TEXT MESSAGING VS ACADEMIC WRITING - A CASE STUDY**Simona BOȘTINĂ-BRATU****“Nicolae Bălcescu” Land Forces Academy, Sibiu, Romania****mbostinabratu@yahoo.fr**

Abstract: *The paper aims to bring into discussion the relationship between informal e-communication and formal writing, focusing on the use of SMS language, which is in a constant evolution, particularly among the young generations. SMS language is also a controversial topic today: some linguists and teachers are concerned that this abbreviated language, with its carefree spelling, its poor punctuation and grammar and its paucity of vocabulary is a real menace to students' quality of writing; others, on the contrary, consider it inspiring and useful as students with a good command of texting also possess a broader facility for language. But what do students have to say about the topic? In order to gain insight into how they view the role and impact of texting on their writing, a questionnaire was distributed to a group of army cadets. The answers show that although text messaging is widely used and is an important tool of communication among young people, students consider that it has a negligible impact on their overall writing abilities and they strongly appreciate the value of writing for their future career.*

Key words: abbreviations, acronyms, texting, writing, culture**1. Introduction**

Text messaging or short message service (SMS, also known under many other names, such as *textese* *txt-speak*, *txtese*, *chatspeak*, *txt*, *txtspk*, *txtk*, *txto*, *texting language*, *txtlingo*, *SMSish*, *txtslang*, or *txt talk*) has become one of the most rapidly expanding ways of communication in the world. It allows people to send and receive text messages that do not exceed 160 characters on their mobile phones. It reminds of the telegraphic language which seeks to use the fewest number of letters in order to produce ultra-concise words and express feelings when dealing with limited space, time and cost. Its main characteristic is, therefore, brevity. Although abbreviations have been used since 1987, with the introduction of e-mail interfaces, nowadays the diminutive, the brief and the simple are exceedingly valued in communication, especially by the 18-to-24-year-olds. They have been called the Generation C [1], being defined by their

digital connectivity: they socialize and share experiences through different devices such as smart-phones, digital players and computers more than any other age groups. They have replaced books and face-to-face communication with texting, social networks, messenger or chat.

Cell-phone texting has become the “preferred channel of basic communication” [2] and it is now commonplace for children at younger and younger ages to communicate with their friends via text messaging as opposed to phone conversations or even face-to-face. Unfortunately, by using this ungrammatical form of texting so frequently, they have introduced it in their “normal language”.

Therefore, the ubiquity of this new way of communication, undeniably both funny and practical, makes us wonder whether its effects are positive or detrimental on the young generation's verbal language use and academic writing.

So, after presenting the controversies surrounding the use of SMS language, we will discuss the way army cadets view the role and impact of texting on their writing.

2. Overall observations: authors' opinions

Does texting have any impact on students' knowledge of standard spelling and their writing abilities? Does it harm or improve it? Answers are controversial and have been subject to many concerns.

2.1. Disadvantages of text messaging

Since text messages have become part of everybody's life, parents, educators and sociolinguists worry about its educational effects. Some psychologists even suggest that text messaging may cause young people to have shorter attention spans.

Critical voices claim that the proliferation of SMS language causes the deterioration of language proficiency because of the paucity of vocabulary and of the collapse of the level of spelling as well, as texting is often full of misspellings.

Parents and educators are usually intolerant of texting language. This is, for example, what the parent of a 15-year old was reading in his son's summer job application: "i want 2 b a counselor because i love 2 work with kids." [3]

Romanian language teachers in high schools are more and more concerned about teenagers' impoverishment of vocabulary in recent years, caused by the lack of reading. They complain that students no longer have the patience to build nice phrases, ideas are expressed in short sentences, with poor punctuation and bad grammar, often without a subject or a predicate. Written language increasingly resembles stenography, like in this statement of a student in a Romanian written exam: *Gasitzi in txt. d mai jos cuvs. kre indplnsc fct. sint. d sub'*. (In the following text, identify the words fulfilling the syntactic function of subject).

Since English is tacitly accepted as the official language of the Internet, most acronyms and abbreviations used in non-English languages and scripts in SMS are

derived from English words, which explains the "anglicization" of these languages. The borrowings are also enriched by national acronyms and this amalgamation leads to a new form of language, often known in French, for example, as "Frenglish", in Spanish as "Spanglish", in Romanian as "Romglish" etc.

Here are only a few examples of the most common SMS specific abbreviations used in several languages:

English:

Rfd = After
2nite = Tonight
Gr8 = Great
kwl = Cool
B4 = Before
2moro = Tomorrow
gog = got to go
ooc = out of control
M8 = Mate
Peetsa = Pizza

French / Frenglish:

@2m1, a2m1 = à demain
@ 11di, a11di = à lundi
@+, a+ = à plus tard
asap (as soon as possible) = aussi vite que possible
b1sur = bien sûr
bjr = bonjour
bsr = bonsoir
C pa grave = c'est pas grave
cad = c'est à dire
dak = d'accord
komencava = comment ça va

Romglish:

Cf = ce faci? (how are you?)
bn = bine (I'm fine)
np = no problem
Cmf = ce mai faci? ((how are you doing?))
Cmz = ce mai zici? (what's up)
Dnd = do not disturb
afk = away from keyboard
10x = thanks
ms, msi = mersi
Bbl = Be Back Later / brb = be right back
poop = pup

asl pls = (age, sex, location, please)

Furthermore, Isabel Berman [4] considers that words within the SMS language that are very similar to their English-language counterparts can be confused by young users as the actual English spelling, and can therefore increase the prevalence of spelling mistakes.

On the other side, researcher Gillian Perrett notices the “de-anglicization” [5] of the English language as a result of its use and incorporation into non-English linguistic contexts. Other opponents of texting are also convinced that it undermines the properties of the English language and its rich heritage. Welsh journalist and television reporter John Humphreys [6] considers that SMS language is “wrecking our language”. The main problem, in his opinion, is ambiguity, illustrated with examples such as “lol”, which may either be interpreted to mean “laughing out loud”, “lots of love”, and “little old lady”, depending on the context in which it is being used. He also describes emoticons as “irritating” and essentially lazy behavior, and surmises that “sloppy” habits [7] gained while using textese will result in students’ growing ignorance of proper grammar and punctuation.

2.2. Advantages of text messaging

There is no doubt that text messaging has certain advantages over other means of communication, mainly phone calls or e-mail. For example, it allows to insert more information when there is limited space to write a message, or when the price of the message depends on its length. It also creates a sense of belonging to a social group, to a linguistic or generational community.

More and more teachers agree with SMS language, impressed by this creatively-formed new language. As learning a new language does not affect students’ proficiency in grammar, SMS language cannot affect their grammar either. On the contrary, texting has brought a new level of convenience, quickness and creativity to language classes. Many teachers have

noticed that the more adept students are at abbreviating, the better they do in spelling and writing.

Teachers in certain schools, especially in large cities, where mobile phone use is more common, have started to tailor some lessons around text messaging activities. These lessons, designed to build literacy skills, pique students’ interest and motivate them in learning by using SMS language as a useful tool in activities which are not commonly done in traditional classroom environments. Writing is then regarded as recreation rather than work. There are websites that provide interesting worksheets on SMS language, like, for example, <http://busyteacher.org>.

A teacher from Maryland University, Barbara Bass, was pointing out: “For a while, people were not writing anything. Now, people are actually seeing words on paper. In fact, according to another recent newspaper article, instant messaging and e-mail are creating a new generation of teenage writers, accustomed to translating their every thought and feeling into words. They write more than any generation has, since the days when telephone calls were rare and the mailman rounded more than once a day”. [9]

Furthermore, it has also been argued that text messages are communicative events characterized not only in terms of their linguistic form, but also their conversational or interactional function. Chandler [10] suggests that text-messages can be considered a genre of writing which distinguishes itself from other genres by some characteristics, such as: the combination of their comparatively short length, the relative concentration of non-standard typographic markers and their regularly “small-talk” content and solidary orientation.

3. Students’ opinion – a case study

A questionnaire was distributed to a group of 25 university cadets aged 18-20. It deliberately focused on the texting issue from their own perspective.

Students were asked to share their thoughts

on the importance of writing to their future success. They also had to tell us about the distinctions they make between formal and academic writing, on the one hand, and personal electronic communications they have with their friends, on the other hand.

First, all students own at least one cell phone, and 80% also have a personal computer. Almost 90% of phone-owning students send and receive text messages, most of them several times a day, this being their preferred channel of basic communication with friends and family. More than 80% use cell phones to do more than texting: they listen to music, share pictures with others, play games, access social networking sites or do school research on the Internet.

Students were asked about what prompts them to write. Students write for school in order to get a grade, complete an assignment, or gain access to a scholarship or to a much desired extracurricular activity. When they do it for school, it is to take notes in class, write essays or computer programs, create PowerPoint or multimedia presentations.

Outside of school, they write to friends using cell phones, social networking sites, or email in order to keep in touch and share information about events in their lives or the latest trends in music, fashion, sports. This also allows them more freedom to contact those that they do not see regularly.

Romanian cadets do not generally take a keen interest in SMS abbreviations in texting. Among the most frequently used they mention some Romglish ones, such as *lol*, *brb* or *blb*, *cf*, *bn*, *me2*, *sal*, *asl pls*; moreover, "a" becomes "@", "e" changes into "3", "o" is "0", and "i" is replaced by "!" For example, *!Nt3Rn3t* means *Internet*.

Therefore, students do not really consider chatting or text messaging as "writing", but an easier and faster way to interact with peers and family.

Among students who send text messages, email, instant messages or post on social networking sites, 80% say this communication has had no important

impact, either positive or negative, on the quality of writing they do for school. Some of them admit that they often use informal writing styles and ignore punctuation in their school assignments. Others, on the contrary, think that communicating electronically has helped improve their academic writing. All in all, they do not consider that it has harmed their school writing, or that it has had a negative impact on their overall writing skills.

Students enjoy non-school writing and, to a lesser extent, the writing they do for school, especially when they are assigned short writings, from a paragraph to one page.

Most of them believe that developing good writing is important to their future success.

4. The questionnaire

1. Do you have a cell phone?
2. Do you have a personal computer?
3. Why do you write?
 - a) to fulfill school assignments (give examples)
 - b) to apply for scholarships, extracurricular activities etc. (i.e. letters)
 - c) to communicate with peers and family
 - d) for other reasons (give examples)
4. Do you enjoy writing for school? Explain.
5. How many text messages do sent daily?
 - a) 0 to 10 b) more than 10
6. Do you use SMS specific abbreviations in your text messages to friends and family?
7. Is it easy for you to write SMS language?
8. Is it easy for you to read SMS language written by others?
9. Does it happen to you to use abbreviations and SMS language in your daily speaking or in your academic writing? (give examples)
10. Do you think text messaging makes you more or less likely to
 - a) write better because you can revise and edit easily
 - b) present ideas clearly
 - c) be more creative
 - d) take short cuts and not put effort into writing
 - e) communicate well

- f) use poor spelling and grammar
- g) write too fast and be careless

5. Conclusion

How did people manage before the advent of cell phones? What would happen now without them? Do they make us feel closer to one another? These are rhetorical questions, as these concerns are not new and we already know the answer: whether we like it or not, changes in the use of the language have always taken place. Even if SMS language is informal and deviates from the standard written language that is formally taught in schools, it is now part of our culture and has become the way of communication the most widely used by people of all ages, social and professional categories.

Many companies, such as PepsiCo's, Frito-Lay, McDonald's and others, have already attempted to pursue the teenage market by using SMS language abbreviations in their commercials. McDonald's in Korea for instance, has an online video commercial

which concludes with: "r u ready?"[11] Even TV is getting into texting. MTV is rolling out a new reality show called "Paris Hilton's My New BFF". (*bff* = *best friend for ever*) [12]

According to a recent survey, it resulted that more and more companies are now checking job applicants' activity on social networking sites. Universities and colleges, similarly, have started to look for candidates online. [13]

Judging by the responses given by the cadets to our questionnaire, texting is just one of many factors influencing the way language is changing; and there is no reason to worry about the future of standard written English or non-English languages. With proper instruction, SMS language can be a useful teaching tool, too. [14] It is up to educators to help students distinguish between slang, SMS abbreviations and correct language, and use them in their appropriate contexts.

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