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Abstract: The proliferation of mobile phones has introduced a phenomenon known as text messaging, which has prompted the dynamic and rapid growth of a new quality of the English language. One of the characteristics of text messages is the extensive use of metaphonological phenomena, like in the following instances: *ROTFL* (rolling on the floor laughing), *2nite* (tonight) *B4* (before) and *coz* (because).

The paper is organized in the following way: first, an introduction to the phenomenon of text messages is presented. Then, metaphonological phenomena such as acronyms, blendings, the ABC language and simplified orthography are illustrated and discussed. The paper concludes that text messages creatively exploit the existing metaphonological phenomena due the medium's specific properties which are a 148-160 characters protocol and the numeric phone keypad rather than as a form of puns or word play.

Key words: text messages, textese, metaphonology, acronyms, blendings, the ABC language, simplified orthography, grapheme.

Metaphonology in Text Messages

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1. Introduction

Modern technology offers a wide range of communication modes.[1] In particular, wireless devices enjoy enormous popularity. The rapid growth of the mobile phone users

[1] It is necessary to introduce the distinction between the channel and mode of communication. The former denotes a path or means of conveying information (e.g. email, television, mobile phone), whereas the latter refers to a particular modus operandi, such as 'highly effective communication mode'.

population has introduced a phenomenon known as text messaging, which is referred to as 'texting'. As a matter of fact, mobile phones have offered a possibility of typing and sending short messages for years. Originally, text messages or SMSes (Short Message Service) were designed as an afterthought by the mobile phone companies in order to enrich the market offer, with the primary focus on voice interaction. According to one of websites devoted to the text messages phenomenon, "text was invented in the late 1980's by a group of Europeans developing standards for data additions to GSM [...] The first text message was sent in the UK in December 1992. SMS was launched commercially for the first time in 1995" (http://www.text.it/mediacentre/default.asp?intPageID=131).

However, this way of communication gained a genuine popularity in the mid 1990s. It all commenced in Finland where it is estimated that around 90 per cent of the population own a wireless phone. Next, the trend gained momentum in Europe, especially in the United Kingdom. The UK is the world leader in the number of sent text messages, with the volume sent on an average day in this country is around 56 million (sources: BBC and the Clickatell organization. The statistics quoted in this paper are as of end of February 2004, if not indicated otherwise). The numbers surge on particular days like New Year's Day, Valentine's Day or occasions such as A-levels day or the Rugby World Cup finals.[2]

There are numerous factors accounting for the attractiveness of the medium which make it so widespread. First of all, it is an extremely convenient communication mode. Communication can be executed in a discreet manner, without disturbing anyone especially when in public. Text messages can be conveyed from everywhere as there are no restrictions on place, there also is no need for any sophisticated equipment. Next, the SMS is free from the inhibitions present in a face to face interaction. Finally, the cost of sending one text message remains lower than the cost of telephoning. These factors contribute to the fact that SMSes encourage as well as facilitate the vast majority of

everyday communication, particularly as far as making arrangements and appointments is concerned.

Speed is an extremely valuable asset:

> [T]ext messages are based on store and forward technology. If sent within the UK, they rarely take more than five minutes to be received by another UK mobile phone (unless there is a peak load in the carrying network(s)). The other advantage is that the storage of the message is maintained until the mobile phone can receive the message and in effect acknowledge or confirm receipt of message […] most operators expect a text to arrive within 10 seconds (http://www.text.it/mediacentre/default.asp?intPageID=131).

According to the website www.text.it, it takes approximately from 10 to 90 seconds for an operator to deliver a message.

What is more, text messages "spawned a large number of services, like jokes, horoscopes, ordering taxis and information about favorite programs, football teams or the latest news" (Ó hAnluain 2001). Text messages serve as the vehicle for poetry writing (Gentle 2003) , even selected excerpts from the Bible are rewritten in this way so that now the word is spread in this rather unorthodox fashion.[3] In the UK the advertisers decided to inform their prospective clients in the text language:

> Coca-Cola Co.'s new billboards for Fanta Icy Lemon soda here urge people: "Tell your M8S" that Fanta "Tastes GR8." […] In a campaign for a new hand-held messaging device, the Vbox, Motorola Inc. created a fictitious dialogue between teenage characters Mark and Nikki and plastered suggestive discussions like this one over billboards and bus stops here in Britain. Nikki: "c u l8r? nikki." Mark: "c all of me l8r;-)" The tagline on each poster reads: "C wot txters hav bin w8ing 4 (Ellison 2001).

[3] The book published in 2002 was entitled: *r father in hvn: up 2 d8 txts frm d bible*.

The proliferation of text messaging led to the recognition of SMSes as a well established form of written communication. A popular book on this phenomenon commenced the proliferation of other publications of this sort:

> The best seller *'WAN2TLK? ltle bk of txt msgs'* is a common source of reference […] it identifies 'over 1,000 abbreviations, emoticons and their meanings', 'guaranteeing' users "irresistible pick-up lines, witty replies, short sharp rows, faultless plans and scorching romantic exchanges, as well as creative ways with pictures for idle moments". This book is light hearted in tone but it is used as a serious reference source in newspaper articles (http://www.netting-it.com/Units/SMS/smsframes.htm).

The book mentioned above was compiled around 2000, and since then many publications have followed suit, presenting the most frequent phrases used by people in text messages. The acronym finders and dictionaries related to the text messages language are thriving on the internet. The editors of the concise OED (Oxford English Dictionary) in their revised edition from 2002 felt the urge to include the most common phrases, expressions and terms in a form of a glossary.

2. Metaphonology of text messages

In the view of the above a conclusion can be drawn that SMSes are exerting a considerable influence upon standard English, since many phrases originally allotted only to wireless phones have made their entrance into everyday language.[4] "These communicative developments are clearly going to have a profound effect on the 'patterns of language' they mediate" (http://www.netting-

[4] The advent of this new phenomenon is not necessarily confined to language, it also affects other domains of life. Typically, the teenagers type in their messages using their thumbs. It is reported that habitual message writing with the usage of the opposable digit can lead to its excessive growth . As a result, its muscles are overtrained and many teenagers complain that they suffer from pains in this particular finger.

it.com/Units/SMS/smsframes.htm). The language of text messages possesses extreme characteristics of a shorthand. This arises due to the fact that an SMS operates on a protocol, which allows merely from 148 to160 characters per message, depending on a model of the phone. Therefore, if the limit is exceeded, the 'extra' writing will be sent as a separate SMS.

What is more, the range bound to 160 characters includes spaces between words. In such a highly circumscribed environment writing is seriously hampered by the limited space. Additional difficulty consists in the usage of numeric phone keypad. By the same token, the advent of a new quality of the text language, sometimes referred to as 'textese', was inevitable under those conditions.

Textese is an informal phenomenon, it is, however, subject to the underlying principle of economy, stipulating that a message must be as compact as possible but at the same time carry the essential content. In SMSes the body of writing is subordinated to the one leitmotif: making everything as short as possible yet decodable for the recipient. Therefore, in order to achieve the desired result, which is maximal content in minimal form, mobile phone users manipulate the English language deliberately.

According to Sobkowiak (1991), tampering with language is the situation in which "metaphonological competence appears to be crucially involved […] the competence of function, and metaphonological competence in particular, plays a significant role in the unorthodox ways in which phonological representations can be manipulated" (Sobkowiak 1991: 132).

It must be stressed, however, that in the case of text messages the manipulation does not stem from frivolous reasons but rather is dictated by the technical limitations of the medium. In text messages, word play does not seem to be implemented per se but is likely to be imposed by the circumstances. The economy of writing appears to be the subordinating principle underlying the use of SMSes unlike some form of entertainment as it is the case with the word play and puns. The shortened forms of words are necessitated by the format of the medium allowing merely 160 characters. Nevertheless, the messaging community excels at extracting the essence, in order to get a message across in the most economical wording possible.

On closer inspection it becomes obvious that inventing new forms of words is not the case. Hardly does texting appear to display highly original and innovative methods of word coining or manipulating. Rather, it seems that the existing methods are extensively utilized. For instance, the vast majority of the text-messaging language was first used in instant-messaging programs on personal computers decades ago. Thurlow's (2003) observation lends support to the above claim: "new linguistic practices seldom spring from nowhere, neatly quashing pre-existing forms and conventions. Just as technologies do not replace each other, nor is it really possible to imagine communicative practices breaking completely, or that dramatically, with long-standing patterns of interaction and language use" (Thurlow 2003).

The scale of the phenomenon seems to be truly groundbreaking. Never before has the conscious manipulation of language appeared to be so widespread and in the case of text messages it has recently acquired a truly new dimension. Sending SMSes is a classical communication act in which both the sender and the receiver must share the same code. If they fail to do so, a communication breakdown occurs and the communication act falls short of performing its basic function. In the case of text messages it appears that the mobile phone user community shares a conventionalized code of communication.

The population of text messagers (or 'texters') is growing continuously as the wireless phones are far more accessible than, for instance, laptops or palmtops. The most riveting feature of text messages is that the creation of new orthographical forms, albeit according to the already existing rules, is the ongoing character of the process. In the words of Crystal (2001) the potential of SMSes is remarkable:

> [T]he challenge of small screen size and its limited character space (about 160 characters), as well as the small keypad, has motivated the evolution of an even more abbreviated language than emerged in chatgroups and virtual worlds […] the medium has motivated some new forms and its own range of direct-address items, such as f2T ('free to talk?'), Mob (mobile phone) PCM (Please Call Me), MMYT (Mail Me Your Thoughts), and RUOK ('are you OK?') (Crystal 2001: 229).

The new forms have originated with the aid of the already existing metalinguistic resources, however, the proliferation is on an unsurpassed scale. Consequently, a number of text-related dictionaries address the issue of the specific language. For instance, there is an on-line dictionary of 'TXT lingo' launched in 2002, which can be found at www.transl8it.com. It serves as a translation tool, rendering the passage coded in SMS language into plain English. This is how the creators of the dictionary advertise their product: "a free, user-friendly translation engine for SMS text message lingo, acronyms and emoticons. With the click of a button, you can take texting lingo and transL8it! to plain english text or visa-versa to SMS lingo" (http://www.transl8it.com). There is also a dictionary devoted to the topic of shorthand language, hosted on the *T Mobile Home Page* (http://www.t-mobile.com/messaging/default.asp?nav).

The Harper Collins publishing house also released a texting dictionary:

> If texting abbreviations leave you cnfsd or your thumbs are tired from texting everything in full then this handy list of texting abbreviations should help you to rest your weary digits. Simply click on the first letter of the word for which you would like to find an abbreviation and then browse the list. Alternatively you can use the Texting Dictionary search in the Word Tools (http://www.collins.co.uk/wordexchange/Sections/TextingWords.aspx?pg=11).

2.1. Typology of SMSes

The examples of text messages analyzed in the paper were compiled from online or press articles, or, from various websites devoted to texting. The relevant sources are indicated in the bibliography.

According to the metaphonological methods employed in the creation of text messages, the following typology can be proposed [5]:

2.1.1. Acronyms

[5] All examples used in this section are listed in Appendix, which compiles metaphonological phenomena encountered in text messages. Most of the text messages analyzed in the paper came from the website www.transl8it.com, while other examples came from online or press articles.

An acronym may be defined as a sequence constructed of the initials such as in *NATO, OK, BBC*. However, acronyms are not confined exclusively to initials. Sobkowiak (1991) claims that "letters, syllables and other chunks of words are cut out, rearranged and assembled to create a heretofore nonexisting word or sequence. Metaphonological competence is accessed in the process to ensure conformity with phonotactic restrictions and euphony" (Sobkowiak 1991: 142). Moreover, as Ronneberger-Sibold (1990) points out, the diversity of acronyms is truly impressive. She also defines their purpose: "they serve to form new lexemes without internal morphological structure […] unhampered by the constraints of the normal word formation rules" (Ronneberger-Sibold 1990: 2).

Sobkowiak (1991) points to the fact that the manipulation is executed on purpose as it is easier and shorter to use the initials *AIDS* instead of a longish phrase *Acquired Immunity Deficiency Syndrome*. Moreover, metaphonology is utilized which is evident in the fact that usually an acronym is designed in order to resemble to a great extent the regular lexical items. Sobkowiak (1991) quotes *WASP, BASIC* as the instances of meaningful acronyms.

Bauer (1988) renders the following definition:

> [A]cronyms are words coined from the initial letters of the words in a name, title or phrase. They are more than just abbreviations, because they are actually pronounced as new words […] acronyms tend to merge into blends when more than one letter is taken from each of the words of the title, as in the German *Ge(heime) Sta(ats) Po(lizei)*" (Bauer 1988: 39-40).

This method of word formation has been in use for decades. Marchand (1969) makes a claim that "letter-words are comparatively new in European languages. The real vogue has set in with our century only" (Marchand 1969: 369). He also observes that in the Middle Ages the personal names were coined from the initials of a title, name and the father's name as in Hida (Hayyim Joseph David Azulai) or Rambam (Rabbi Mosche b. Maimun).

Presumably a genuine popularity of acronyms commenced with the second World War telegrams since *SWAK* (Sealed With a Kiss) and *TTFN* (Ta Ta For Now) have even made their entrance into the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) of that time. As a matter of fact, the WW I (ANZAC, WREN, DORA) and WW II were extremely productive in acronyms coining and in the wake of which the 1940s witnessed an explosion of those formations (*CARE, UNRRA, NATO, RADAR, UNESCO*) (Marchand 1969). The acronyms used in text messages could be exemplified as follows: *ATB (all the best), BBFN (bye bye for now), BBL (I will be back later), CMI (call me), HAND (have a nice day), PLS (please), THNQ (thank you).* According to Graeme Diamond, an editor in the New Words group at Oxford University Press, the phrase most likely to gain official sanction is LOL (Laughing Out Loud).

The abundance of acronyms used with reference to SMSes is captured by those publications that are devoted to explaining their meanings. If one visits websites dedicated to text messages, attached will one find a glossary containing the acronyms, should a mobile phone user need any assistance in decoding them. Some of those acronyms overlap with those used long time ago in mail messages such as *IMHO (in my humble opinion), ASAP, FYI (for your information)* or the prime example of *LOL (laughing out loud*) and derivatives *LMAO (laughing my ass off), LMHO (laughing my head off).* Their familiarity can facilitate the process of construing the meaning, some of those acronyms are so frequent that the recognition is instant and poses no major difficulties. However, a certain problem arises when the acronyms appear somewhat exotic and weird. Their use is restricted to a certain group of mobile phone users, local usage, specific context or even jargon. *LND (London), SRO (Standing room only), JK (Just kidding), IGU (I give up), TMB (text me back) or PCM (please call me)* illustrate the trend.

Therefore, a conclusion can be drawn that the distribution of all the acronyms employed in text messages is highly uneven. Some acronyms are immediately obvious, but again, the issue arises for whom. It might be a pure accident that a person would recognize the acronym *TC (Take Care)* whereas the highly frequent items *THX (thanx) or BTW (By the Way)* could remain unknown. It is highly likely that certain acronyms will

be popular in specific age, sex or social affiliation groups but not in others, whereas the use of email and internet as well as playing computer games enhances familiarity with acronyms used in SMSes as they overlap. "As for acronyms, which are encoded by stringing together the initial letters of words in phrases in English, what the acronyms mean may not always be understood by users, unless they are already familiar with the language used in CMC" (Nishimura 2003).

However, text messages do not always adopt the existing, well-established internet acronyms. Crystal (2001) notes that the creativity evinces in formations capturing whole sentences or phrases instead of words. There is no denying that those new acronyms must manipulate the sentences which are frequently used or are typical for the context, like 'have a nice day' (HAND) or 'bye bye for now'(BBFN). Crystal (2001) notes that "[t]iny screens have motivated a whole new genre of abbreviated forms. The acronyms are no longer restricted to sentences or phrases but can be sentence – length" (Crystal 2001: 85-86).

2.1.2. Blending

This technique is also referred to as 'portmanteau words' and consists in involving two or more lexemes in the base. The prime examples are *smog (smoke* plus *fog)* or *brunch (breakfast* plus *lunch*). As Bauer (1988) explains, "two or more words are simply merged where they overlap, so that no information is lost, but repetition of letter combinations is avoided" (Bauer 1988: 39). Marchand (1969) remarks: "the result of a blend is always a moneme, i.e. an unanalyzable, simple word, not a motivated syntagma" (Marchand 1969: 368). Typically, the bits taken of particular words are smaller than a morpheme. However, text messages offer a special treatment of the blending technique, namely the use of numerals. The instances of *2nite (tonight), 2morrow (tomorrow), 3dom (freedom), 4ever (forever), 4tun (fortune), m8 (mate), gr8 (great), w8 (wait)* demonstrate how the numeric keypad of the mobile phone can be utilized. Blending a digit into a lexical item is a deliberate, intentional process of incorporating metaphonology. It does take the awareness of homonymy to replace a

syllable of a word with a digit so that the phonological interpretation of the number would be in accordance with the phonology of the replaced syllable or chunk.

In the case of *3dom (freedom),* there is a clear discrepancy between the pronunciation of *three /θri:/* and the morpheme of *freedom, free /fri:/* . Nevertheless, the meaning of the blend remains transparent despite "replacing" the dental fricative with the labiodental one. The use of numerals in text messages is not simply a matter of fancy, but it is necessitated by the specific layout of the keypad since numerals are placed on the same buttons as the alphabet letters.

Therefore, exploiting the existing conditions shows that in the creation of new forms of words the users access the metaphonological means. The overlapping of the phonemes from the syllable of the word *great* with the pronunciation of the digit *eight* is just a matter of coincidence. Still, it leads to the creation of a new, shortened and economic form of the lexical item *great*. Notably, the numeral usually tends to replace a syllable as in the instances of *2nite (tonight), 2morrow (tomorrow), 3dom (freedom), 4ever (forever), 4tun (fortune).*

2.1.3. The ABC language

The term ABC language designates the use of letter names. This word play employs a graphemic-phonemic manipulation. If the case arises in which a particular letter name such as *r* corresponds to a word like *are,* then the grapheme coincides with the phonemic form.[6] This type of text messages includes examples such as *b* for *be, m* for *am*, *n* for *an/and*, *o* for *oh* (*oh I see*), *UR* for *You are* or *your*, *c u* for *see you, y* for *why* etc. Sometimes a letter stands for a whole word (*Y* for *why*), whereas in some cases a letter replaces a chunk of a word (as it is the case in the instance of *l8r – later).* In similar vein, this is another striking example of using metaphonological competence.

2.1.4. Simplified orthography

[6] In the understanding of Luelsdorff (1989), "graphemes, by definitions, are letters and letter combinations whose status as graphemes derives from their relations to phonemes and the conditions placed on the realizations of those relations" (Luelsdorff 1989: 6).

Unorthodox spelling forms and orthographical simplifications appear to constitute the predominant feature of textese. This can be accounted for by the space limit and the informal character of the medium. Here are a few examples of simplified orthography: *nu* (new), *yaself* (yourself), *nite* (night), *coz* (because). An observation of the pattern in these simplified forms reveals that letters standing for silent sounds as well as letters representing unstressed vowels are deleted. The underlying assumption is that the graphemes which do not contribute to phonology are not realized at all. Consequently, the graphic representations employed in textese attempt at achieving a more phonemic form.

Simplified orthography generates criticism of texting as a deviated communication mode. Bralczyk (2004) and Sutherland (2002) claim that texting fosters sloppy pronunciation habits and reduces language to a bare communicative minimum. According to Sutherland (2002) "it is bleak, bald, sad shorthand. Drab shrinktalk […] it masks dyslexia, poor spelling and mental laziness. Texting is penmanship for illiterates" (Sutherland 2002). Bralczyk (2004) discusses the texting habits in the Polish language and concludes that the influence of text messages on standard language is artificially inflated (Bralczyk 2004). Bralczyk (2004) and Sutherland (2002) seem to fail to appreciate the productivity of texting and tend to underestimate its impact on everyday life and communication.

The question arises whether simplified orthography is merely a fad or it will ever influence the mainstream writing. The community of mobile phone users is growing rapidly. Moreover, the teenagers who allegedly constitute the vast majority of the texters will be adults one day and in this way their spelling habits could spill into writing. These teenagers admit that they are already using in school papers, assignments and homeworks phrases and orthographic forms they use when texting (Trujillo 2003). The media have already expressed concern about the impact of text language on the spelling habits of youth, bemoaning the deterioration of the English language. However, the speculations whether simplified orthography threatens the English language cannot be addressed in a straightforward way.

3. Discussion of metaphonology

In the light of the discussion, a major conclusion can be drawn that creation of text messages proceeds under the control of the metaphonological competence. Textese demonstrates the capacity and huge potential of metaphonology as the texters are able to effectively manipulate phonemes, graphemes, syllables, letters or numbers in order to create the desired, economical effect. Metaphonological competence aids preservation of the phonology of a lexical item with the use of a numeral or a letter instead of a whole syllable. Next, there is no denying that text messages in striving for economy exploit the already existing devices. However, the text message use of metaphonological methods is productive and ongoing. What is more, this process seems to have an unsurpassed scale. Next, the driving force behind this massive incorporation of acronyms, blendings, the use of the ABC language and simplified orthography is not paronomasia or language play. The proliferation of metaphonological devices in SMSes is attributable to the economy and speed factors. A texter is pressed for time and bound by the protocol limitations to 160 characters which invites the creation of ad hoc shorthand forms we witness in abundance in text messages. Finally, the most prevalent feature of textese - simplified orthography - might spark up the ongoing debate on the English spelling system and reforms.

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Appendix : metaphonological phenomena

1 = one, won, want
1DRFL-wonderful
1sty-thirsty
2 = To, too
2day-today
2moro-tomorrow
2nite-tonight
2-to, two, too
3dom-freedom
4 = For
4ever-forever
4tun-fortune
4U-for you
4VR = Forever
6-sex
8 = ate
AFO -Adult fan of...
AIM - AOL™ Instant Messenger™
AKA-also known as
ASAP-as soon as possible
ATB-all the best
ATM -At the moment
AYT - Are you there?
B -Bye, be
B4 = Before
BBFN-bye bye for now
BBL -(I will) be back later
BBW-big beautiful woman
BRB-be right back
BYO - Bring your own
CMI-call me
CUB L8R-call you back later
CUL8R, CUL -see you later
CUZ = Because
CW2CU-cannnot wait to see you
CYA, C U-see you
D8-date
DDG - Drop dead gorgeous
D-the
EA -E-mail alert
EOD - End of day
ETA - Estimated time of arrival
ez-easy
FWD-forward
FYI-for your information
G2G-got to go
GR8-great
GTG - Got to go
GUDLUK-good luck
HAGS-have a great summer
HAND-have a nice day
HRU How R You
ICQ - 1) I seek you 2) ICQ Instant Messaging service
IGU - I give up
IMHO-in my humble opinion
IMO - In my opinion
IRT - In regards to
IYSS-if you say so
JAM - Just a minute
JIT = Just in time
JJ - Just joking
JK = Just kidding
K = OK
KIT-keep in touch
kwik (kar wash)-quick car wash
L8R = Later
LMAO-laughing my ass off
LMHO = Laughing my head off
LND-London
LOL-laughing out loud
Lurk = To hang out in the background/viewing
LYLAS-love you like a sister
M = Am
M8 = Mate, boy or girl friend
msg-message
N = An, and
NA = Not acceptable/applicable
NE = Any
nite-night
NITING-anything
NOS = New old stock
nuf -enough
O = Oh
OIC = Oh, I see
OTOH-on the other hand
OTT-over the top
PCM-please call me
ped xing-pedestrian crossing
PLS-please
POV = Point of view
PS = Post script
Q8-kuwait
QR = Quick response
R = Are
ROTFLOL = Rolling on the floor laughing out loud
RU CMING-are you coming
RU3-are you free
ruf-rough
RUOK-are you okay
sk8IN-skating
sed-said
SMS = Short message service (an e-mail or other message)
SPAM = unwanted e-mail or chat content
SRO = Standing room only
SUP = What's up?
SWAK-sealed with a kiss
TCCIC-take care because I care
THNQ-thank you
THX-thanx
TMB-text me back
TNX or TKS = Thanks
TOM = Tomorrow
TTYL = Talk to you later
tuf-tough
txtalk-text talk
txt-text
U = You
U@ -where you at
U2 = You, too
UOK-you OK
UR = You are, your
VSTR = VoiceStream
W8 4MI-wait for me
w8-wait
WER R U-where are you
WL-will
wot-what
W-why
WYSIWYG = What you see is what you get
XLNT-excellent
Y = Why
YER = Your, you're
YR = your