

The Sociolinguistics of Mobile Phone SMS Usage in Cameroon and Nigeria

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Abstract

Exploiting tools such as questionnaires, observation, and sample SMS texts, this study has made an inventory of the linguistic and cultural specificities that have forged mobile phone SMS (short message service) culture in Cameroon and Nigeria. The study further examines how both Cameroonian and Nigerian texters have reinvented conventional linguistic and communicative practices to express their thoughts. In doing all this, the work attempts to show the similitude as well as differences that exist between text messages from both countries. The corpus for this study comprises 300 SMS text messages collected from 72 informants from both countries. The data was analysed in the light of some views and theories on written and spoken discourse communication (Bloom and Gumperz, 1972; Hymes, 1972; and Herrings, 2007). From the analysis, it was realised that SMS language use is influenced by several interrelated factors such as the relationship between texters, the goal of communication and the technological setting of text input. It was noticed that Cameroonian and Nigerian text messages undergo almost the same linguistic adjustments such as the use of letter/number homophones, non-conventional spellings, accent stylisations, omission of punctuation marks, lack of word inter spacing, use of onomatopoeic expressions/exclamations as well as complex capitalisations.

Finally, the findings revealed that some background knowledge of Cameroonian and Nigerian cultures is essential in order to properly appreciate text messages from these countries. Hence, the medium like the society' world view determines SMS linguistic culture in both countries though the medium remains a stronger determinant.

Introduction

Linguists such as Ling (2001) have all sought to analyse the effects of the ever-growing modern technology on language. As pointed out in Guth (1980), modern science and technology constantly need new words and expressions to cover their concepts and ideologies. Therefore, new inventions bring with them new vocabularies, expressions and attitudes. With the development of New Information and Communication Technology (henceforth NICT) and especially with the advent of the cell phone and its services, new words, expressions and syntactic structures have infiltrated into the linguistic continuum of Cameroonian and Nigerian texters.

In fact, a keen observer will accept that mobile phone usage differs substantially in technological innovation and in the density of its social spread from the fixed phone. With the advent of the mobile phone, as earlier intimated, all conversational maxims have been defiled. What is said and how it is said largely depends on the interlocutors. The mobile phone SMS service has developed rapidly since its introduction. It is very popular throughout the world, especially amongst young urbanites as it allows for voiceless communication, useful in noisy environments (bars and restaurants). Because of the limited message length and tiny user interface of mobile phones, SMS users commonly make extensive use of numbers for words (For example "4" in place of the word "for"), and the omission of vowels as in the phrase "Txt msg" which actually stands for "text message". Also, the syntactic structure of SMS texts is, for the most part, highly disjointed and incoherent. It is observed that texters have sacrificed form for content. Much attention is placed on what is to be communicated than on how it is communicated. This causes SMS to be credited with creating a language. Since most SMS communication is interpersonal, one may strongly rely on pragmatics and shared knowledge for interpretation. The character space limitation of the messages themselves and the cumbersome text input make the

terse and otherwise rude behaviour acceptable among texters (Ling 2003). Despite the supposed awkwardness of text input, it should be recalled that texters seem not to be quite willing to invest time and effort in creating and tailoring their messages as they share information.

Review of literature

The preoccupation of this chapter is to appreciate current thinking in the areas of linguistic variation and the impact of New Information and Communication Technology (henceforth NICT) on the English language. Many studies, it should be noted, have so far been carried out in the domain of Short Message Service (SMS) and language in a bid to establish the effect that this medium has on language. However, much work in this field of research is being carried out in the occidental while very little research has been done by Cameroonian researchers either on the language of NICT in general or SMS in particular. This kind of research is relatively recent in Cameroon and has attracted little academic attention.

Below is a cross section of critical commentaries made in relation to the language of SMS. Most of these works have sought to describe the structural features of SMS messages and to ascribe a genre to SMS language : spoken or written language (Crispin, 2003 ; Hard Af Segerstad, 2003 ; Birkerts, 1995 ; Ling, 2002 ; Belmore and Collot, 2003, Bodomomo and Lee, 2004).

Beslisle's (1996) study centred around the effects of e-mails on language use. Unlike Barker's, Beslisle's work investigated the benefits of using e-mail in the ESL writing class by teachers and students. From this study, he concludes that e-mail in ESL classes is of paramount importance in the teaching-learning process, given that shy and slow-to-understand students can do some writing all alone and freely too, unlike if they were to interact among peers in class. Hard Af Segerstad (2002) in an article entitled "The pragmatics of SMS written by Swedish Texters" presents some of the findings of a linguistic analysis of SMS messages written by Swedish users. The purpose of his paper was to highlight concerns about the ways that standard varieties and conventional linguistic and communicative practices have been affected. He was equally concerned about the "Moral and academic panic" caused by the use of SMS language by Swedish. His paper revealed the following findings: that Swedish texters make use of word shortenings, contractions, "G" clippings, emoticons, inflectional endings and new abbreviations in analogy with unconventional abbreviations of English. He posits that English words and phrases showed up in the middle of messages otherwise written in Swedish. Thurlow Crispin (2003) in his article captioned "Generation TXT" presents the sociolinguistics of young people's text messaging. His paper centres around discursive analyses of qualitative data arising from an investigation of 159 older teenagers use of mobile telephone text messages. With a corpus of 544 text messages, he examines the linguistic forms as well as the sociolinguistic "maxims" that these text messages portray. In fact, he analyses the maxims of a) brevity and speed, b) paralinguistic restitution and c) phonological approximation. He holds that the dual maxim of brevity and speed is manifested most commonly in a) abbreviations of lexical items, b) minimal use of capitalisation. He argues that paralinguistic restitution is highlighted via the use of emoticons; meanwhile phonological approximation is achieved through letter-number homophones such as 'b4' and 'c u l8er'. Thurlow believes that the way and manner in which young teenagers use language in their text messages makes them children of the "text generation".

Bodomomo and Lee (2004) in their paper "Linguistic Features of SMS texts in Hong Kong" observe the distinctive features that are potentially specific to the Hong Kong context. The paper examines the cultural and linguistic properties of Hong Kong SMS texts. Their study reveals that Hong Kong texters make use of Letter/number homophones such as 88 "bye bye" (in English resembles the pronunciation of '8' in Cantonese). Similarly 99 stands for 'nite nite' which literally means 'good night'. They further cite the influence of users' native tongue on users' text messages. For example, Cantonese "tomolo" for "tomorrow". The 'r' sound is changed to 'l'. This is an attempt to resemble one of the problems faced by many learners of English in Hong Kong- the inability to pronounce 'r' or the free variation between these two alveolar liquids. From a study conducted at the Department of communication and Science at the City University in London, Collot and Belmore (2003) in an article "SMS Essay rings alarm bells for youth literacy" examine the potential damaging effects on literacy caused by their use of text messaging. After collecting students' scripts, they were surprised to see a teenager's essay beginning: "my smmr hols wr cwot. B4 we usd 2go2ny2c my bro, his gf & thr 3 kds ftf.", translated "My summer holiday was a complete waste of time. Before, we used to go to New York to see my brother, his girl friend and their three kids face to face". They hold that this child's essay was riddled with "hieroglyphics" and translation into English was pretty difficult. From their findings, they intimated that the

decline in standard of grammar and written language is partly linked to text messaging. They hold that "There must be rigorous efforts from all quarters of the educational system to stamp out the use of texting as a form of written language so far English study is concerned. Kasesniemi and Rautiaineu (2005) made a detailed study of SMS use by Finnish 13-18 year olds. They reported that "Finnish teachers have been worried about the negative effects that the free-form, often quickly written text messages may have" particularly as "SMS communication does not rely on traditional grammar or punctuation required for texts written for school". They contend that text messaging leads to bad spelling, bad grammar, and a general dumping ground of the English language. However, they hold that literacy is not just about spelling. The need for extreme shortness makes it legitimate to use unconventionalised forms of writing; so that even shy students feel free to communicate because they do not have to expose themselves in a highly personalised way.

Contrary to popular expectation, the use of text messages abbreviation is linked positively with literacy achievements, according to a work carried out by researcher at Coventry University by Plester and Wood (2006). Their study captioned "Children, texts and English- new research" explores how the use of text abbreviations might be related to the skill children need in reading and writing. This was in response to concern raised by Parents and teachers about whether text messages could damage a child's ability to use Standard English. The study reveals that students usually use 'youth codes' such as "dat fing", "gonna" and "wanna". Finally, the research reveals that there is no evidence to link a poor ability in Standard English to the habit of texting. On the contrary, they attest that "children who were the best at using "textism" were also found to be the better spellers and writers".

Al-khatib, M.A. (2008) probes into the use of E-mails as a mode of communication by Jordanian university students. He sets out to determine the full extent of communication achieved by these students and secondly, to see whether the e-mail, as a new mode of communication, signifies the emergence of a new genre of writing. From his findings, it was realised that e-mail messages follow "rules" for style and conventions that differ from the norms of handwritten letters. He further holds that the students' messages communicated a great deal of information about the writers, their style of writing, and the socio-cultural norms of their society. Chilwa, I. (2008) studies the extent to which text-messaging constructs Christian Values, belief systems and sentiments in Nigeria. Using data from Christians in the Pentecostal denomination, Chilwa study shows that with its peculiar orthographic convention and style, text-messaging has become popular among Christians adherents not just because it is short, cheap and fast but that it is individualistic and fits well into a context where respect for individuals is emphasized.

Within our national territory, Sala (2006) in an article "Mobile Phone Usage in Cameroon", he examines the peculiarities of mobile phone usage in Cameroon. This article investigates the use of beeping, text messages and the quality of conversation over the mobile phone. The article further probes into the differences between cell phone and fixed phone. The writer concludes that, aspects of fixed phone culture such as greetings, caller's identity and goodbye have disappeared with cell phone communication, hence reducing the quality and quantity of conversation on cell phone.

Camilla (2004) carries out a comparative analysis of Cameroonian and British e-mail messages. In her study, she examines structure and language use and the innovations that have occurred in the way people write English as a result of e-mail. She further looks at the how and why e-mails should be used in English language teaching and learning process. She establishes the similarities and differences between British e-mails and Cameroon e-mails. She holds that both e-mails usually begin with expressions or words such as "dear john", "dear sir"; "o boy", "hello", and "hi babs". At the level of closing, Camilla considers "I look forward to meeting you in June" to be British and "while waiting to hear from you" to be Cameroon. She further argues that British e-mailers make great use of emoticons such as :), ++. They equally make use of hesitation makers such as "er", "mum", "errh". However, while Camilla's work examines several aspects of e-mail language, our major concern is based on the language of SMS. Camilla (2006) in an article entitled "Orality and Literacy in Cameroon E-mail Discourse" postulates the existence of a relatively new discourse in the world based on Computer-Mediated-Communication (CMC). Drawing from the works of researchers such as Johnson (1998), December (1993), Abdullah (1998), who have categorised E-mail discourse as "hybrid", Camilla focuses her paper on how, through e-mails, contemporary spoken and written English are losing their identities as distinct forms of language. To substantiate the discussion, examples of authentic e-mail messages from Cameroon were indicated. Her investigation reveals that Cameroon e-mail discourse is neither oral nor literal, but a new genre in its own right. Her paper has a direct bearing with my work in that e-mail just like SMS messages both possess qualities of spoken and written language.

Objectives

This study follows from a previous study carried out by Awonsi (2004) on “...A Sociological study of SMS text messages as register and Discourse in Nigeria”. The main interest of this study is to examine and evaluate the language of mobile phone SMS in Cameroon and Nigeria in order to bring out their linguistic and cultural specificities. From the assumption that language varies in relation to the different users, this work sets out to compare how texters from both countries have succeeded in re-inventing conventional linguistic forms to communicate. While accounting for the use of this “new” linguistic forms, the endeavour, it is hoped, will equally discuss the communicative functions that these messages perform.

Hypothesis

This research project rests on the underlying premise that there is an undercurrent of syntactic differences that runs through Cameroonian and Nigerian text messages engendered by the socio-cultural backgrounds of the texters.

Data and method

This part of the study discusses the procedures of data collection and presents the method of data analysis. The corpus for this work came from various sources. Firstly, it was the product of many years of observation of Cameroonian and Nigerian text messages. Other methods of data collection include questionnaire and sample SMS texts. The population for this study were selected from Cameroon and Nigeria, particularly in the towns of Yaounde, Buea, Calabar and Enugu. This is because the culture of SMS texting is particularly popular among urbanites. Those tested include users of the mobile phone SMS, with an average level of education randomly selected. They were university students and lecturers. Three main tools were used for this research: Questionnaires, observation and sample SMS texts.

A questionnaire was designed and administered to 72 informants. Out of the 334 samples distributed, 70 were collected and this gave a return rate of 97.22%. The questionnaire was randomly distributed to students and lecturers in Cameroon and Nigeria. The questionnaire consisted of 12 questions designed to test their knowledge on mobile phone SMS usage.

A corpus of 600 text messages was gathered from randomly selected informants. As earlier mentioned, informants were required by the researcher to forward SMS texts they had written to friends and relatives and not those they had received for ethical and methodological reasons. Ethically, it is not proper for the researcher to ask for messages a respondent has received since implicitly one includes data from persons who have not given their consent to participate in the study. Methodologically, one does not know the linguistic and social backgrounds of the senders for messages a respondent has received. These messages were downloaded and analysed on the basis of language features and sociolinguistic variables. We tried to be as loyal and faithful as possible to the original texts. The translations also tried to retain the spelling, punctuation, capitalization and flavour of the original messages. The data collected was analysed taking into consideration the linguistic and cultural specificities and relating them to the regions of Cameroon and Nigeria.

Data analysis

Distribution of SMS linguistic features by region

This section of the study probes into the linguistic features found in the SMS messages from both countries. It also establishes the frequency of occurrence. This is to evaluate the extent to which these features have impacted the writings of texters. It hopes to identify how this medium of communication, which for the most part is predominantly dialectic, reveals characteristic linguistic and cultural features of both countries.

Table 1: Percentage frequencies and distribution of SMS linguistic features by region

Features		Cameroon		Nigeria	
		Occurrence	% frequency	Occurrence	% frequency
Initialization		100	33.33%	115	38.33%
Truncation		45	15%	85	28.33%
Vowel Deletion		278	92.66%	280	93.33%
Alphanumeric homophony		198	66%	184	61.33%
Letter homophony		224	74.66%	244	81.33%
Logographic emoticons		08	02.66%	38	12.66%
punctuation	Fullstop	291	97%	296	96.66%
	Comma	173	57.66%	164	54.66%
	Question mark	138	46%	124	41.33%
	Exclamation mark	14	04.66%	105	35%
Lack of inter-word spaces		04	1.33	13	4.33%
Onomatopoeic expressions		07	02.33%	41	13.66%
Total		1480	493.29%	1689	560.95%

Before we take in turn each of the linguistic features on the table above and discuss them highlighting their peculiarities, it would be proper to analyse the table in general. The results reveal that SMS texts in Cameroon and Nigeria undergo almost the same linguistic adjustments such as letter/number homophones, word truncations, initialisations, vowel omissions, haphazard use of capitalisation and logographic emoticons. The table, however, reveals that full stops, vowel deletion and letter homophones are the three most commonly used SMS linguistic features (in both countries). Contrarily, lack of inter word spaces and logographic emoticons appear to be the least employed. Unlike traditional classification of abbreviations in language, SMS texters longer restrict themselves to acronyms and initialisations but use other forms of word shortenings such as vowel omission, 'g' clipping and letter homophones. From the total percentage score, it is glaring that SMS culture is more deeply rooted in the Nigerian society than in Cameroon. In fact, the total token percentage for Nigeria stands at 560.95% as against 493.29% for Cameroon.

Initialisation

The analysis of data reveals that texters from both countries make use of initialisation. Initial letters are used to represent whole words or sentences. Initialisation, it should be noted, constitutes one of the methods of shortening in text messaging employed by Cameroonian and Nigerian texters. Results from the corpus show that Nigerian texters make more use of initialisation (38.33%) than Cameroonian texters (33.33%). Nevertheless, texters from both countries are heavy users of SMS initialisation. Examples of initialisation are visible in the following SMS texts:

M181: Jane plse kindly send back my bk AS AP (Cameroon)

M12: I'm above you and I am ready 2 face u A3 (Cameroon)

Expanded form: Jane please kindly send back my book as soon as possible

ii) I'm above you and I am ready to face you anyplace, anytime, anywhere.

However, many people may easily recognise the initial “bk” as referring to “book”. This is by virtue of the subject position it occupies in the construction. “AS AP” can pose a serious problem since it can possibly stand for any expression.

From Nigeria, we had the following example text messages:

M437: AFAIK he is not going 2 win the gubernatorial election

2) M462: GF, I don’t hav much time now, TTUL.

Expanded form: i) As fas as I know he is not going to win the gubernatorial election

ii) Girl friend, I don’t have much time now, talk to you later.

From the corpus, the analyses reveal some linguistic and cultural specificities of using SMS initialisations in Cameroon and Nigeria. For instance, though both countries do not make use of lengthy initials like the British (Janson 2002), Nigerian texters make use of lengthy initialisations comparatively to those written by Cameroonians. This phenomenon might be explained by the fact that the English language is more rooted in Nigeria than in Cameroon. Culturally, this can be explained as part of the Nigerian love for conceit. In fact, Nigerians love to hide meaning through idioms and proverbs. Because of this tendency, most of their text messages make use of word/sentence initialisation so as to fulfil a collective identity function whereby special shared knowledge is required for interpretation.

Truncation

Occurrence of short forms in SMS text messages often results from orthographic transformations in the form of word truncation. By truncation, the orthographic representations of words are clipped. Truncation, however, poses less trouble to ordinary language users. Nigerian texters, interestingly, make high use of word truncation. This is evident from the table above where Cameroonian texters score 15% against 28.33% for Nigerian texters. Truncations are evident in SMS texts number 12,47,59,335,395 etc.

M10 = Gday Theo, thx 4 the parcel. it was gr8t. (Cameroon).

M551 = Rev. Paul bist du ok? (Nigeria)

From the corpus, it was realized that words designating family relations such as brother, sister, mother, father, and names of individuals such as Theophile, Margerette, and Thomas were usually truncated.

Vowel deletion

To achieve brevity at times, texters make use of vowel deletion in their text messages. Vowels are omitted in words while its consonant counterparts represent the whole word. When this happens words are contracted. From the corpus, the following examples of vowel deletions were noticed Gd = good, nt = not, bt = but, yr = your, wk = week, msg = message, txt = text, cld = could, frm = from, bck = back, usd = used, kds = kids, plc = please. Example text messages include the following:

M7 = Gd mother, I ws hppy wth the gift u sent to us. I say they were beautiful. Thk u mum (Cameroon)

M443 = My smmer hos wr spent at Ibadan. Usd 2go2 lke sde hotel and swm wth my mther (Nigeria)

Expanded forms:

good mother, I was happy with the gift you sent to us. I say they were beautiful. Thank you mum.

My summer holidays were spent at Ibadan. I used to go to lake side hotel and swim with my mother.

As far as vowel deletion is concerned, there was not any mark difference in the use of this feature between Cameroonian and Nigerian texters. However, Nigerian texters scored (93.33%) indicating a slight edge over Cameroonian texters (92.66%).

Alphanumeric homophones

This has to do with the combination of letter and number to represent a word or a clause. The use of this feature in SMS texts is largely arbitrary. In fact, texters tend to substitute parts of words with phonetically similar letter sequences. From the corpus, numbers are either used as integral parts of words or sentences. It was realized that (66%) of Cameroon SMS texts made use of this feature as opposed to (61.33%) of Nigeria SMS texts.

Examples of alphanumeric homophones include words such as “b4” = before, “2d4” = to die for, “w8” = wait, “l8r” = later.

M135 = We usd 2go2 town 2c my uncle and my Gpa. (Cameroon)

M444 = 2 g 4 U. ok!!!! (Nigeria)

Expanded form:

We used to go to town to see my uncle and my Grand father

Too good for you. Ok?

There might be little or no problem in deciphering the full meaning of sentence (i) but sentence (ii) poses a tremendous problem. In fact, this is more so as the expression does not respect the syntactic rule of SVO or that of subject predicate. It has only the object “you”. The subject here can only be implied. We could provide one thus “This woman is too good for you”. “2” and “4” represent “too” and “for” respectively and hence stand for independent words.

Letter homophones

Letter homophones in this analysis stand for those letters that represent whole words due to similarities in pronunciation. In fact, they are termed replacements. Replacements are written representations of the sounds that one would make when saying certain words. For example “kt” instead for Katie, “u” = you, “R” = are “n” = and, “D” = the.

The choice to create a verbal illustration of these words tends to indicate that, at least in part, the user may be thinking of this utterance in its spoken form even though every other part of the text message may well be created within a written framework. From our analysis of the data, it was equally realized that Nigerian texters make more use of this feature (81.33%) than their Cameroonian counterparts (74.66%). Example texts include:

M167 = I wish you the best n goodluck. Jc (Cameroon)

M588 = No, u got it all wrong. I meant that this business can give 1 profit as well as loss. So u r v. free 2 join us (Nigeria)

Expanded form: i) I wish you the best and goodluck. Jecintha

ii) No, you got it all wrong. I meant that this business can give one profit as well as loss. So you are very free to join us

Logographic emoticons

This has to do with icons denoting emotions. Here, meaning is created through objects and events acting as “signs” in relation to other signs. Examples of these signs are :) = smile, ÷(= frowning, :~ = crying, ÷t = Angry and @ = at. Consider the following examples:

M184 = BHME @2, so w8 4 me to come (Cameroon)

M342 = Each time I read from u I smile like this :) :) (Nigeria).

From the text messages above, “@” and :) are signs representing “at” and “smile” respectively.

Generally speaking, texters from these countries do not make much use of emoticons in their text messages. Nigerian texters however, make use of this feature even though they do not vary it. Among the 300 text messages collected from Nigeria, emoticons such as @, :) and xxx were the only ones found while only @ was employed by Cameroonian texters. This suggests that a wide range of emoticons are not used in both Nigerian and Cameroon text messages.

Punctuation

From the corpus, texters make use of four principal punctuation markers: full stops, commas, question marks and exclamation marks. The use of punctuation markers in SMS texts is complex. Some text messages have no commas; others have poorly used commas and some use commas replacements for full Stops. When all these happen, the sentences either become fragmented or spliced. The resourceful use of punctuation (or as koritti describes it constructing paralinguistic markers quite ingeniously as well as breaking orthographical conventions in an inventive manner (1999:15)), appears to

be a personal stylistic choice. In fact, punctuation, such as the full stop, is often unnecessary to most texters as the end of a line will signify the end of an utterance.

From the data, it was interesting to note that Nigerian texters make enormous use of exclamation marks more than Cameroonians texters. This might be an influence of their speech culture on their text messages. Nigerians by nature love to exclaim. The analysis revealed the following results for the use of exclamation marks (04.66%) for Cameroon and (35%) for Nigeria. The following text drawn from the corpus is showcase of the flagrant violation of the mechanics of writing. For example:

M97 = No infos up till now, I'm worried, I'm going 2 Etam.(Cameroon)

Form the above text, one would have expected a question mark after "now" and a full stop after "worried". Rather we have commas and this is quite unusual and unacceptable. The above poor use of commas create sentence splice.

Lack of interword spaces

In order to minimize character space, some texters do not inter-space their words from each other. The whole text is written as one block with the use of initial upper case letters acting as word boundaries. From the data, texters do not make much use of these features in their SMS texts. Nevertheless, (1.33%) of the text written by Cameroonian had this feature while (4.33%) of Nigeira SMS texts had this feature. Consider the following text messages.

M13 = ThisIsVeryGood, KeepItUpMyBoy (Cameroon)

M315 = INMySchoollamJustLikeASmall EZE. They call me Igwe (Nigeria)

Expanded forms:

This is very good, keep it up my boy

In my school I am just like a small Eze. They call me Igwe.

We realized that some texters make use of this features even though enough space exists for the full version of the words with inter-spacing. This however can be explained or interpreted as a distinct familiarity between the communicating partners. It can equally be interpreted as a behavioural tendency or a reflection of the troublesome text entry on a mobile phone.

Onomatopoeic/Exclamatory expressions

Onomatopoeic expressions are almost non-existing in Cameroon sms text messages (02.33%) whereas Nigeria texters relatively make good use of onomatopoeic expressions in their messages. From Nigerian SMS texts, a wide range of onomatopoeic expressions were identified, for example: Ewo, hei, chei, haha, woohoo, yeah, yep, yay, eh and woh. However unless used in marked isolation, it was not possible to determine if the use of onomatopoeic expression as in "M313 = Ewo, thought it was @ nine. I don't buck, I am on my way straight away.Max" (Nigeria) was used deliberately for prosodic effects or otherwise.

Message complexity

Message complexity is defined here as the number of separate clauses, sentences or what one can perhaps call separate thoughts in one construction (Wanji 2006). The text messages were divided into two categories: simple and complex messages. Simple messages include single sentence, clause or thought. A typical example of a simple message is one sent by a Cameroonian businessman. Consider this example:

M253 = "Hi Peter, I am still waiting for the goodée.Benson (Cameroon). This message is short, direct and void of all unnecessary grammatical and punctuation niceties. This type of messages made up 28.5% of the total messages. Conversely, about two third of the entire SMS text corpus was complex in their construction. A complex message it should be noted is one that handles more than one subject matter or concern. A glaring example of a complex message is

M548 = "Jare, just to let u know that Jamb is out I didn4t make it, what about you and my Ben? "

This message is complex in that a report is given about an individual's situation, and a request for information is established all in one sentence. Consider the diagramme below:

Table 2: Frequency and distribution of message complexity

Message complexity	Cameroon		Nigeria		total
	No	%frequency	No	%frequency	Frequency
Simple	99	33%	72	24%	28.5%
Complex	201	67%	228	76%	71.5%

The above table indicates that Cameroonian texters are more likely to write simple sms texts (33%) than do Nigerian texters (24%).

Openings and Closings

Another measure of the social nature of sms messages is the degree to which the writers follow the form of traditional letter writing in their messages, which involves including salutations (openings) and closings. On the whole, there are relatively few messages that had either of these formulations. From the corpus, there was what one can consider simple openings and closings and more advanced or formal versions. The informal openings were often a chatty “hi” followed in about half of the cases with punctuation mark of some kind. In very few cases, the openings were more formal including both a greeting and the name of the person being addressed. The informal closings were either the name or initial(s) of the texter. The more formal closings used the common formulation of say, for example: Hilsen Jenny followed by a period. Vivid examples of formal openings are found in text messages: M154, M157, M158, M162, M492 etc. On the other hand, informal openings are visible in text messages: M209, M213, M27, M61 etc. As far as closing is concerned, M211, M212, M253, M314 are examples of informal closings. Consider the following cases:

M455= Mr Okwokwo. Just to inform....Gnite. (Formal opening)

M449= Hello Joe, how ar u2day....Geral (Informal opening)

M288= The first assistant....Barrister Muna (Formal closing)

M121= tell my guy I will only come during xmas break. chao (Informal closing)

In terms of the distribution of salutations and closings, only about (13.5%) of the messages had an opening and (14.17%) of closings

Table 3: Frequency and distribution of openings/closings

Feature	Cameroon			Nigeria		Total
	Type	No	%frequency	No	%frequency	
Opening	Simple	17	5.66%	31	10.33%	8%
	Formal	12	04%	31	07%	5.5%
Closing	Simple	23	07.66%	43	12.33%	10%
	Formal	09	03%	16	05.33%	04.17%

The above table indicates that Nigerian texters make more use of message openings and closings in their text messages than Cameroonians.

Common grammatical “errors”

This section reports on findings of SMS linguistic features which reflect Cameroonian and Nigerian native intuition and the so-called common grammatical “errors” by L2 English learners in Cameroon and Nigeria. Here, we witness a lot of expressions that are English at the surface but have L1 underlying structures. That is the vocabulary is English but the syntac is from a substrate language. Sridhar refers to this phenomenon as “Culture-bound speech patterns”. Texters’ use of reduplication, loan translation, omission of functional words, focus constructions and deletion of the –ly morpheme is an eloquent testimony to the above point.

Verb form errors

In the data, wrong association between the auxiliary verb and the form of the main verb is common. This is another clear manifestation of the disregard for formal rules of language in SMS texting, as shown in the following examples:

Table 4: Example of Errors in verb forms

Cameroon	Nigeria
M88= I <u>have write</u> you an email...	M539= <u>Have u talk</u> to Richmond?
*I have written you an email ...	*Have u talked to Richmond?
M53= Dad, <u>did u sent</u> the money via xpress union chato ii?.	M349= ... <u>Have you start</u> taking photo?
*...did you send...express union chat?	*... Have you started taking photos?

According to the data collected, this phenomenon exists in both Cameroonian and Nigerian sms texts but seem to be more frequent in Cameroon sms texts. Grammatical errors might equally be attributed to the level of English proficiency of the texter. On the other hand, it could also be a matter of “time constraint”. Texters hardly proofread their messages. Hence, in sms messages which are composed by second language learners of English, this kind of error is very likely to be found.

Subject omission

In the data collected, subjects of sentences or phrases (mainly personal pronouns) are often left out, as shown in the table below:

Table 5: Examples of subject omission in Cameroon texts

Example	Target
M241= ...Perhaps will book a new flight next week	*Perhaps I will book a new flight next week
M176= Can't remember	*I can't remember
M277= Ok phone u later	*Ok, I will phone you later

Table 6: Examples of subject omission in Nigerian texts

Example	Target
M508= is in April next year	*It is in April next year
M544=...Is because I didn't have hav enuf credit	*It is because I didn't have enough credit

Largely, it was realized that both countries make use of subjectless sentences. However, while Cameroonian texters omit the personal pronoun “I” in most of their sentences, Nigerian texters have the propensity to omit “it”. Further, it was noticed that Nigerian SMS texters make use of functional words omission. In fact, English articles and the auxiliary verb “do” in most of the interrogatory constructions are usually left out. For example:

M334= “...You know, student who has not paid the fee will be fired” for

* “...you know, a student who has not paid the fee will be fired”.

M432= “you want me to come at 5 pm” for

* “Do you ant me to come at 5pm?”

These phenomena may be attributed to two reasons:

- The syntax of most Nigerian languages do not have articles or auxiliary verbs that correspond to English ones (Bamiro; 1995). Texters tend to apply this knowledge even when they compose English messages.
- Another plausible reason might be the influence of pidgin on both Cameroonian and Nigerian texters.

Creative nativisation

Here, expressions are coined by texters to reflect their worldview. In fact, idioms in these communities are translated in to English to reflect the mood of the situation. When this is done, it poses a problem of intelligibility to the native speaker of English. Among the numerous expressions that have been coined to reflect the worldviews of Cameroonian and Nigerian texters are the following:

Table 7: Creative nativisation

Cameroon		Nigeria	
Expression	Target	Expression	Target
To eat Christmas	Spend	Lock-chest	Heart-failure
Cry-die	funera	Put in the family way	Become pregnant
To eat government money	Embezzles	Been-to	Traveled abroad
Make mouth	Brag	Four-one-nine	
Wonderful	Alarming	Thanks for yesterday	Appreciate for favour done the previous pay day.
Fayman	crook	True son of the father	A legitimate child
Woman wrapper	A man who is fond of women	Short time	Casual sex relation in a hotel
Bottom power	A woman who uses her sexuality to get what she wants	An Aso rock	The residence of the Nigerian Head of states
Chopan foolan	A man who is extorted by a girl	Sleep tight	Sleep well
Gombo	corruption	Wetin you carry	Policeman

Consider the following texts messages:

M592= Just wait...Donald, I don't have lucky face in business...just hope it will give way.

M262= Nicoline, who chop njangi 2day? Na Paul or Betrand?

Apart from the above nativisations, others such as "to take in", "tobe on the seat", "been-to", "four-one-niners", "mesambe", "his my bamenda", "anglofool", "francofrog", "to have an expo", "tokunbo", "public dog", "Toronto" and "sara" etc were equally noticed from the corpus.

Code-mixing

Code-mixing is known to be a common linguistic behaviour in multilingual settings. In the context of SMS, code-mixing is not only restricted to "English" and "pidgin" mixing. A number of codes (which are created by the users themselves) are available for users to express themselves in different situations. This section proposes a classification of "codes" that are commonly adopted and practiced by Cameroonian/Nigerian sms texters. Cameroonian texters use English, pidgin, mother tongue, French and

franc-anglais as codes while Nigerian texters make use of English, pidgin and mother tongues and some foreign languages especially German as codes.

These codes, it should be recalled, reflect the linguistic situation of the countries. For example, more French messages were found in the Cameroonian corpus of SMS texts. Meanwhile just about 5 French SMS texts were found in the Nigerian corpus. This is explained by the bi-official language status that Cameroon enjoys. For examples M4, M191, M132, M152 etc were constructed in French. Consider the following texts from Cameroon:

M4= Je sais pas de quoi tu parle.C te pas moi. Cmpris ? (French code)

M260= Na how man ? that insurance people came...catch you then. Ebeneze (Pidgin/English)

M192= Boudon i beg it's impossible de came...chao et on est ensemble (Fran-anglais)

From the Nigerian corpus, codes such as the following are visible:

M331= I dey flash u you no di respond. Watti dei Chinedu. (Pidgin)

M303= don't u ever call my number again, efoulefoule. (English/mother tongue)

M464= Reseignez-vous aupress de votre agence avant de venir.SVP. (French)

What was of interest from the text messages is that there was no single message written in Fran-anglais from the Nigerian corpus. Also, we realised that there was no single message completely composed in Pidgin in the Cameroon corpus, a phenomenon evident in the Nigerian corpus. This leads us to conclude that Nigerians, perhaps, are more grounded and likely to use Pidgin than Cameroonians.

From the French corpus we equally realized the use of abbreviated forms. Consider M447 in the corpus.

For example: "C fini?" (C abbreviates c'est – is it finished?).

"le truck g pas ..." for "le truc que j'ai pass...".

Hence, in French sms, "g" replaces "j'ai" through phonetic usage.

Again, we noticed the technical use of the word "ne" (no). Most texters would say "je sais pas" for "je ne sais pas" meaning "I don't know".

"Le truck e g pas compris c kil fo faire un résumé/Le truc que j'ai pas compris c'est qu'il faut faire un résumé. "The thing i haven't understood is that the summary is compulsory". For the examples above, "g" systematically replaces "j'ai", therefore writing "je nai" is much longer, hence the abbreviated form and elimination of "ne".

Lexical influence

Lexical influence is manifested in two different forms: lexical borrowings and loan translations.

Table 8: Lexical Borrowings in Cameroon/Nigeria SMS texts

Cameroon		Nigeria	
Lexical words	Meaning	Lexical words	Meaning
Achu	Traditional meal in the North west province	Mazi Emeka	Mr. Emeka.
Fon	Chieftaincy title in the North West Province	Ngwongwo	Pepper soup
Njangi	Contribution	Igwe	King
Rappel	Arrears	Ego	Money
Echelon	Incremental postion	Udela	Type of fruit
Vignette	Road tax disc	Jamb	Joint admission and matriculation board.

Procureur	Magistrate	Danfo	Bus
Nkang	Corn gruel	Oga	Master
Patent	Business tax	Jare	Friend
Ni	Mother Tongue (Title of respect) Sir	National moi-moi	National cake

These words can be seen in SMS texts number M26, M33, M51, M207 M348, M365, M369, M438 etc (See Appendix I and II). These lexical influences come from local languages, Pidgin and French. In fact, this table exposes the fact that the varieties of English used in Nigeria are influenced tremendously by the over 400 indigenous languages and pidgin. Meanwhile in Cameroon, the varieties of English use are shaped partly by indigenous languages, Pidgin English and largely by French (see Mbangwana 1989).

Loan translations

This consists of literal translation of composite material from a foreign language or local language to take a parallel form in English. Consider the following examples gathered from the corpus.

Table 9: Loan translations in Cameroon SMS texts

Word	Target
Attestation of presentation of the original of a diploma	(French: Attestation de presentation de l'original d'un diplôme) Document attesting the origin of a diploma, authentication
Fiencial controller	(French: Contrôleur financier auditor)
Nomination	(French: Nomination): appointment
Life certificate	French: Certificate de vie: certificate of one's family size
Text d'application	French: texte d'application) standing orders.

Table 10: Loan translations in Nigeria SMS texts

Word	Target
Brother of tomorrow	(igbo) 'Nwanne echi' – (day after tomorrow)
Lucky face	(Igbo) Ihu oma – (good luck)
White man's work	(yourba) olu oyibo: (civil service)

The above tables show that while most Cameroonian loan translations come from French, Nigerian loans come from the native languages.

Focus constructions

The use of redundancy to achieve emphasis is what we call focus construction. From the corpus that we gathered, very little instances of focus construction was identified. Consider the following examples:

M599: Where are you? This job is terrible. U are never at home even on public holidays.

M296: We have 29 partitions already. And why do you sent it through this my friend.

Note the redundant use of "this friend" rather than "this friend" or "my friend".

Abbreviation Trends in Cameroon /Nigeria SMS messages

To investigate Cameroon and Nigeria SMS user's usual practice of abbreviation, we decide to analyse their text messages in order to establish patterns in their use of some abbreviations. The results are summarized in Table 20 below.

Table 11: Abbreviation trends in Cameroon and Nigerian SMS texts

Cameroon			Nigeria	
word	abbreviation	number	Abbreviation	number
This	dis	56	dis	71
you	u	281	u	289
see	c	291	c	296
	si	15	/	00
please	pls	245	pls	233
	plse	107	plse	111
	plis	17	plis	24
	plz	22	plz	33
morning	mornin	96	mornin	76
	mornx	78	mornx	102
	morng	141	morng	173
Are	r	56	r	114
	're	109	're	51
today	2day	241	2day	222
	tday	11	tday	19
	2dei	02	2dei	12
thanks	thk	143	thk	130
	thx	156	thx	176
	thz	44	thz	50
number	no	173	no	150
	nmba	4	nmba	11

Cameroon			Nigeria	
word	abbreviation	number	Abbreviation	number
	#	132	#	244
and	&	212	&	111
	nd	09	nd	04
	n	140	n	232
something	sthx	23	sthx	19
	sthg	41	sthg	30
later	L8ter	11	L8ter	15
	lata	3	lata	7
Night	nite	284	nite	273
	nait	71	nait	91
Tomorrow	tomoro	81	tomoro	70
	2morrow	201	2morrow	214
	tm	0	tm	1
	tmr	1	tmr	4
	tmw	0	tmw	2

From the above table, it is glaring that most Cameroonian and Nigerian texters are more likely to use “pls”, “mornng”, “2day”, “thx”, “sthg”, “nite” and “2morrow” for “please”, “morning”, “today”, “thank”, “something”, “night” AND “Tomorrow” respectively. Conversely, while Cameroon texters are more likely to use “re” for “are”, Nigerian texters will prefer “R”. Furthermore, while Cameroonian texters have a high propensity to use “no” for “number”, her Nigerian counterpart will go in for “#”. Again, most Cameroonian texters will use “&” for “and”, Nigerian texters will go in for “n”.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study has been to evaluate text messages written by Cameroonians and Nigerians, establishing their linguistic and cultural specificities. To achieve this objective, a sample of 300 text messages were collected and analysed. Results of the present analysis of text messages from both countries support previous findings on language use in SMS (Thurlow 2003 and kasesniemi 2003). It was realized that text messages from both countries undergo several processes of word reduction, truncation, letter/number homophones, phonetic respelling, accent stylizations, omission of punctuation and “G” clipping.

Secondly, it was realised that Cameroonian and Nigerian SMS texters are influenced by their local languages, custom and belief systems capable enough to give it a flavour and characteristics that could be distinctly identified as cameroonian or Nigerian. Some of these lexical cultural identities include “danfo”, “agbada”, “419”, “long leg” for Nigerian and “ma”, “cartouche”, “concoors”, “achu”, “fon” for Cameroon.

Finally, the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of SMS texters stand as a pointer to the feature they are likely to incorporate into their messages. Hence, a thorough study of SMS language should go beyond the general features of SMS linguistic specificities to cultural specificities. This study is obviously just the first step; much systematic investigations are needed before definite statements can be made on the regularity of patterns of the use of SMS linguistic features by both Cameroonian and Nigerian texters. It is hoped that the availability of bigger and varied corpus would help facilitate such studies.

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