of new communication technologies by court reporters, enrollment in some of the traditional courses has dropped significantly. It appears that reporters who are fluent in SMS lexicon prefer taking their notes quickly and filing their stories to assignment editors in real time. The SMS lexicon presents more advantages for reporters than traditional shorthand that is usually taught exclusively to secretarial students. Reporters can literally use any wireless mobile communication device to write an SMS message without the need of any special software.

Beside the fact that one can rapidly write long thoughts in just a few words as shown in Table 1, an SMS is always likely to reach only and exclusively the intended recipient. This also means that it is relatively difficult for someone else to intercept a personal text message sent to a

friend or a business note sent to a boss or a co-worker. It can be argued that instead of sending a text message one should directly make a phone call. There are a few difficulties with calling someone on a mobile phone. The person on the other end might be in an important meeting where a phone call would be considered a real disturbance. The intended recipient might also not have network service at the time of the call. Unlike a phone call, an SMS message is automatically stored where it can be re-read. This proves particularly useful in the case of fairly detailed information that might otherwise be forgotten. SMS messages do not require the mobile phone to be active and within range and the message will be held for a number of days until the phone is active and within range.

The teaching of SMS lexicon within the traditional academic curriculum is imperative because language is not just a grammar with a set of rules, but also a set of symbols. Conventional linguistics teaching argues that symbols are primivite and relatively unexpressive because there are no clear or regular relationships between the symbols. However, studies of SMS in any language show that users of these symbols conform to a grammar of their own, and that the symbols are used exclusively to mean what the members of the community understand. One of the properties of language is arbitrariness. As Lehmann (2005) states, "in the traditional comparative method, arbitrariness is only relied upon in individual linguistic signs."

There are difficulties in teaching lexicons in any language. Leeman (2005) argued that unlike morphology or syntax, which can be neatly packaged and presented to students in the form of a finite number of rules or categories, the lexicon is chaotic and seemingly incomprehensible in its infiniteness. The difficulty, according to Leeman, is due to the fact that languages contain several thousands of words whose meanings are multiplied by usage, collocation, and context. There is also the fact that words enter into intricate relations with each

other across synonyms and antonyms. Similarly, researchers argue that language, as a system of values and differences, is more of a process than a product, and ideology plays an important role in this process. As Wong (2003) reiterated, given the "polysemous" nature of words and the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, meanings can never be fixed and can always be contested. Depending on their ideologies, other speakers may attach competing meanings to the same label."

However, this difficulty seems very minimal or perhaps non-existent in the teaching of the SMS lexicon; at least at its early stage as the language as it may be limited to a certain number of words. The possibility of entering into intricate relations of antonyms and synonyms is very remote. SMS takes great advantage of iconicity, which, as a semiotic notion refers to a natural resemblance or analogy between the form of a sign ('the signifier') and the object or concept ('the signified') it refers to in the world.

Perhaps a clear precedent to the teaching of SMS lexicon is the teaching of sign language as well as the teaching of shorthand in stenography. The richness of cognitive iconicity in sign language is seen in the phonological pole of signs that involves objects moving in space as viewed from a certain vantage point (Wilcox, 2004). The study of sign language has been of keen interest to researchers over the last four decades. Tarcsiova (2005) stated, "The question of iconicity and arbitrariness was the concern of scientists as well because sign language itself used to be considered only as a complex of gestures which had been agreed on in advance." Today, there is a strong agreement among sign language professionals and researchers in this field that "motor-visual modality of this kind of communication means inevitably results in certain differences."(Tarcsiova, 2005). Lessons learned in the study of sign languages can help

researchers in the academic sectors to foresee the possibility of success in the teaching of SMS lexicon.

IV. PRACTICAL BENEFITS TO SOCIETY

The academic sector must help society draw the maximum benefit from scientific inquiry. Unlike e-mail, SMS as it currently stands is relatively SPAM free. Although this may change over the next year or so, at present it is the ideal communication channel to cut through the clutter. As a result, marketing departments worldwide are climbing aboard to try and target their customers in this one-on-one manner that has 'message opening rates' soaring way above any other medium.

An SMS is Discreet

Unlike a phone call you do not have to run out of the restaurant where you are eating to field the call, yet you still know when an SMS has arrived. The discreet nature of text messaging ensures you stay in touch with minimal disturbance.

SMS leads to smaller phone bills

An SMS is far cheaper than a phone call yet in most instances you will convey just as much information as you would have if you had called.

Also, the use of virtual offices for traveling business executives call for a need in SMS lexicon proficiency. Business people can quietly interact with their partners or their employees from airports around the world without disturbing other passengers. The effective use of SMS can yield a very good return in investment. It is thus, also paramount that researchers and

policymakers look into the importance of formalizing and standardizing the translation of the

new argot in order to facilitate the international and cross-cultural communication.

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