

The Debate of Textese: Education and Language Change

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Abstract

The use of Textese (or SMS language) seems to be increasingly carried over from messaging through mobile phones to the day to day use of English. On one hand is its popularity which is apparent in the increasing occurrences of abbreviated and non-standard forms of language in newspapers and magazine articles, and on the other, are the complaints of teachers and parents that students' language is getting deteriorated due to Textese. Research is being done by linguists in the west to explore the impacts that Textese has on literacy acquisition but no significant research has been encountered in the Indian scenario. Inevitably, the teachers here are being guided by their personal, intuitive views on the issue. Recognizing that teachers' perceptions regarding Textese being 'good' or 'bad' have determinate influence upon classroom practices the research reviewed in this paper establishes the need of documenting and analyzing these perceptions systematically. The research was conducted in three phases. Phase one analyzed a collection of sixty text messages as the data in order to clarify the nature and characteristics of Textese. Phase two and phase three, on the other hand, reported on the perceptions of various stakeholders- students, teachers, and language experts regarding the use of Textese in classroom contexts using a structured questionnaire and semi-structured interviews as tools of data collection (respectively). The research concluded by stating that the debate of Textese is a genuine and brisk area of contention within the Indian scenario.

Key words: Textese, Text messages, Standard language, and literacy acquisition

Introduction

Mobile phones seem to have become an inextricable part of modern lifestyle. Its subsequent impacts on the contours of human life-health, psychology and the way humans relate to each other are being studied by researchers in various contexts. One of the impacts of mobile phones which remain a significant area of concern

for many researchers throughout the world is its impact on Language. The present research started with a general observation of the increasing use of Textese- the non-standard and truncated language used typically in informal text messages, in various other written contexts such as newspapers, magazines, advertisements, pamphlets as well as in spoken conversations. It was noted that the augmenting trend of Textese is being generally seen as indicating the arrival of a significant language change.

A study of previous research showed that the change is being seen as a degenerative threat towards the regular use of language by many, and it is teachers (with their argument that students are losing control on grammar as a result of their electronic chatting) who form the greater proportions of this community (Spatafora, 2008). Researchers, such as Lee (2002) and Humphrys (2007) argue that extensive use of Textese while text messaging has led students to become habitual to such a 'sloppy' form of language. As a result, students cease to notice the non-standard abbreviations and irregular syntax of Textese when it gets carried over to their formal writings (Lee, 2002). Ross (2008) posits that there is a significant change in students' overall quality of work since the advent of Textese. She states that students want to get everything written 'as fast as possible and are becoming increasingly disinterested in the consuming steps of writing process- drafting, revising and editing the text' (p. 4). Baron (2002) uses the term 'whateverism' to describe the attitude that a continuous use of Textese leads to and argued that it may permanently harm our linguistic capabilities.

However, there are also scholars who view such changes as ineluctable in the process of evolution of language, and owing to its flexibility, consider Textese as being especially relevant for classroom contexts. Researcher O'Connor (2005), for instance, asserts that such technologies are resulting in the creation of 'a new generation of teenage writers who are accustomed to translating their every thought and feeling into words. They write more than any generation has since the days when telephone calls were rare and the mailman rounded more than once a day' (para.7). Dansieh (2011) and Crystal (2001) propose that Textese facilitates literacy acquisition by engaging learners meaningfully in the acts of reading and writing. In his book titled 'Txtng: The Gr8 Db8', Crystal (2008) refutes the popular view that SMS language can have negative impacts on student's language and literacy and argues, 'I do not see how texting could be a significant factor when discussing children who have real problems with literacy. If you have difficulty with reading and writing, you are hardly going to be predisposed to use a technology that demands sophisticated abilities in reading and writing. And if you do start to text, I would expect the additional experience of writing to be a help, rather than a hindrance'. (p. 157)

Hence, many researchers and teachers deprecate the use of Textese in classroom context, while others seem to sanction it. This study organized these two sets of perceptions into two disparate schools of thought prevalent in the area.

Further, it has been noted that despite the excessive research which is being done to inquire into the impacts of Textese on literacy acquisition in western context, no conclusive results has been found. The area, hence, remains internationally contended. However, an overview done in the field indicated that no such research or debate is being organized in the Indian context (Pallavi, 2015). This research, therefore, attempted to see whether the debate is really non-existent and irrelevant in the Indian scenario. It is argued that educators cannot afford to remain passive on the issue since they either approve Textese by accepting it when it occurs in students' assignments or disapprove it by marking it as incorrect use of grammar. Since there is a lack of research done specifically in the Indian context, the study attempted to problematize the issue and then obtain the views of students, teachers and language experts regarding the debate on the use of Textese in the Indian classrooms.

Indeed, a third school of thought associated with the issue, stresses upon the need of continuing the debate for the role it plays in furthering one's understanding, while one takes a non-judgmental standpoint. This school of thought argues for exploring the issue in various contexts with the aim of understanding it profoundly. The research, contending a similar vantage point, did not seek to attain a definitive conclusion on the debate but rather stressed on the need of systematically reporting and objectively analyzing the popular perceptions of various stakeholders associated with the field of education. The attempt was to analyze and evaluate Textese for its own value rather than in comparison to the Standard form of language.

The primary questions that this research addressed were as follows:

- What is Textese?
- What are the different types of messages and how do they affect the use of language?
- How is Textese produced and interpreted?
- What is the perception of teachers, students and language experts regarding the use of Textese in written assignments and examinations?

Methodology

Before beginning to explore the popular perceptions of various stakeholders on the issue, it was considered important to clearly understand what SMS language or Textese is. Since the research sought to assess Textese for its worth, rather than using the Standard form of language as a yardstick to compare Textese with, it began by analyzing a collection of text messages to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of Textese and various facets related to the use of the language.

In the first phase of the study, the researcher collected sixtytext messages from the students of education department studying at the Central Institute of Education, University of Delhi, India. These messages were analyzed qualitatively in order to arrive at various categories of messages and to studyfurther how language is manipulated within each of these categories.

Once an understanding was gained as to what Textese is and what the various factors are which influence it, the research proceeded to gain an insight into the perceptions of students regarding Textese. The preliminary analysis of messages which was done in the first phase worked as the theoretical background andguided the subsequent collection of data from the students of English proficiency course studying at ILL (Institute Of Life Long Learning), University of Delhi, during the second phase of the study. This group of students was characterized by a varied background since students from disparate fields of study (sciences, humanities and commerce) who intended to improve their skills at English language, comprised the group. The tool which was used to collect the data for this phase of the research was a self-report kind structured questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of both closed ended as well as open ended questions. Responses of thirty students were randomly selected for analysis by the researcher. These responses were subjected to qualitative as well as quantitative analysis. Students' responses to closed-ended questions were analyzed quantitatively, while those given in response to open-ended questions were analyzed qualitatively.

Although the questionnaire yielded quantitative as well as qualitative data, the inability of a structured questionnaire as an appropriate tool for providing any scope to probe further into the acquired data remained a major limitation. To overcome this limitation and to gain an in-depth understanding of the exact reasons which guide the popular perceptions of people, the third phase of the study was organized.

In the third phase of the study individual and personal (face to face) interviews were conducted to obtain the relevant data. The interviews were semi- structured in

nature. The six participants who were interviewed were selected purposely by the researcher, with a view to obtain data that was varied in nature and was broad enough to embrace most of the relevant units which could be analyzed for the purpose of the research. However, since the sample size is small, it cannot be expected to represent the population of students, teachers or the language experts of the country. The collected data was reported elaborately and analyzed qualitatively.

The significance of this phase of the study lies in the opportunity that it provided to attain a clearer understanding on the issue in question. The analysis of the responses in Phase two had led the researcher, as stated above, to certain hypotheses explaining the beliefs and logic that guided popular perceptions related to the issue. The data yielded by this phase of the study goes a step further and provides the researcher an opportunity to ascertain or negate those speculations by testing them against the attempts of participants to rationalize their beliefs and perceptions. However, it must be noted that this research work was not an attempt to provide definitive conclusions to the debates that surrounds the use of Textese in formal contexts. It rather attempted to explore and understand varied perceptions held by people, the interactions of which gave rise to the debate.

Further, it is apparent that this research followed the design of an action research. Each phase in this research led to the next, validating or negating the speculations that were drawn by the researcher on the basis of the previous phase that the research went through.

Findings and results

The study had begun by analyzing text messages in order to arrive at an understanding on how regular form of language is being manipulated within these messages. In order to approach the problem systematically, messages were classified into disparate categories during the first phase of the study and an in-depth understanding of why, when and where is Textese mostly employed as well as various factors which affect the use of Textese was gained. The analysis led to the following four broad categories of messages that were developed primarily on the basis of the relationship shared between the sender and the receiver of the message:

- **Formal messages**

Formal messages are generally shared between people whose conversations with each other are characterized by hierarchical power structures or distant relationship in an institutionalized setting. Conversations that take place via message between boss and her subordinates, a teacher and a student, or between colleagues who share a distant relationship are some of the situations in which such messages are shared. This type of message exchange is usually done for the purpose of sharing information. The use of language in these messages closely resembles the standard language which is acceptable for official purpose or in formal conversations.

- **Business messages**

Messages sent by companies with the aim of promotion and marketing of their products constitute this category of messages. These messages are typed at the source and are sent off to multiple receivers at the same time. Unlike formal messages, these messages consist of many acronyms and abbreviations and intend to deliver as much information as possible within a limited space. The details of the business constitute the content of these messages.

- **Forwarded messages**

This category of messages consists of jokes, jingles and quotes. Forwarded from one receiver to another, this category is most frequently used by the youth. Manipulation of English language is done quite frequently in these messages for the purpose of brevity. These messages are generally exchanged between people who share an informal relationship. However, greetings on various occasions can be sent through forwarded messages between people who share formal relationship as well.

This category of messages has come to define an entirely new form of relationships in the youth which exchange such messages quite frequently. Youngsters use forwarded messages to “stay in touch” with friends or with whom they seldom meet. These messages in such cases indicate that the sender has not forgotten the receiver and is interested in retaining the acquaintance.

- **Informal messages**

Informal messages are generally shared between people whose relationships are not defined by a hierarchical distribution of power between them; they might rather share an intimate relationship with one another. From a short two message chat to long chats consisting of several messages, informal conversations held via messages follow the

widest range of structures, can be written for disparate purposes and manipulate language at various levels. Informal messages are most prone to manipulations of language and hence most relevant for this study.

The research being reviewed here studied the changes that are brought in English language while typing informal messages in details and reported that the operation of encoding a message in Textese by the composer of the message (and later, its interpretation) may involve unconscious mental processes of selection and substitution at various levels.

Dropping of helping verbs, grammatical subject, definite articles and various other parts of the sentence (of Standard English) that are not considered "important" or are "obvious" from the context, result from a process of selection. Hence, the message "I am in a meeting. I cannot pick the phone. Can you message me?" can be conveyed successfully by typing "In meeting.can't pick.can u msg?" Apparently, words that are semantically most important in a sentence and letters that are phonetically most prominent in a word and are essential to the meaningful interpretation of the message are 'selected' while typing in Textese.

Further, the process of substitution seems to play another important role while encoding a message in Textese. Spellings such as "L8r" for "later", "4" in the place of "for", "u" for the standard "you" and "mondaz" instead of "Mondays" illustrate the point at the level on spellings. The substitution of consonant clusters with a numeral or a single letter is done on the basis of the phonetic proximity of the replacing numeral or the letter with the original word or the consonant cluster which it replaces. Ideas and sentences can be similarly replaced in order to save time or space while typing messages in Textese.

As the regular form of language undergoes the operations such as those described above, what yields is a kind of code which the message receiver has to decipher in order to reach at the underlying message that was in the mind of the person who typed the message. Context plays a key role in ascribing meaning during this process.

The second and the third phase of this research explored the various perceptions that relate to the use of Textese specifically in classroom contexts. The findings of these phases are summarized below- perceptions that supported the use of Textese in the classroom context were broadly classified into two categories.

1. Students have a limited period of time at their disposal during examination; they will be able to write more if they are allowed to use Textese.

2.Using Textese will save students from "hard work" of writing more.

There were two other reasons that were given in favor of Textese in response to the questionnaire; according to these responses, Textese “increases writing skills” and “makes it (writing skills) effective”. Both of these statements were not stated clearly and therefore could not be interpreted accurately by the researcher.

However, most of the respondents argued that SMS language should not be used in examinations. The reasons which were given in the support of this argument were broadly classified into following categories-

- 1. Textese cannot be comprehended easily by many.**
- 2. Words written in Textese are liable to multiple interpretations.**
- 3. Since Textese is a deviation from the regular form of language it cannot become the medium to gauge students' competence in the language.**
- 4. Allowing the use of Textese will deteriorate the language English.**

Hence, the presence of several and contesting viewpoints held by people, deploring the use of Textese or supporting it, indicates that the issue is not vapid in the context. The assumption that the debate is irrelevant or absent from the Indian scenario is apparently negated by the findings of this research.

Further, the perceptions of students, teachers, and language experts that were reported during the second and the third phase of the study were juxtaposed to the findings of the first phase of the study. It was found that although the arguments and the people that deplore the use of Textese outnumber those who support it, it cannot be assumed that Textese affects students' language ability negatively. Most of the respondents had argued that Textese is encouraging improper spellings and grammar among students. However, the analysis of text messages which was carried out during the first phase of the research indicated that the use of Textese is inherently linked to the Standard form of language. Textese, as depicted by the first phase of the study, is the result of operations such as selection and substitution that are carried out on a message which is originally perceived by the message composer, specifically, in the proper form of language. It is only when a message composer has a strong grasp on the proper form of language that she can identify the units which are most significant and essential to be typed for proper interpretation of the intended message. Textese cannot be successfully employed if the users are not conversant with at least the spoken form of the language. Hence, it was argued that unwarranted allegations such as the one stated above, should be cautiously examined as they might not be the true representative of the reality. All in all,

the present research work intended to explore the case of Textese as a debate in the Indian context. In

Conclusion, it was posited that the debate of Textese is a genuine and brisk area of contention within the Indian scenario and the possible implications of Textese for literacy acquisition must be subjected to further research.

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