

Strategies Applied in SMS: An Analysis on SMS Column in *The Star* Newspaper

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Abstract

The progression of technology has influenced language greatly. The technology of SMS in mobile phones is beginning to bring about some changes in the English language as far as the informal language is concerned. Thus, this research is a study of the creative strategies of abbreviations that are found in the SMS column that is printed in *The Star* newspaper. This study looks into randomly selected SMS texts that are published in the newspaper and the research intends to look into creative abbreviation strategies in the SMS texts. The findings show that although *The Star* publishes its print in Standard English, in order to be at par with the latest technology, the newspaper has allowed the use of abbreviations in the SMS column for its readers to share their views.

Keywords: SMS texts, newspaper, standard English, short forms, creative abbreviation strategies

1. Introduction

1.1 The Problem

The world has witnessed the invention of a new medium of communication through the discovery of mobile phones and with that, the Mobile Mediated Communication (MMC) came into being; playing a major role in communication. The English language has also been affected by this technology. Before mobile phones were invented, the 'electronic mail' or 'e-mail'; a technology-based mode of communication via Internet, whereby one is able to send and receive messages, started the change of the English language. Through the use of e-mail, the English language spelling and grammar were not given the priority and this kind of communication took place as to purely transfer message.

1.2 Importance of the Problem

The language used in the e-mail for informal interactions has been adapted to suit its users whereby, abbreviations are used to make one's message simpler. Another new medium of communication-Short Message Service (SMS) in mobile phones has further brought changes in the English language in a more creative manner. SMS texts, unlike e-mails, have only a certain number of characters that are allowed to be typed on a page on a mobile phone. These further forces the SMS users to make full use of the space given through the use of abbreviations as long as the receiver is able to comprehend the messages sent.

Besides communication, the print media is also a field that is closely related to the English language use. Without language, the print media is paralyzed in broadcasting their news. *The Star* newspaper has been established as an influential English daily newspaper in Malaysia. In order to further upgrade its print to be at par with this technology era, this reputable newspaper has instilled the service of receiving opinions or messages via SMS from the readers till today. The readers will just have to thumb their message, accompanied with their real names or pseudonyms and send their messages to the number, 39993. Sending SMS texts to the newspaper is not only faster, but also hassle free without having to fumble with envelopes or stamps. Hence, this paper aims to identify and analyse the strategies of abbreviations that are printed in the SMS column in *The Star* newspaper.

1.3 Related Literature

1.3.1 SMS Language

'Txt generation' is a term introduced by Rheingold (2002) that refers to the principal users of SMS, whereby, this generation is enamoured with new technologies, which they easily appropriate and integrate into their lives (Nantel & Sekhavat, 2004). Nantel and Sekhavat (2004) further imply that:

... SMS has become a strategic communication tool used by many, especially young people and this has furthered the development of this technology by devising 'SMS language', based on instantaneous, lucid, interactive and viral aspect of the medium. This language resembles code, owing to the prevalence of abbreviations and is subject to the constraints of the technology (maximum 160 characters).

(p.21)

Due to limited message lengths and user interface of mobile phones, SMS users commonly make extensive use of abbreviations, particularly the 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 stands for 'text message'. This causes SMS to be credited with creating a language (Ming, 2005).

1.3.2 Mobile Phones in the Newspaper Industry

For centuries, civilisations have used the print media to spread news and information to the people (World Association of Newspaper, 2004). The Roman *Acta Diurna*, printed around 59 BC is the earliest recorded 'newspaper' when Julius Caesar wanted to inform the public about important social and political happenings (Barber, 2008). By the middle of 19th century, newspapers were becoming the primary means of disseminating and receiving information (World Association of Newspaper, 2004). The technological revolution of today is creating new challenges and opportunities for the newspapers.

The newspaper industry is responding to the needs offered by technology. Capitalizing on their position and offering content that is quick to access, timely and entertaining to the mobile consumers will help them to regain a better position (Broerman, 2006). Besides, newspapers have provided an interactive two-way communication for their customers. An integrated mobile platform enables publishers to send content from its content management system directly to the mobile phone consumers (Broerman, 2006). Now, newspapers also permit mobile users to send their views to be printed in the media as well.

1.3.3 Abbreviation Strategies

SMS users have limited space for their messages and thus they adopt the habit of manipulating the mobile phone keypads. As SMS is meant to be fast and economical, the users abbreviate phrases and words. According to Ming (2005), SMS users use keyboard characters and punctuation marks to stress certain words, signal open-endedness and expressions, which in spoken language would be easily done by manipulating the tone of one's voice. Ming (2005) has identified three ways of abbreviating texts in SMS and they are; truncation, omission of letters and substitutions of parts of words with phonetically similar letter sequences. Therefore, this study would refer to Ming's (2005) study to analyse the strategies of abbreviations in the SMS texts in *The Star* newspaper.

2. Method

The aim of the study is to investigate the strategies of abbreviations in the SMS texts in *The Star* newspaper. Table 1 lists the categories constructed to determine the strategies of abbreviations. These categories are adopted from Ming's (2005) study entitled 'SMS Corpus'.

Table 1. Abbreviation strategies

Strategies of Abbreviations	Definition	Examples
Letter omission	Omission of letters in a word	shld = should, hv = have
Truncation	Omission of the last letter in the word	goin = going
Phonetic substitutions	Substitution of parts of words	L8r = later, W8 = wait

Hence, each SMS text will be examined for any use of abbreviations. A total of 200 SMS texts were collected randomly from *The Star* newspaper dated from 1st February until 9th March 2008.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 The Abbreviation Strategies in the SMS Texts

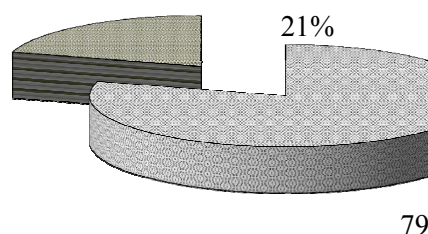


Figure 1. The abbreviations identified in the SMS texts

Figure 1 shows the number of SMS texters to the newspaper who had used abbreviations and those who had not used abbreviations in their SMS texts. A majority of 79% or 159 SMS text messages were found to have at least one abbreviation used in the SMS texts and 21% or 41 SMS messages that did not have any abbreviation.

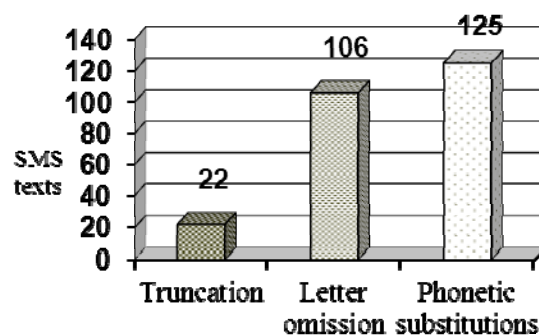


Figure 2. The abbreviation strategies in the SMS texts

Figure 2 above shows the abbreviation strategies used in the SMS texts that were sent to *The Star* newspaper. It was found that two main types of abbreviation methods were used to abbreviate texts by the SMS texters. Phonetic substitution was the main abbreviation strategy used as this method was traced in a total of 125 SMS texts or 62.5% out of the 200 text messages, followed by letter omission that was found to occur in 106 SMS texts or 53.0%. The least preferred abbreviation method was the truncation method that only occurred in 22 SMS texts or 11.0% of the 200 text messages. Some SMS texts were found to use all the abbreviation strategies in their messages. There were also uses of one type or two types of abbreviation methods found in the SMS texts.

a. Phonetic substitutions

Phonetic substitutions were used as the main method of abbreviation in the SMS texts that were sent to the newspaper. A total of 125 SMS texts or 62.5% of the text messages had words that were abbreviated by substituting some parts of the word with a phonetic representation. Below are some examples:

Table 2. Phonetic substitutions

No.	Message No.	Words with phonetic substitution	Actual spelling
1.	001	2, n, u, r	to, and, you, are
2.	002	Ctzen	Citizen
3.	019	2gether, v, Y	together, we, why
4.	050	Everyl	Everyone
5.	053	Bcoz	Because

From Table 2, it is very clear that the SMS language had a close resemblance of dialogue. This is because the abbreviations were carried out by replacing the letters in the word with a matching number or another letter which had the same phonetic sound while speaking. For example, 'them' was abbreviated to 'dem.' The phonetic sound /th/ was matched with the phonetic sound /d/. Thus, the texter would be able to save one space. As for the word 'thank you', all eight letters were reduced to only two words; /t/ and /q/. By doing this, the texter was able to save 6 spaces or 4% of the space on SMS screen that has only a 160 limit of characters.

Besides letters, numbers were also used to substitute the letters in the words. The most common numbers used in this phonetic substitution were '2' and '4'. For example, 'information' and 'together' were made shorter with the uses of numbers: 'in4mation' and '2gether'. This is because, 'for' sounds very much alike like the number 'four' and the same goes to the number 'two' that does not sound any different from 'to'.

Phonetic substitutions of both letters and numbers had also been found to occur in the SMSes. For example, the word 'before', was shortened to 'b4' according to the sound representation that is given by the letter 'b' and the number 'four'. Thus, phonetic substitution is creative thumbing of SMS as the texters would have to be creative in replacing the available letters to matching sounds by other letters and numbers that does not take up much space on an SMS screen that allows limited number of characters to be typed on.

b. Letter omission

Letter omission is another abbreviation strategy used in the SMS texts. Letter omission had been found to occur in a total of 106 SMS texts or 53.0% of the 200 SMS text messages. Below are some examples:

Table 3. Letter omission

No.	Message No.	Words with letter omitted	Actual spelling
1.	002	hr, whn, yrs, pls	here, when, years, please
2.	007	cngrts, nt, lts, hs	Congrats, not, lets, has
3.	012	govt, shld	government, should
4.	025	p'dise	Paradise
5.	026	wk, nt, othr, immigrant	Week, not other, immigration

From the examples in Table 3, it is rather clear that abbreviation through letter omission was carried out by omitting certain letters in the word. Unlike phonetic substitution which had replacing clues for its pronunciation, letter omission did not provide any hint of clue but let the readers guess the word by looking into the context of the abbreviated word. For example, the abbreviation 'p'dise' in Message 025 would make a reader stumble for a few seconds to guess the actual word, as this abbreviated word is not common and the reader will have to look into the context of the word. 'Paradise' would come into one's mind after looking at some words as clues for the context of the abbreviated word, such as, 'not peaceful', 'foreigner' and 'no lawmen'.

Letter omission is done in a certain way by omitting mostly the vowels that were contained in the word. For example, 'whn', 'urs', 'pls', 'alwys' and 'ppl' were abbreviated for 'when', 'yours', 'please', 'always' and 'people'. Vowels were usually omitted in abbreviating words because most of the time, it is the consonants in the English words that build the backbone of a word. Besides, vowels are made of only five letters (a, e, i, o, u) that leaves the readers with fewer choices to guess the word in comparison to the twenty-one consonants. However, the vowel in the word would not be omitted if the vowel happened to occur as the first letter of the word, for example, 'attn', 'incl', 'ownrs', 'alwys', 'immigratns' and 'apptmts'. This is because, the first letter in a word is very important to give the readers a strong hint to guess the word.

The occurrence of the same kind of abbreviation for the same word or the consistency of the abbreviations is another element that has been found to be lacking in the words that are abbreviated through the method of letter omission. Consistency refers to the same type of abbreviation that is used for the same words by different texters and inconsistent abbreviation means different abbreviation forms that are used by different texters for the same word. Examples of inconsistent abbreviations that had occurred in this study are as in the table below:

Table 4. Inconsistent letter omission

No.	Abbreviations	Actual spelling
1	pls, plse	please
2	shld, shd	should
3	incl, inclg	including
4	sch, schl	school
5	gov, govt	government

The inconsistency of the abbreviations might have occurred due to the fact that the SMS language itself is an informal language that does not have any correct or wrong rules. There are also no corpora or any dictionary on the words in the SMS language that has been published to guide the texters to thumb their SMS texts. The SMS language is all about message transfer and communication and thus, the medium of the message transfer; the language is taken for granted in order to save space within the 160 limit of characters.

Consistent abbreviations occurred only in a small number of words that did not contain more than 4 letters, for example: 'rd' for 'road' and 'nt' for 'not'. These words tend to have the same abbreviation by many texters probably due to its structure itself that is made up of a small amount of letters and is balanced with the same amount of vowels and consonants. Thus, the vowels are omitted and the consonants are left to serve as abbreviations in the SMS text messages.

Letter omission was chosen as the second most used method in this study because it has provided the texters the flexibility to omit the letters that the texters thought might not affect the word itself. The readers should be able to guess the word that was abbreviated by looking at the context of the word. Besides that, most of the time, the vowels were the letters that were omitted from the abbreviated words as the consonants usually provided the structure or the backbone of the word.

c. Truncation

Truncation is another form of abbreviation that was least used as a choice to abbreviate the words in the SMS texts that were found in *The Star* newspaper. Letter truncation had been found to occur in 22 SMS texts or only 11.0% of the 200 SMS text messages. Below are some examples of messages that contained the method of truncation in the SMS messages. For each example, the SMS text will be retyped with the actual spelling.

Table 5. Letters truncation

No.	Message No.	Words with letter truncations	Actual spelling
1.	020	Edu	Education
2.	032	Smokin	Smoking
3.	042	Manufac	Manufacturer
4.	047	Prob	Problem
5.	093	Ther	There

The examples in Table 5 show that letter truncation refers to the method of abbreviation whereby, the beginning letters of the words are retained, but the last letter(s) of the words are truncated. The method of truncating was used least by the texters. This might be due to the fact that the texters preferred the methods of phonetic substitution and letter omissions although truncation might help the texters save more space, for example, the truncation of the word 'university' to 'uni' saves 7 letters.

Truncation, almost similar to the method of letter omission, also omits letters, but truncation omits the last letter(s) in the word. Thus, this method of abbreviation also leaves the readers to guess the words abbreviated by looking at the context. Besides, most of the truncated words were rather common in its use; for example, 'org' is a common abbreviation for the word 'organization' and 'exec' is 'executive'. In short, letter truncation was the texters' last choice to be used as a method of abbreviation in the SMS texts sent to *The Star* newspaper because the texters preferred other creative abbreviations like phonetic substitutions and letter omissions.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Although *The Star* is an established newspaper in Malaysia, whereby formal language is a strict policy as far as any newspapers are concerned, this newspaper has begun to accept informal language like the SMS language in its print in a special column called ‘SMS Column’ where readers’ views are printed on. This act does not degrade the newspaper but it actually enhances the newspaper by its introduction to the techno-modern language. This is an indication that it is time to accept the SMS language in an informal situation. However, the victim of this situation is the children who might tend to misunderstand the functions of the SMS language.

Thus, in order to avoid raising our children with the misconception that SMS language is all right for formal situation, teachers play an important role in explaining the ideas and concepts of SMS language to the students. It is the teachers’ duty to stress that SMS language is acceptable in informal mode of communication only. When it comes to formal mode of communication, they should be able to switch to Standard English.

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