The impact of electronic communication technology on written language

Mohd. Sahandri Gani B. Hamzah[1], Mohd. Reza Ghorbani[1], Saifuddin Kumar B. Abdullah[2]

(1. Faculty of Educational Studies, University Putra Malaysia, Selangor 43400, Malaysia;

2. Department of Polytechnic, Ministry of Higher Education, Selangor 43400, Malaysia)

Abstract: Communication technology is changing things. Language is no exception. Some language researchers argue that language is deteriorating due to increased use in electronic communication. The present paper investigated 100 randomly selected electronic mails (e-mails) and 50 short messaging system (SMS) messages of a representative sample of international students in University Putra Malaysia (UPM) to find out the impact of these two specific modes of electronic communication on written language use. The e-mails from UPM International Students Association (UPM-ISA) yahoo group were content analyzed. A non-probability convenience sampling was used to select the 50 short message services sent to the researcher about different subject matters by Malaysian and international students at UPM. Then, they were also content analyzed. The results indicated that the language used in students' e-mails and SMS messaging was full of spoken-like spelling, unconventional use of punctuation and abbreviations, and ungrammatical sentences. However, the more in-depth content analysis of the data revealed that the written language is being creatively adapted, developed, and enhanced to suit the conditions of the electronic communication age. Syntactical and lexical reductions are just strategies used to reduce effort, time and space.

Key words: electronic; communication; written

1. Background

Electronic communication technology has revolutionized the composing process and participation in writing activities. Since e-mail provides a non-threatening atmosphere (Kupelian, 2001) and an arena for students to present their work beyond classroom boundaries (Karchmer, 2001), they are encouraged to write (Leibowitz, 1999). However, this has led to a new variety of the written language, which seems to be deviant from the traditional norms.

Although language has always been changing, according to Biesenbach-Lucas and Wiesenforth (2001), due to developments in communication technology, its change has recently accelerated and led to interesting variations in written language use. For example, the evolution of an abbreviated language is due to the shortcomings and the technical restrictions of SMS as a means of communication. The existence of a common background between close friends and family members seems to be another reason for a reasonable use of syntactic and lexical short forms to save energy, space and time. Since only a tiny space is available to communicate, the texter has to condense meaning into a short message. A special shared knowledge is required to understand this language

variety, which is an indicator of group affiliation.

Danet (2001) found a tendency toward playfulness in email greetings and concluded that email communication is more informal in comparison to traditional norms governing the form of official letters. Trupe (2002) also found an emergent diversity in written communication in terms of word choice and syntax. However, Abras (2002) observed that writers in online discourse adhered to the principle of relevance to help readers reach maximal understanding with minimal processing effort.

Since the language of e-mail and SMS messages is associated with acronyms and changes in spelling norms (Abdullah, 1998), it is an inherently informal communication system. The electronic age has provided a new context for the writing process. University students are frequently engaged in electronic writing. Investigating the various features of written language found in e-mails and text messages will have implications for writing and writing instruction. As pointed out by Grinter and Eldridge (2001), it is interesting to see how and whether users find ways of adapting the media to make themselves understood.

2. Objectives and research questions

The purpose of this study is to analyze: (1) how the language used in international students' e-mails is different from the traditional letter-writing language; and (2) how users have overcome the shortcomings of SMS as a means of communication.

This study was an attempt to answer the following two questions:

(1) How is the language in university students' e-mails different from the traditional letter-writing language?

(2) How have users overcome the shortcomings of SMS as a means of communication?

3. Methodology and results

The target population for e-mail data collection in this study is the students who are a member of University Putra Malaysia (UPM)—International Students Association (ISA) called UPM-ISA yahoo group. Each member sends his/her non-political e-mail to the proclaimer who will post it to all members. In this study, 100 e-mails were randomly selected from among more than 300 e-mails sent to the researcher.

As to the SMS sampling, 50 texts sent to the researcher about different subject matters by Malaysian and international students at UPM were selected based on a non-probability convenience sampling.

After random selection of 100 e-mails, they were carefully content analyzed by the researcher. Generally, the main characteristics of the analyzed e-mails are as summarized in Table 1 based on their frequency.

As indicated in the above table, some e-mails lacked subject lines while others crammed the entire message body into the subject line. Standard spelling, punctuation, and capitalization, which are some of the characteristics of the normal written language, were not acceptable in the studied e-mails. Some e-mail users used SMS language in their messages. Lack of contact information in the signature, sloppy written message body, and other deviations found in the analyzed e-mails refer to the fact that the language used in the university students' e-mails was more informal and casual than the traditional letter-writing language.

After a non-probability convenience sampling, the SMS messages were carefully content analyzed by the researcher. Generally, the main text devices used to overcome the shortcomings of SMS as a means of communication without losing any meaning are as indicated in Table 2 based on their frequency.

Table 1   The main characteristics of the analyzed e-mails (N=100)

Categories	Frequency
Poor grammar	41
Misspelled words	38
Improper capitalization	32
Irrelevant punctuation	29
Sloppy and hastily written message body	24
Use of abbreviations and acronyms	22
No paragraphs	22
Lack of contact information in the signature	17
Improper or missing subject line	13
Rambling	9
Too short or too long content	6
Use of SMS language	3
Use of all capital letters or all lowercase	2
Improper tone and manner	2

Table 2   The main text devices found in the analyzed SMS's (N=50)

Single letters	Words	Frequency
R	Are	27
U	You	22
C	See	16
B	Be	7
Y	Why	2
Digits	Words	Frequency
2	Two, to, too, and word such as today	33
4	For and word such as forget	11
8	In word such as hate	1
Acronyms and abbreviations	Words	Frequency
PLZ	Please	18
TQ	Thank you	17
CU	See you	17
U2	You too	14
B4	Before	11
CUL	See you later	8
HRU	How are you?	6
IC	I see	6
L8R	Later	5
RUOK	Are you ok?	5
IOU	I owe you	2
FC	Fingers crossed	1

As delineated in the above table, since sending SMS messages can be time-consuming due to the troublesome text entry on mobile phones, SMS users employed text devices such as single letters, digits,

abbreviation, and acronyms to replace words. A lot of words were shortened and combined with numbers. Grammar, punctuation and capitalization were largely ignored. These devices seem to have developed as a natural reaction to the 160-character limit of the service to overcome the shortcomings of SMS as a means of communication. Text messages were in the form of greetings, invitations, congratulations, jokes, questions, etc. While a few of them were in full words and sentences, many others were as economical as possible. The language of SMS messages was a combination of spoken and written communication—a spoken mode in a written medium.

4. Discussions

As the finding of this study shows, a new variety of the written language is evolving in response to the increased use of the electronic means of communication such as e-mail and SMS. Along with advancements in electronic communications, changes in what and how students write seem quite natural. Depending on the degree of our adherence to the conventions of formal writing, these changes may seem positive or negative. Although some of the deviations coincide with the adage, "to err is to be human", every error spotted by the readers drops their opinion of the message's value. Therefore, some of the implications of this study are discussed here.

First, standard spelling, punctuation, and capitalization are some of the characteristics of the normal written language. It goes without saying that e-mail and SMS are used for speed communication in which the occasional error may slip by, but the cap key, for example, is not just for decoration. When the writer sends an e-mail with no capitalization and punctuation or an SMS full of abbreviations and acronyms for the sake of brevity and convenience without thinking about the position of the receivers, it is difficult for them not to assume the sender is lazy. Naturally, they will not take the sender seriously. The rules for electronic communication are the same as for any professional dealings. If the writer acts professional, people will see him/her as professional. If it is not important enough for the writer to make sure the message looks professional, it is not important enough for the receivers to read it.

Second, although it is fast and timesaving for e-mail users to use SMS language in their messages, changing attitudes and introducing something new takes time. Some people think it is rude and lazy and do not even use it on the phone. It is important to write clearly particularly if the readers are not native speakers of the language in which the email is written. Is it worthy for the speed increase to write a message like "R u in ur office 2moro?" which seems to be insulting and implies that the writer does not have time to give the reader? The credibility of the author will negatively be impacted if the hidden implication of a message is that his/her time is more valuable than the recipient's time.

Third, it is understandable that e-mail users are in hurry nowadays, but can they ignore the importance of proofreading? Is there any excuse for grammatical mistakes, which sometimes drive people nuts? They are judged by the quality of their writing. Their bad writing makes people look down on them. The inclusion of thanks, greetings, punctuation, capitalization and grammar will add to the credibility of the author while their omission to save a few precious seconds will show little respect for the reader.

Fourth, since first impressions count for a lot, improper or missing subject line can be very costly. The appearance of the text body is very important too. For example, writing the entire e-mail in lower or upper case shows nothing more than laziness or shouting at people and then expecting them to reply to the e-mail politely.

Fifth, the content analysis of the composition of the SMS language used in this study shows the development of language short forms in SMS communication, which retain both written and spoken language characteristics.

Speech and writing can be described both in terms of the production and reception contexts (Hughes, 1996). It is understandable that SMS users make use of linguistic short-cuts applying the properties of both written and spoken language to the less formal language used in text messages, but the conventions of politeness and formality often remain necessary. What needs to be emphasized here is that the use or overuse of abbreviations, acronyms, linguistic short-cuts, capitalization and punctuation should be based on the relationship of the sender and receiver of the message.

5. Conclusion

This study challenged the assumption that language is deteriorating because of increased use in electronic communication. Contrary to this assumption and regardless of the linguistic and non-linguistic problems observed in the analyzed e-mails and SMS messages, results suggest that language use is adapted creatively to the particular needs of the electronic age. A number of linguistic features and strategies used by the e-mail and SMS writers such as abbreviations, spoken-like spelling, less attention to punctuation and capitalization, as well as syntactical and lexical reductions were well suited to the conditions of electric communication to reduce space, time and effort.

Although e-mail and SMS are very useful communicating tools, it should be borne in mind that just like any other forms of communication, brevity, clarity, and attention to tone and manner apply equally to electronic communication. Omitting thanks, greetings, punctuation, capitalization and grammar might not be always a good choice. If a user employs them to save a few precious seconds and shows little respect for the reader who is in a higher position, this is a human problem rather than a technology problem. Therefore, although the language change due to the advancements in electronic communication technology is inevitable, the negative impact on the written language has to do with the technology users not the technology itself. The electronic communication technology has just led to more creativity in the written language so that it can reduce space, effort, time and cost.

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