
Assessing the Nigerianness of SMS text-messages in English

INNOCENT CHILUWA

To what extent does the distinctiveness of Nigerian English come through in text messages?



Introduction

In the history of the English language certain developments have left significant linguistic marks on the language. As new developments and cultural forms occur, new words and styles of expression evolve with them and spread. This is true of the new linguistic style that is associated with the Global System for Mobile Communications (GSM) revolution in Nigeria since 2001. GSM has brought with it a variety of English that is situationally distinctive and context sensitive (Awonusi, 2004:45). GSM came to Nigeria with the licensing of *MTN* and *Econet* (now *Celtel*) in 2001 during the Obasanjo administration, after many years of decaying telecommunication infrastructure. Within a short time after the introduction of mobile telecommunication, almost a million subscribers mainly in the cities made a rush at possessing mobile phones and were willing to pay any tariff. N50 (50 nairas) were paid per minute per call as against N15 per text message. This was said to be the highest rate in Africa, causing many subscribers to opt for text-messaging as a cheaper alternative.

Function of SMS-text messages

SMS (short message service) is the device for sending text messages that enables GSM subscriber send short messages and pay less as against a higher tariff on oral telephone calls. The short message service gives the subscriber the advantage of choosing a minimum number of words that would communicate comprehensively but briefly with minimum cost. Subscribers are constrained by space and time. Most handsets nowadays allow a maximum of

250 characters including space, symbols and punctuation marks. So subscribers are actually forced to create new linguistic forms to enable them maximize the available space and say all that has to be said. Text messages have become a dynamic written communication strategy, occurring naturally in practical communication contexts. While they do not always conform to lexical or grammatical rules, their content is usually recognised by its writers and receivers as coherent (Onadeko, 2000; Cook, 1989).

Text messaging began with features that fitted well with the linguistic features of the informal variety of Nigerian English (Awonusi, 2004) but its functions in recent times cut across both formal and informal communication contexts while exhibiting informal language features. For example, text users communicate with friends, spouses, clients and



INNOCENT CHILUWA was born in Nigeria in 1964. He attended the University of Calabar and obtained a degree in English & Literary Studies in 1995. He also holds Masters and PhD degrees in English Language from the Universities of Lagos and Ibadan. He presently teaches in the Department of English and Literary Studies, Covenant University, Ota, Nigeria. He teaches English morphology, semantics, discourse analysis, pragmatics and English for the mass media. His research interest and specialization are discourse analysis, pragmatics and media studies. Dr Chiluiwa is married to Molly.

even employers. People nowadays receive invitations to employment interviews mostly through text messages. And even when formal invitation letters or cards are sent out, they are in many instances preceded by SMS-text messages. Text messaging has become a part of our communication system and exhibits features that are distinct from almost all other discourse types.

This paper seeks to examine the extent to which text messages in Nigeria exhibit features of Nigerian English, especially lexical items, coinages or borrowings that reflect the Nigerian socio-cultural context. It also seeks to investigate whether text-messages that draw on Nigerian English, drawing from standard or non-standard usage or both. This study also focuses on possible new trends in text messaging in Nigeria. As descriptions of Nigerian English are no longer uncommon, and for reasons of space, Nigerianisms will not be discussed here. Suffice it to say that it displays many “New English” features in common with other parts of the world. The data comes from 61 SMS-text message samples collected by the author between 2006 and 2007 within Lagos and Ota area (*see box for a selection of these*). Samples consist of actual communication that took place between interlocutors residing in Lagos, Zaria, South-west and South-east areas of Nigeria.

In the attempt to characterise SMS-text-messages, vis-à-vis Nigerian English, sociolinguistic and discourse approaches are particularly valuable. Discourse in this context refers to language in use, constructed in spoken or written texts in practical communication. It is convenient to divide my data into three broad categories namely (i) Economic Text Messages – associated with business and commerce, (ii) Social Text Messages – associated with religion, politics, education and other social concerns, and (iii) Personal Text Messages – associated with greetings, felicitations, expressing of feelings, prayers etc.

From the table it is obvious that “personal text messages” (PTM) occurred most frequently, representing 60% of the data. These are messages that are associated with well wishing, prayers and expressions of feeling among interlocutors. SMS text messages are thus a form of written communication that are mostly used in informal settings. As we shall see later, economic text messages (ETM), i.e. ones associated with business and commerce,

Table 1: occurrence of types of text messages in the data

| | No | % |
|------------------------|----|-----|
| Economic text messages | 07 | 11 |
| Social text messages | 17 | 29 |
| Personal text messages | 37 | 60 |
| Total | 61 | 100 |

conform more to the standard written English than the unconventional English style that is prevalent in the personal and social text messages, (STM).

Elements of Nigerianness in SMS text Messages

Economic text messages

Linguistic studies have suggested that Nigerian English tends to be “bookish” and text-based. The question can therefore be raised whether ETM conforms to Nigerian English. It is quite clear from the data, however, that expressions that are peculiarly Nigerian, such as local idioms, coinages and loan words that reflect the Nigerian cultural psyche are completely absent from the ETM data base. Consider the messages in Panel 1.

The mention of ‘Nig’ in the second line of the first text message does not necessarily make the whole text Nigerian. *Any* first language English text can make reference to Nigeria. The ETMs in the above box are respectively concerned with share offers, buy and selling of an academic journal, the cost of sending SMS

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 - “Ur phone’s in this hand. Is ur form in d other? 8 billion ordinary shares of 50k each @ N7.50 per share in Transcorp’s IPO! It’s Nig, 100% world class! Take it.”
 - “JCE vol. 2 now out, sending 7 cpies, 2 are ur own. 5 for sale @ 500 naira per copy.”
 - “Transaction notification via SMS now attracts N10 per SMS. Notification via email remains free. To subscribe pls call...” GTB.
 - “Best wishes for the New Year from Trustfund. Your Trustfund mobile code is ... To check your account text TRUSTFUND”

to a bank, and a banking advertisement. While some features of text-messaging like abbreviations, language contractions, and sensational spellings are noticeable, not a single instance of Nigerian usage occurs. We can even see that text messages from GT Bank (Guaranty Trust Bank), Trustfund and Union Registers are generally formal, straightforward and standard both in form and structure. Significantly, much of text message spelling conventions such as 2 for 'to' or 'too'; 4 for 'for', & for 'and' etc. are not as prevalent as they are in Social and Personal Text Messages. This is due to the purely formal business context which is reflected in the language. Organisations are probably mindful of the possibility that certain coding of language in text messages is indeed problematic to decode and business communication is traditionally persuasive and kept generally simple for effect. Words like *shares, sale, transaction, subscribe, notification, or account* (as we see in the Economic Text Messages) are key business and commercial terms, which of course form the themes of the messages. These therefore must be clearly written, even while being communicated through an informal medium of SMS. So we can conclude that SMS text messages that are associated with business are formal in its style and generally do not generally include such forms such as local colour or culture specific items.

Social text messages

I classify as Social Text Messages (STM) those messages that involve more than just the receiver and sender. In other words a larger social context is involved. Such messages generally exhibit features of text-messaging both in structure and style and do carry some features that reflect the Nigerian socio-cultural environment. In the data about 41% of the texts exhibit some aspects of Nigerianness. Some of these text messages are exemplified in Panel 2.

Features of Nigerian English are reflected in Nigerian personal names such as Chinanu (Igbo), Adebayo (Yoruba); Nigerian town, cities and state (Ota, Abuja, Lagos, Abia); Nigerian institutions (Unilag – University of Lagos); Aso Rock (Nigeria's seat of power) Nigerian coinages (CUSAT- Covenant University Scholastic Aptitude Test; GIC – Global International College); Loanwords from Nigerian indigenous languages, e.g. *ndewo* (a general

- “Cmplmnts. pls text me wen i can see u on campus or at hm. Addrs pls. Adebayo. Gic/unilag. Ex. Colig.”
- “Campaign ‘wars’ pd off in: joy 4 offering self 7 impact that Abia needs her elites who rather develop othr states & nations. Now, I’m in Lagos 2 babysit Ruby. Tnx.”
- “Oga I want u 2 give me real support 4 my church wedding on June 23, 07. It’ll b a big relief if u can finance mineral & malt, 2 cost btw ₦13 to ₦15 tsand.”
- “Hello sir, been trying 2 call u 4 sometime now. Am in Ota. Shall be comin in 2night. God bless u.
- “Dr. ndewo! Plse tell Chinanu dat I will lodge 5 thousand at past 3pm today. She shld cope while I get ready to lodge more money.”
- “D Amorc is in Abuja 4 Nortrn Genral meetin. Dr Kenneth is natnl president. They’re billd 2 visit Aso Rock! Circulate 2 intercessors.
- “De class was slated 4 2moro but CUSAT has interrupted dat schedule so what about tues day @2pm? Have a nice wknd.”

mode of greeting of the Igbos), *Oga* (meaning ‘master’ or ‘boss’ – a Yoruba word that mainly occurs in Nigerian Pidgin English. Of all the groups, the STE exhibits most of Nigerianness in text message English. Because STE represents social communication, it is not surprising that elements that are culture specific and socially oriented are prevalent in the texts. Other features of text-messaging such as abbreviations and manipulations of spellings are freely used because senders and receivers are individuals, rather than business organisations. Communication at this level is informal and language here does not only communicate meaning but also constructs relationships, explicate world views and indeed predict certain levels of social understandings.

Personal Text Messages

I see these messages as close communication between the two persons involved in the SMS, and not implicating other persons or social organisations, institutions etc. About 90% of the PTMs in my data base are associated with Christianity – i.e. conveying prayers and messages that reflect Christian feelings and

sentiments. It is surprising that more local aspects of Nigerian English do not surface in these personal messages. The reason is probably due to the misconception that Christian ideals are generally at variance with indigenous culture. Only four (4) out of thirty-seven (37) personal text messages bear a Nigerian mark, only in personal names such as *Rosilu* (Yoruba), *Onyinye* (Igbo) and *Idika Eke* (Igbo). A few examples of PTE from the data are shown in Panel 3.

It is possible that there is a clash between the personal tone of these messages and the more formal institution of religion. Hence words and expressions in the data are drawn from formal educated Nigerian English, with the requisite changes of spelling and the coding convention of text messaging.

Table 2 shows that out of 61 SMS text messages only 11, or 18% of the data, reflect the

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“My praya 4 u: De glory of d Lord wil be yr great reward, wher ordas ar limitd u'l be liftd. D peak of ordas will be yr beginin. Sori l'vn't cald, l'v bin busy, nxt wk”

“U're a child of destny, meant 4 de top, created 4 impact, configured 4 excellence, packaged 2 be distinguished, called 2 be great & ordained 2 be celebrated...”

“U crossed my mind jst now, so I whisperd a prayr 2 ask God 2 take gud care of u, protct u, provide 4 u, abv all grant u ur heart desire”

“An angel vistd me dis evening n I askd hm if u're ok. He laughed & showd me a picture of u wrappd in God's arms.”

“Without ur permission, I askd d Lord 2 bles u, pamper u, guard n shower u wt hs merices n I ope u don't mind.”

“Pls opn ur door 4 dse visitrs waiting outside 2 come in coz dey nd a place in ur life, they're – happiness, joy, peace & prosperity. Pls open ur door.”

Table 2: representation of Nigerianness in the data

| | No | % |
|------------------------|-----------|-----------|
| Economic text messages | 0 | 0 |
| Social text messages | 07 | 41 |
| Personal text messages | 04 | 11 |
| Total (61) | 11 | 18 |

Nigerian socio-cultural environment. As we have noted earlier, the Nigerian socio-cultural context is reflected in the Nigerian English by the occurrence of lexical items with “local colour”. These include new coinages, some which are influenced by elements of transfer from the indigenous languages. Some others are items with culture bound features with some inevitable elements of “Nigerianness” including words that are directly borrowed from the local languages. We can conclude therefore that so far SMS text messages in Nigeria reveal very little of the distinctiveness of Nigerian English, whether formal or informal.

Emerging varieties of SMS text messages

New entries in the data base of text-messaging are likely, as people try to become more creative and apply what Awonusi (2004) has called “the law of energetics” in response to the constraints of time, space, energy and cost. While it is difficult to conclude that some new items and trends have emerged over the years, it is also certain that certain abbreviations, spellings and symbols are relatively new. Text messaging is constantly evolving, as some of the variation of types of abbreviations suggested in Panel 4.

As with text messaging world wide, the most striking feature of the examples in my data base is the abbreviation of words, often made possible by phonetic spellings. This kind of spelling generally alters or ignores the conventional morphological representation of some particular words. Much of the spelling corresponds with the pronunciations of uneducated Nigerian English, (e.g. *that*, *dat*; *those* – *dose*; *order* – *oda*; *Greet* – *grit* etc.), though it must be conceded that the first two examples are also common world wide. Abbreviations are of three main types. Firstly, some words like *you*, *at*, *the* or *and* are regularly replaced by symbols (i.e. U, D, @, or &). The first two have effectively become new orthographical representations, while the “@” and “&” are telegraphic signs already present in the typographical conventions of printing. Thirdly, some place names in the data are generally abbreviated or reduced to mnemonics e.g. *Unilag* for ‘University of Lagos’; *V.I. for* ‘Victoria Island’, etc. A second type of abbreviation uses alphanumeric conventions – i.e. an admixture of letters and numerals as in the examples *be4*, *2day*, *2mrw*.

Articles

| | |
|------|----------------|
| The | <i>d, de</i> |
| Some | <i>sm, som</i> |

Demonstratives

| | |
|-------|------------------|
| That | <i>dat</i> |
| Those | <i>dose, dos</i> |
| This | <i>dis, ds</i> |
| These | <i>diz, dz</i> |

Personal pronouns, possessives and reflexives, etc.

| | |
|----------|------------------|
| You | <i>U</i> |
| Him | <i>hm</i> |
| Your | <i>ur</i> |
| Her | <i>hr</i> |
| They | <i>dey, dy</i> |
| Them | <i>dem, dm</i> |
| Yours | <i>ur's, urs</i> |
| Yourself | <i>urself</i> |
| Other | <i>oda, odr</i> |

Auxiliary verbs/modals

| | |
|-------|----------------------|
| Are | <i>re, r</i> |
| Have | <i>hv, ve</i> |
| Will | <i>wll, ll</i> |
| Would | <i>wd, 'd</i> |
| Shall | <i>shll</i> |
| Could | <i>kud, cud, kld</i> |
| Been | <i>bin, bn</i> |

Prepositions

| | |
|----------|------------------|
| To | <i>2</i> |
| For | <i>4</i> |
| At | <i>@</i> |
| About | <i>abt</i> |
| Above | <i>abv</i> |
| Before | <i>be4, b4</i> |
| Behind | <i>behd, bhd</i> |
| Around - | <i>arn'd</i> |
| Between | <i>btw, btwn</i> |

Adverbs

| | |
|----------|----------------------------|
| Tomorrow | <i>2morrow, 2mrw, tmrw</i> |
| Today | <i>2day, 2dy</i> |
| Forever | <i>4ever, 4evr</i> |
| Tonight | <i>2night, 2nite</i> |
| Next | <i>nxt</i> |

Link words

| | |
|------|-----------------|
| And | <i>&, n</i> |
| But | <i>bt</i> |
| Who | <i>wh</i> |
| That | <i>dt, dat</i> |

Nouns/verbs/adjectives

| | |
|-------------|-------------------------------|
| Thanks | <i>tanx, tks</i> |
| Month | <i>mth</i> |
| Capsules | <i>capsls</i> |
| Move | <i>muv</i> |
| Want | <i>wnt</i> |
| Please | <i>pls, plz</i> |
| Thought | <i>tot, thot</i> |
| News | <i>nus</i> |
| Continue | <i>cntnue</i> |
| Submitting | <i>sbmtg</i> |
| Call/called | <i>cl, kl, culd, kld, cld</i> |
| Loaves | <i>loavs</i> |
| National | <i>natnl</i> |
| Sorry | <i>sorri</i> |
| Sir | <i>sa</i> |
| Courage | <i>korig</i> |
| Greet | <i>grit</i> |
| Hope | <i>hop, ope, hp</i> |
| Just | <i>jst</i> |
| Peaceful | <i>piecfl</i> |
| Exhausted | <i>exhstd</i> |
| Good | <i>gud</i> |
| Number | <i>numba, nmba</i> |
| Weekend | <i>wkend, wknd</i> |
| Paid | <i>pd</i> |
| Order | <i>oda</i> |

Clauses

| | |
|-----------|------------------|
| I have | <i>I've, I'v</i> |
| I haven't | <i>I vn't</i> |
| I am | <i>I'm</i> |
| You are | <i>u're, u'r</i> |
| You will | <i>U'll, u'l</i> |

Greetings

| | |
|--------------|----------------------|
| Good morning | <i>gmornin</i> |
| Good evening | <i>gevnin</i> |
| Hello | <i>helo</i> |
| Good night | <i>gnite, gnight</i> |

Implications of text messaging to language teaching and learning

The amount of dynamism and creativity in text messaging shows how language users respond quickly to social changes in relation to their language needs. In Nigeria, text messaging is mostly used in the urban areas and this “implies that SMS texts in Nigeria reflect urban Nigerian English” (Awonusi 2004:49). The

implication of this is that SMS text messaging does not necessarily pose any threat to language teaching and learning, since it is mostly popular among educated Nigerian English users. Only a fairly proficient user of English can effectively manipulate spelling in the technical context of the SMS. In other words text messaging does not imply lack of proficiency in English, rather a level of creativity associated with proficient users.

However, teachers of English in Nigeria are beginning to express a great deal of concern about text messaging as obvious signs of text message spelling conventions and orthography are manifesting in students' essays, even in important certificate examinations. Clearly urban students are learning to cope with two different orthographical representations of the same language. Teachers need to focus on inculcating the standard spelling conventions, via their traditional methods. (There is nothing they can teach youngsters about SMS spelling!) However, teachers should not forget that the full use of a language depends on flexibility of usage in varied socio-cultural contexts. From one perspective, rather than being a destroyer of language skills, text messaging is one method of testing language proficiency.

Conclusion

This paper shows that SMS text-messages do not manifest sufficient features of typical Nigerian English to be considered a special regional register. The nature of the medium minimises reference to social and cultural ele-

ments of the Nigerian environment in all text types examined. The study also shows that text messaging is dynamic, and subject to individual variation and change and may probably never stabilise, since no stabilizing agency exists. Lastly, text messaging does not pose any challenge to English teaching and learning in Nigeria because both teachers and learners understand where to draw the line. ■

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