

## Gender Differences and Culture in English Short Message Service Language among Malay University Students

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper examined the sociolinguistic aspect of Short Message Service (SMS) language, particularly in identifying gender differences and in revealing how Malay culture could be represented in SMS texts. The research applied both qualitative and quantitative approaches on 20 Malay postgraduate students of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia: 10 male texters and 10 female texters aged between 24-30 years old. Data collection involved 40 SMSes; 20 text messages from each gender and interviews with four participants. The predetermined categories namely abbreviation, emotion, onomatopoeic and word length were selected to fulfill the aims and scope of the study. Hence, Shafie et al (2011) and Balakrishnan & Batat's (2010) framework of abbreviation, emotion and onomatopoeic, and word length was used. Based on the analysis, it was revealed that there were no gender differences in the use of abbreviations. However, females showed more use of emotions, onomatopoeic and their text messages were longer than males. These findings were confirmed by all the interviewees. The findings also revealed some culture aspects; both the Malay word "lah" and the translation of Malay proverbs into English which are used among Malays in their language were detected.*

*Keywords: English SMS texts; gender differences; culture; Malay language; code-mixing*

### INTRODUCTION

Anglophone literature has reported that there is a link between language and gender (Halpern 2000, Wood 2001). Girls are more talkative and use more relational-type expressions than boys who use an assertive-type language while boys are less able to show emotion-based expressions like sharing of self and empathy (Leaper & Smith 2004). In addition, girls feel that they are better in showing feelings (Michaud, Bégin & McDuff 2006) and emotions (Balakrishnan & Batat 2010). Equally interesting is that females who are active in SMS messaging too often fill their text messages with references and social gossip (Thurlow & Poff 2009). Hence, it can be said that women are more talkative and "emotional" than men who are more "practical". But, can such differences be reflected also in their use of Short Message Service (SMS) language?

Besides gender difference, culture is also reflected in SMS language patterns (Elvis 2009). Analyzing SMS language used in two different cultures, Cameroonian and Nigerian, Elvis was able to discover that initialization was used in Nigeria texts messages more than Cameroonians' because Nigerians love to hide the meaning by using idioms and proverbs. By doing so, "most of their text messages make use of word/sentence initialization so as to fulfill a collective identity function whereby special shared knowledge is required for interpretation" (Elvis 2009, p.30). As for the use of exclamation, Nigerian texters also use a lot more exclamations compared to Cameroon texters as they are influenced by their speech culture. In other words, "Nigerians by nature love to exclaim" (Elvis 2009, p.32). Need to include more literature on sms language and culture

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Accounting for almost all languages, Thurlow and Poff (2009) compiled three kinds of texting maxims which are brevity and speed; paralinguistic restitution; and phonological approximation. The researchers claim that different methods such as the usage of acronyms, emoticons, letter-number homophones, phonological approximation, non-observation of grammatical rules, multiple punctuation and capitalization have been employed in texting to achieve the three maxims. Similarly, Crystal (2001, p. 229) pointed out that "the challenge of the 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 chat groups and virtual worlds".

Applications of the maxims can be found in a sociolinguistic analysis of 882 SMS messages from 463 Norwegians whose ages ranged between 13-67 years old by Ling (2005a) in 2002. The analysis shows that women write longer messages than men. The average number of words per message for women and men is 6.9 and 5.54 respectively. Besides that, women are more likely to use abbreviations and emoticons in their messages. The same result was revealed by Rafi (2008) who states that there is a difference between male and female lexical and morpho-syntactical SMS language choices. Females write longer and more lexically dense messages than males.

In another study, Rafie (2010) collected a sample of 300 SMS texts from a group of participants whose ages ranged from 20-25 years old. The findings reveal that there is no significant gender variation in the use of abbreviations. In yet another study, Ling (2005b) collected 417 messages via a telephone survey from 1000 Norwegian participants between the ages of 13 and 67. The analysis shows that girls aged from 13-34 years old write longer messages than boys (30 and 20 letters, respectively). Between 35 and 54 years of age, there is no difference in the word length as both men and women sent messages containing 20 letters. For participants of 55 to 67 years of age, the number of letters increased to 25 for women and decreased to only 10 for men. In Deumert's and Masinyana's (2008) South African study, 312 messages from 22 participants who are bilingual speakers of isiXhosa and English whose ages ranged from 18-27 were collected. The 312 messages are written either in one or the other language, or in a mixture of both. The average length of the messages is 22.6 words, with girls writing an average of 23 words, and boys, 19.

An interesting research bridging Asian and European cultures has been conducted by Balakrishnan and Batat (2010) who investigated the effect of age and gender on SMS usage among Malaysian and French youths. The participants are 50 Malay and 32 French who ranged in age from 15 to 25 years. An interview was administered to elicit the participants' use of emoticons and abbreviations. The findings show that female youths from the two

cultures are more active in using SMS, emoticons and abbreviations than their male counterpart.

Many studies have been conducted on the linguistic features of SMS texting. British texters commonly use shortenings, acronyms, initializations, letter/number homophones, accent stylization and non-conventional spellings (Thurlow 2003), while French texters use accent dropping, vowel deletions, non-conventional abbreviations and grammar (Francois 2010). Research on texters from United States shows that apostrophes and sentence-final punctuation are omitted (Ling & Baron 2007). In Swedish, meanwhile, capitalization, punctuation, subject pronouns, prepositions and articles are omitted (Segerstad 2002) and Malaysians use a lot of abbreviations, non-conventional stylization and contractions (Shafie, Osman & Darus 2011). However, such studies did not focus either on gender or the effect of culture in SMS language. Hence, this research paper attempts to look at two socio-cultural aspects namely, gender and culture. It mainly describes gender differences in SMS English language as well as the link between language used in SMS and culture.

### OBJECTIVE

The aim of this study is to investigate if gender influences SMS text patterns among Malay postgraduate students and how Malay culture can be reflected in the SMS language of these students. It should be noted that gaps in communication occur when the intended message is not transmitted or misunderstood. The result of this miscommunication is mainly due to the different styles of communication amongst people. One of the factors affecting good and effective communication in any means is gender. Gender differences in communication may pose problems in interpersonal interactions leading to intolerance and disappointment. These frustrations also occur in SMS messaging. Thus, investigating the linguistic variations in SMS by men and women is important. The differences if found could help us to avoid communication confusion or misunderstanding between genders. This study also hoped to enhance the cultural awareness among non-Malaysians on local patterns of language in texting. Therefore, a better understanding of local cultural influence on language used in SMS will provide exposure to Malay cultural words and enable non-Malaysians to communicate effectively with locals. Since there is a lack of studies concerning SMS language based on gender and culture, the current research paper will attempt to address this issue.

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Thus, this research paper attempts to answer the following questions:

1. How varied are the gender differences in terms of abbreviation, emotion, onomatopoeic and word length in the SMS language of male and female Malay post graduates students?
2. How do the SMS linguistic patterns reflect the cultural identity of the group?

### METHODOLOGY

The study employs both quantitative and qualitative methods. Hence, two primary steps are followed in this research paper. The first is to identify the linguistic variations between male and female texters. The study focuses on four predetermined categories of linguistic features of SMS; abbreviation, emotion, onomatopoeic and word length as they are the most common features of SMS. In addition, such features have been used by other researchers in the field

(Shafie et al 2011, Balakrishnan & Batat 2010). The current investigation adopts the definition of abbreviation that has been indicated by Shafie et al (2011) as syntactical, lexical reductions and misspellings of lexical terms. As for emotion features, gestures such as smiling, frowning or laughing cannot be expressed physically, so they are substituted with emoticons, which are basically icons representing one’s emotional state. Onomatopoeia is defined as a word that is formed from the sound it describes. Another dimension for examining the material is the mean length of the words. It is basically focused on how many words appear per SMS.

In the second, an interview is conducted to provide further understanding and to validate the findings in the gender differences, if any, found in SMS texting. Thus, the interview aims to triangulate the first research question concerning gender differences in the use of the above four selected features. The interview is also carried out to ensure that the patterns identified in this study reflect and represent the culture of the participants.

In this paper, the controlled demographic variables of the participants were their race and age. The respondents were 20 UKM Malay students: 10 females and 10 males whose ages ranged between 24- 30 years. In conducting the interview, two participants from each gender was chosen. To construct the corpus for this research; texts consisting of 40 sets of SMS (20 from females and 20 from males) were collected.

### DATA ANALYSIS

The three features: abbreviation, emotion and onomatopoeic were analyzed based on their frequency of occurrence in the texts. The final characteristics are then recorded in two tables representing linguistic features of females’ language in SMS, and linguistic features of males’ language in SMS. As for word length, the words in each text are counted then tabulated according to three categories; few (4-14 words), average (15-29 words) and lengthy (more than 30 words). The class intervals start with the smallest number of words per SMS (4) while the upper class limit is determined by the highest number of words per SMS (more than 30). After analyzing the quantitative data, the interview is transcribed and direct quotations of the participants’ responses to each question are used to analyze the themes emerging from the responses.

### RESULTS

The results are categorized into two parts; the first part is related to gender use of abbreviation, emotion, onomatopoeia and word length. The second part presents the socio-cultural element in the SMS texts.

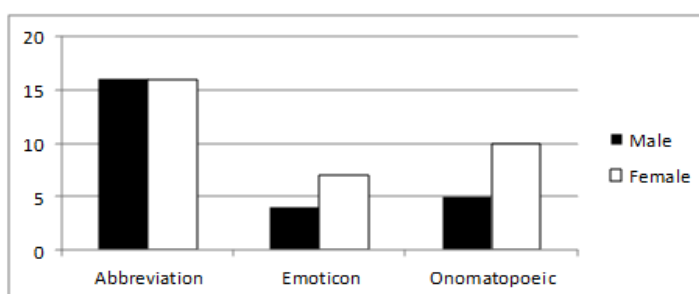


FIGURE 1. Comparison of linguistic features between males and females in SMS

As can be seen in Figure 1, there are no gender differences in the use of abbreviation as it is used by more than half of the SMS samples in both female and male texts. The same result is detected from the interview when only one of the male participants states that “no, gender will not influence the abbreviation”. This finding is similar to that of Rafi (2010) who found no difference in the use of abbreviations between both females and males in their SMS texts.

In this study, lexical reductions of lexical terms are detected. For instance, one of the male participants states that “I shall frwr to ur inbox in fb” and one the female participants texts “u shud watch eclipse n u’ll know why she shud chose Jacob” It seems that both genders use the maxim of brevity and speed and paralinguistic restitution in which abbreviation is a necessity to SMS language. Examining the similarities of abbreviated words used by both genders, the study finds both genders abbreviate some words such as ‘tq’ for thanks and ‘u’ for you.

Based on the interview, though both genders use abbreviations equally, they have different views of using it. The female participants claimed that they use abbreviations because “it is simple and to save time” while the male participants state “it is easy and can save cost” by reducing SMS length. Also, it is the nature of SMS characters that force them to shorten the words as a single space to SMS allows up to only 160 characters.

However, the feature of emoticons is used significantly more by females than males. Females used 35% while males used 20%. Based on the interview, male participants agree that they rarely use emoticons. This finding is supported by Balakrishnan’s and Batat’s (2010) study as emoticons are used more by females. Emoticons such as “smiley” and “winking” are used for enhancing the meaning of the text messages and for engendering “playful, informal style, intimacy which accentuated relational orientation of text messages” (Thurlow 2003 cited in Shafie et al 2011). From the findings of this study, females and males share the use of ‘smiley ☺’. However, ‘wink ;)’, ‘tongue :-P’, ‘laughing :D’ and ‘straight face ☹’ are used only by females. The icon of ‘frown ☹’ is used by males.

As indicated in Figure 1, females use more emoticons than males. The female participants reveal in the interview that using emotions “show our affection and feelings”. However, the males say that “it’s not an appropriate way to show feelings” and that is why they use fewer emoticons. Similarly, females display more use of onomatopoeia than males. The use of this feature is detected in 50% of the female SMS texts; however only 25% the males used this feature. The participants of the interview all agree that females use more onomatopoeia as commented by one of the females; “yes I often use onomatopoeia”. In contrast, one of male participants declares “only girl did that”. The reasons behind the use of onomatopoeia are “to emphasize feelings and to express excitement, sympathy, guilty etc” and “to get the ummmph!! while texting”. As opposed to females, male participants indicate that the use of onomatopoeia is less important in constructing SMS texts. They express that they are “not in mood to say such thing” and “if men do, it doesn’t really show their masculinity”.

## WORD LENGTH

TABLE 1. SMS word length of male and female participants

Number of words	Women	%	Men	%
4-14 (few)	10m	50	16m	80
15-29 (average )	5m	25	4m	20
30-43 (lengthy )	5m	25	-	-

The results in Table (1) show that 5 messages or 25% of female participants write lengthy messages. By contrast, 16 messages or about 80% of male participants use less than 14 words per SMS. The same result is found during the interview where a majority of the participants share the opinion that females text more words than males. This finding is consistent with Ling's (2005) and Deumert's and Masinyana's (2008) study in which there is a significant gender based difference in the number of words per SMS message. Naturally, the data shows that women generally write longer messages. The participants were asked if gender differences have an effect on the length of SMS. The female participants state that "female like to elaborate and talk more than men and we are more expressive". The same view is shared by one of the male participants where he states that "girls have much more to say than us". Nevertheless, another male participant comments that gender does not influence the length of SMS but it depends on "the person who has deep intuition, who has many things to express".

### SOCIO-CULTURAL PATTERNS

The second part of the findings concerns the socio-cultural elements in SMS texts. It is obvious from the SMS texts and the conducted interviews, that Malay cultural identity is not that much reflected. There are only two patterns identified from the data. The first one is the use of 'la'. For example, "leks2 la sis", "Salam wani. Can u gv me till tomoro? writer's block la. Huhu", "Thanks. Sure confusing la look who are those genius ppl constructing it". From the interview, 'la' or 'lah' is said to be the common Malay spoken suffix used even though the text conversation is in English. It is also reviewed as "a habit or common practice to make the sentence sounds better". The participants of the interview share almost similar views and say that 'lah' is used to soften angry responses as "don't shout at me lah".

The second pattern is translating Malay proverbs when texting in English such as "keep in mind, don't let banana fruits 2 times ahh!" and "don't 4get 2 prepare umbrella b4 rain k!". To make it clearer, the first proverb has been translated into English and it means we should not repeat the same mistakes and the second proverb can be simplified as be prepared. The lack of occurrence of this pattern in SMS is because according to the participants, the "meaning is not the same once we translate it". Furthermore, one of the male participants stated that "we don't know the correct way to say it in English". It is also mentioned in the interview that the use of Malay proverbs in English SMS is partly to show cultural identity.

### DISCUSSION

The results have shown that the use of abbreviation is necessary in writing SMS texts and there is no difference between genders. The SMS texts offer many advantages in terms of cost, time, length and storage. Barasa and Mous (2009) also listed out other benefits of SMSes as they are cheaper than the voice call, less intrusive, enable direct conveyance of the message, can be saved for future reference and offer a choice to reply, forward, or delete them. Nevertheless, the disadvantages of SMS texts are also crucial to be discussed. The main weakness of text messages is it is only accessible to literate people (Barasa & Mous 2009). For this paper, literate refers to mutual understanding of the topic discussed in SMSes. Outsiders may have difficulties to get the gist of the SMS content especially if jargon is used. Besides, since all participants in this paper are students, there is a concern whether the informal abbreviations used in the SMS will influence their daily writing. As people are

prone to adopt quicker and easier way of conveying messages, this undesirable effect of abbreviation may become worse if it is adopted and practised in their formal academic writing or examinations (Ahmad, Nurullah & Sarkar 2010). However, this phenomenon can be controlled if the educators impart the knowledge and responsibility to their students with regard to appropriate use of language. Or perhaps, someday the abbreviations used in the SMS will be accepted in official writing.

Judging by the results of the study, it is clear that females use more emoticons and onomatopoeic expressions than males. Women are by nature more expressive and tend to show their feelings even in non-verbal communication. As opined by the male participants, the use of emoticons does not reflect the real feelings of texters.

As SMS is a hybrid of written and spoken discourse, females are able to use this innate form of SMS, so they 'write' as though they are speaking. This study proves that females write longer messages than males, suggesting that they are comfortable to interact virtually as if they are in a real life interaction. In general, males are more concise in expressing their thoughts in SMS texts. However, writing too simple and brief SMS messages may sometimes lead to incomplete understanding of the message. In addition, writing too long SMS messages may lead to confusion as the intended message from the sender is lost. With regard to culture in SMS texts, Malay postgraduate students are partly influenced by their local language as they give their SMS texts a character that can reflect their identity as Malay. Positively, using 'lah' in SMS brings the speaker and listener closer as it shows solidarity and familiarity. Moreover, it may be bold to suggest that this ethnic group practised their culture by translating Malay proverbs into English in their SMS texts. This is something that can be proud of as many people tend to be influenced by other cultures and rarely acknowledge their own roots. Negatively, this cultural element may create confusion for others who are from the group. They may not understand the message and may not be able to text with Malay users of SMS texts such as Malaysian Chinese and Indians who form the other major races in the country effectively.

#### LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

As this study is conducted on a small number of Malay postgraduate students in UKM whose ages ranged between 24-30 years old, the findings cannot be generalized to represent the gender differences in English SMS patterns for all Malays. For future studies, better results will be obtained if more SMS samples from more participants are involved. Future studies can also investigate more than four predetermined features to get an in-depth analysis on gender differences and culture influence in SMS language by examining capitalization, punctuation, letter homophones and message complexity.

The study indicates that at the linguistic level, there are gender differences identified in terms of emoticons, onomatopoeic and word length. Females have stronger tendency to use all features compared to males. But in terms of abbreviation, both genders show no difference as this SMS mode of communication allows each individual to abbreviate due to the limited space of SMS. Besides, the finding reveals that SMS words are shorten to economise cost and time. Nevertheless, based on the interview, the result demonstrates that there is some cultural influence in texting SMS in English for both genders. There are only two patterns of cultural elements identified in this study namely the use of 'la' and the direct translation of Malay proverbs into English.

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