A Linguistic Study of Abbreviations in SMS

Naveen Kumar HC, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

==

Abstract

Of late, whenever one sees a short form of a word in written communication, the common utterance is, "Oh! SMS Language!?" Abbreviations have become such inseparable parts of SMS lingo. Concerns are expressed about language deterioration due to the excessive use of abbreviations. Parents are bothered about their children getting addicted to 'txtng' (texting), i.e., lacking spelling skills. The teachers are getting the answer scripts with SMS abbreviations and are puzzled if they can accept those abbreviations as they too have begun to comprehend and use abbreviations like 'u'. Linguists have been inquisitively observing the biggest ever language revolution happening due to the electronic medium. This article is an attempt to study the

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
12 : 6 June 2012
Naveen Kumar HC, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.
A Linguistic Study of Abbreviations in SMS   271

abbreviations used in SMS, their formation and variety. Through that, an attempt is made to analyse the techniques used in the process of abbreviation.

Introduction

According to the International Telecommunication Survey 2008, there are 4 billion mobile/cellular phone users in the world and the number of new users is increasing every year. Though internet is also around, individuals are preferring mobile phones for the portability and simplicity of usage. With the latest developments in the field of technology both computers and mobile phones have become one and the same as the facilities of one being available in the other. According to www.Cellular-News.com on the New Year eve of 2008, around 43 billion text messages were sent all over the world. The SMS is more popular than the voice messages. Whether it is English, regional script or regional languages with the script of English, people are choosing to convey things silently at the place of noisy calls. With the increasing need to be fast and brief in our communication, SMS (Short Message Service) has gained a great popularity.

SMS

SMS is also called textese, phone short-hand (Sutherland: 2002), Txt (Shortis 2007), texting (Crystal: 2008), SMS Communication (Hard af Segersteg: 2002) txtspk, txtk, texting language or txt talk. The term, 'SMS', is used throughout this article. The language used in SMS has been a topic of discussion for various reasons for linguists, grammarians and generally elders due to the deviations it is taking from the regular language. Parents and teachers have begun to feel that the youngsters are using incomprehensible spelling and grammar (Baron: 2008). Crystal (2001) feels that a linguistic revolution is at hand.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
12 : 6 June 2012
Naveen Kumar HC, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.
A Linguistic Study of Abbreviations in SMS   272

Abbreviations and Coding

Coding as such is not new to human communication. Indus valley civilization is said to have the practice of using pictographs on clay tables to mark an agreement or settle accounts in 3500 BC (Wilton: 2005). The puzzle games of rebuses, which convey messages through short forms, pictures and numbers, are being played from a long time. 'Whatzit?' puzzles, which ask to find out the familiar phrase from specially arranged letters, are published as regular features in newspapers. With the advent of internet and mobile phone technology too, a sort of code language seems to have emerged as a part of day to day communication.

Abbreviations have become synonymous with SMS language. Users of SMS try to convey many things within 160 characters including spaces and in no time. The mobile phone's 12 keys are to be used to type all the alphabet, numbers, symbols and spaces. So, typing more characters with a single key is the inevitable way to type messages. Though T9 predictive text system is available over phone, many don't know the system or most prefer fewer characters to convey a message. It is less likely that a person with the knowledge of T9 predictive text goes for short cuts. The high-end cell phones have a keypad similar to that of a computer but they are not affordable for a layman. SMS is relatively cheaper than calls and voice messages. This has resulted in various forms of shortenings. This study is an attempt to look at the abbreviations and the process involved in shortening of the words. Acronyms like 'lol' (laughing out loud), AFAIK (as for as I know) are used in SMS, but their frequency is less compared to internet language (Baron: 2008). So, only SMS abbreviations are dealt in this article.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
12 : 6 June 2012
Naveen Kumar HC, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.
A Linguistic Study of Abbreviations in SMS   273

English, most widespread but second largest spoken language in the world, has been a major language on Internet and SMS. Multilingualism is, no doubt, picking up, but non-English languages have been poorly represented with electronic medium (Danet et al: 2005). TransSMS which translates the SMS to a different language of the receiver from any language of the sender is not popular yet (Othman et al: 2003). So, this is a study of SMS abbreviations in English.

The abbreviations in any medium are attempts towards brevity in all senses. Hard af Segersteg(2002) opines "Informal and speech-like reductions in texting are (...) strategies towards reducing time, effort and space whilst expressing informality and personal intimacy" (p. 232).

Crystal (2008) does not look at the abbreviations as the latest developments happened exclusively due to texting. It is noted that these features were already there on internet and few new creations have happened in texting. This might be true of the native speakers but the non-native speakers are introduced to the shortening more due to SMS than the practiced abbreviations.

Interpreting Abbreviations

Various interpretations have evolved from the earlier studies. Whenever a word is frequently used it tends to have different short forms based on the users and their reason behind method of abbreviation. There are instances of same abbreviations used to represent different words, which lead to confusion. If the normalization is done on the respellings done by the texters, the intended informality goes missing along with the essential part of interpersonal meaning (Tagg: 2009). The SMS language is popular due to the brevity and exclusiveness

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
12 : 6 June 2012
Naveen Kumar HC, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.
A Linguistic Study of Abbreviations in SMS   274

(Priya: 2008). Most of the abbreviations used in SMS were there in *The Dictionary of Abbreviations* edited by Eric Patridge in 1942. These abbreviations are neither novel nor incomprehensible, some of them are taken from internet activities like chat and email, only few extensions of the same are seen being done in texting (Crystal:2008).

Features like facetious forms (Crystal: 2003), logograms (Crystal: 2008), colloquial respellings (Tagg: 2009), accent stylization (Plester: 2009) are hardly seen in non native speakers of English, as they are the results of extensive familiarity with the language.

Present Study

A study of the abbreviations used in the SMS of the non-native speakers of English is taken up here keeping in mind the mode of abbreviation. So, all the features fell into the 5 ways of abbreviation, some of which are also observed of native speakers. The data for the same are collected over a period of 4 years from 2007 to 2011 created by individuals with different mother tongues of India other than English. 306 instances of abbreviations are found in 50 characteristic/distinctive SMS, selected out of nearly 3000 messages. It is observed that the abbreviations in SMS have taken place in the following five ways:

Sl. NO.	Methods of Abbreviation	No. of Instances
I	Phonetic Contractions	185
II	Clippings	43
III	Omissions	59
IV	Substitutions	9
V	Initializations	10

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
12 : 6 June 2012
Naveen Kumar HC, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.
A Linguistic Study of Abbreviations in SMS   275

Total	306

I. ***Phonetic Contractions***: There are instances of abbreviations happening by using a spelling which is perfectly or nearly a phonetic representation of different syllables.

   a. Clubbing of two words to make one unit which sounds similar (1 instance)

      1) tnq   =>   Thank you

          In (1) 'tn' is representing 'than-' and 'q' is representing '-k you'

   b. Partial representation of the word with required sound (3 instances)

      2) coz   =>   because

          In (2), only the stressed syllable of the word 'cause' as 'coz' is representing 'because'.

      3) z   =>   is

          In (3), the only consonant sound of the word 'is' is 'z', it is representing the word.

   c. Phonetic transcription where 'h' is mute (28 instances)

      4) wen   =>   when

      5) wat=> what

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
12 : 6 June 2012
Naveen Kumar HC, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.
A Linguistic Study of Abbreviations in SMS   276

In (4) and (5), 'h' is mute in 'when' and 'what'. So, /wen/ is the exact phonetic transcription, while 'what' has a near transcription.

d. Near phonetic representation of a part (19 instances)

6) 9t   =>   night

7) 5n   =>   fine

In (6) and (7), the final consonant sounds of '9' and '5' (/n/ and /v/) are ignored in forming short forms of 'night' and 'fine'.

e. Partial word in number form (3 instances)

8) some1 =>   someone

9) no1   =>   no one

In (8) and (9), 'one' is put in figures.

f. A number with one or more letters to represent a different word together (10 instances)

10) b4   =>   before

11) gr8   =>   great

In (10) 'b' is representing 'be' and '4' is representing 'fore' while, /-eɪt/ of 'great' is represented by '8' which has exactly the same pronunciation.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
12 : 6 June 2012
Naveen Kumar HC, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.
A Linguistic Study of Abbreviations in SMS   277

g. Single letters whose pronunciation is same as some word (90 instances)

12) u   =>   you

13) y   =>   why

14) b   =>   be

In (12), (13) and (14) 'you', 'why' and 'be' are represented by the alphabet 'u', 'y' and 'b' respectively, which exactly have the same pronunciations.

h. Single numbers whose pronunciation is nearly same as another word (24 instances)

15) 2   =>   to/too

16) 4   =>   for

The pronunciations of '2' and 'to' and '4' and 'for' match exactly in their pronunciation are seen in (15) and (16)

i. Near phonetic representations using some letters other than the actual spelling(7 instances)

17) fuchr   =>   future

18) drmz   =>   dreams

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
12 : 6 June 2012
Naveen Kumar HC, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.
A Linguistic Study of Abbreviations in SMS   278

In (17) 'ch' of the pronunciation of 'future' and 'z' of 'dreams' in (18) are the phonetic representations of the respective sounds, which have replaced the actual spellings.

II.   *Clippings:* There are instances of clipping an end of the word

   a.   Pre-clippings (5 instances)

      19) s   =>   is

      20) ll   =>   will

      First half of the spellings are clipped in both (19) and (20)

   b.   Post-clippings: Clipping of a word by retaining one, two, three or four letters of the word as they are. (38 instances)

      21) t   =>   tomorrow

      22) Ac   =>   Account

      23) cam   =>   camera

      24) lang   =>   language

      The rest of the letters are clipped except the first letter of the word 'tomorrow' in (21), first two letters of the word 'account' in (22), first three letters of the word 'camera' in (23) and first four letters of the word 'language' in (24). It

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
12 : 6 June 2012
Naveen Kumar HC, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.
A Linguistic Study of Abbreviations in SMS   279

can be noted that only the (21) needs the context to elicit the word, while the rest can be grasped approximately.

III. *Omissions:* There are instances of omitting some letters in the middle of the word

    a. Omitting all the other letters retaining first, last and any one letter in the middle(5 instances)

        25) amt=>   amount

        In (25), the first letter 'a', the last letter 't' and 'm' from the rest of the letters in middle is taken to abbreviate the word 'amount.'

    b. Omitting all the other letters retaining first, last and two letters in the middle(5 instances)

        26) opin   =>   opinion

        In (26), the first letter 'o', the last letter 'n' and from the middle 'pi' are taken to abbreviate the word 'opinion.'

    c. Omitting one of the double letters(5 instances of which three are also examples of post-clipping)

        27) hapy   =>   happy

        28) mary   =>   marry

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
12 : 6 June 2012
Naveen Kumar HC, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.
A Linguistic Study of Abbreviations in SMS   280

In (27) one of the p's is omitted from 'happy' and in (28) one of the r's from 'marry'.

d. Omitting all the letters except the letters representing consonant sounds (4 instances)

29) gdnt   =>   goodnight

30) msg   =>   message

In (29), in the pronunciation of 'goodnight' /gʊdnait/ the consonants are only used to represent the word, while in (30), /m/, /s/ and 'g' which is one of the letters representing /dʒ/ are used to represent 'message'.

e. Omitting all the letters representing vowel sounds(not when they appear in the initial position) (28 instances)

31) pls   =>   please

32) avlbl   =>   available

In (31) 'pls' is representing 'please' which is sans all the letters which denote vowels. In the same way, in (32) 'avlbl' is representing 'available'. Since 'a' has appeared in the initial position it is retained.

f. Random omission of one or two letters without following any of the above norms (12 instances)

33. becm   =>   become

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
12 : 6 June 2012
Naveen Kumar HC, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.
A Linguistic Study of Abbreviations in SMS   281

34.   Frndship   =>   Friendship

In (33) and (34) all the letters representing the vowels are not omitted as in III (e). But 'o' & 'e' in the former and 'i' & 'e' in the latter are omitted while a letter representing vowel sound is retained in each.

IV. *Substitutions:* There are instances where the symbols replace the letters or numbers(9 instances)

35) 4k   =>   4000

36) @   =>   at

(35) uses 'k' to represent 'thousand' and (36) uses '@' to represent 'at'.

V. *Initializations:* There are instances of using only the first letters to represent a word

a. Only first letter of a part of a word which is made up of two different words (1 instance)

37) y.day   =>   yesterday

In (37), the prefix 'yester' is represented by the first letter 'y', the rest of the word is retained.

b. Using first letters of both the words which make the main word together(2 instances)

38) NY   =>   New York

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
12 : 6 June 2012
Naveen Kumar HC, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.
A Linguistic Study of Abbreviations in SMS   282

In (38), 'N' and 'Y', the initials of 'New' & 'York' are used to represent the place.

c. First letters of the different greetings through the day (4 instances)

39) gm   =>   good morning

40) gn   =>   goodnight

In (39) and (40) take the initials of the adjective, 'good' and time of the day, morning/night.

d. Complete initialization of a sentence or a phrase (3 instances)

41) ftf   =>   face to face

In (41), the initials of all the three words in the phrase used to represent the phrase.

Conclusion

The abbreviations in SMS follow 5 major ways in which phonetic contractions have 60% of the samples studied, while omissions have 19% and clippings have 14% of the share. So, the users seem to give more importance to the mode of pronunciation and are creating the nearest and shortest spelling possible, by not following the existing elaborate spelling structures. This view is strengthened when it is observed that a word reduced to single letter or single number in 103 instances and two in 27 instances. This also looks like a user's reaction to the spelling system of

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
12 : 6 June 2012
Naveen Kumar HC, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.
A Linguistic Study of Abbreviations in SMS   283

English e.g., 'through' is shortened to 'thru'. So, economy of space, time and cost are managed through these abbreviations.

On the other hand, many abbreviations also show the creativity of the users of SMS. The abbreviations like 'n8' for 'night' and 'avlbl' for 'available' show that the abbreviations do not happen simply because of lethargy but it is achieved out of creative thinking. As spoken English is different from the formal English, SMS spellings are different from formal written English. *The Oxford Dictionary* has included GR8, RUOK etc. in its newer versions. This hints that these features are heading to stay here. They are popular because they save time. They are the results of laziness.

While so much has happened in the SMS communication through mobile phones, with QWERT keyboard entering mobiles, the features are taking a different turn! After all, language has to change with users and time, and the same is happening through electronic medium too.

===

References

1. Baron, Naomi S., *Always on: Langauge in a Online and Mobile world,* 2008, Oxford University Press, US

2. Crystal, David, Language and the Internet, 2001, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

3. Crystal, David, *txtng: the gr8 db8*, 2008, Oxford University Press, Oxford

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
12 : 6 June 2012
Naveen Kumar HC, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.
A Linguistic Study of Abbreviations in SMS   284

4. Danet, Brenda and Herring, C Susan, "Multilingualism on the Internet", *Netlingo: The Metamorphosis of Language* (Ed. Salonee Priya), 2005, The ICFAI University Press, Hyderabad.

5. Grinter, R. and M. Eldridge 'y do tngrs luv 2 txt msg?' in Prinz et al (eds), 2001

6. Hard af Segerstag, Y. *Use and Adaptation of the Written Language to the Conditions of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 2002, *PhD thesis*, University of Goteborg.

7. Naveen Kumar HC, *A Linguistic Approach to e-English*, 2010, *PhD Thesis*, University of Mysore

8. Priya, Salonee, *Netlingo: Metamorphosis of Language,* 2008*,* Icfai University Press, Hyderabad.

9. Shortis, T. 'Gr8 Txtpectations: the creativity of text spelling, 2007, *English Drama Media Journal* 8: 21-26.

10. Tagg, Caroline, *A Corpus Linguistic Study of SMS Texting*, Doctoral thesis submitted to University of Bermingham, 2009

11. Weber, R. "Variation in spelling and the special case of colloquial contractions", 1986 *Visible Language*

12. Wilton, Dan, *Transl8it! Dxnre & Glosre: Yor Complet Guid 2 Onlin Ch@ & SMS Txt lNgo*, 2005, iUniverse, Lincoln

===

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
12 : 6 June 2012
Naveen Kumar HC, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.
A Linguistic Study of Abbreviations in SMS   285

Naveen Kumar HC, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.
Lecturer in English
Government Pre-University College
Dandinashivara
Turuvekere (T)
Tumkur-572215
Karnataka
India
naveenhalemane@gmail.com

Language in India www.languageinindia.com
12 : 6 June 2012
Naveen Kumar HC, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.
A Linguistic Study of Abbreviations in SMS   286