Chapter LXVIII
Linguistic Forms and Functions of SMS Text Messages in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The chapter examines the linguistic forms and functions of SMS text messages in Nigeria. With an estimated 25 million mobile phone users in Nigeria, the use of SMS is fast growing in Nigeria, just like in other parts of the world and this is leading to the gradual abandoning of the traditional oral culture, especially among the educated. In addition to the usual nonconventional orthographic forms and spelling typical of SMS, the study observes Nigerian users' tenor consciousness, linguistic creativity, text multilingualism, the use of predominantly local languages, the emergence of NEB-SMS, and how the socio-economic and religious atmosphere of the country constrain SMSs. A greater demand is placed on ESL teachers to emphasize how style, context, purpose and audience determine linguistic choice. It is observed that the use of The chapter examines the linguistic forms and functions of SMS text messages in Nigeria. With an estimated 25 million mobile phone users in Nigeria, the use of SMS is fast growing in Nigeria, just like in other parts of the world and this is leading to the gradual abandoning of the traditional oral culture, especially among the educated ones. In addition to the usual nonconventional orthographic forms and spelling typical of SMS, the study observes Nigerian users' tenor consciousness, linguistic creativity, text multilingualism, the use of predominantly local languages, the emergence of NEB-SMS, and how the socio-economic and religious atmosphere of the country constrain SMSs. A greater demand is placed on ESL teachers to emphasize how style, context, purpose and audience determine linguistic choice. Also it is observed that the use of indigenous languages will lead to their development and seek relevance for them in the digital technology era.

INTRODUCTION

The new millennium ushered in a new medium of communication through mobile phones in Nigeria. The licensing of three operators of Global System for Mobile Communication (GSM) in August 2001 marked a significant moment in the history of telecommunication in Nigeria. Prior to this historic occasion, Nigerian Telecommunication Limited (NITEL), a governmental organization, enjoyed the monopoly of the provision of telecommunication services. Apart from the fact that the services of NITEL were not very efficient, they were only limited to a few Nigerians, who lived in the cities and major towns, typically the educated people. However, with the advent of GSM, it became accessible to other Nigerians.

After 16 years of military rule, Olusegun Obasanjo became the president on May 29, 1999. The new government adopted economic and political policies such as privatization, deregulation and democratization. These policies have their roots in the USA, which in contemporary times is the major agent facilitating the spread of English language alongside her economic, technological and cultural influences all over the world (Taiwo, 2004a). The new development in communication through the modern technology is creating a global high profile for English. Gradol (1997) corroborates this in his statement that "the computer technology age is not only encouraging the use of English, but also transforming it" (p. 51).

English is the major medium of communication in Nigeria. Though the language is nonnative to Nigeria (it came through colonialism), it has been domesticated in order to express the peculiar sociolinguistic realities of the Nigerian context. It has also been institutionalized across the different linguistic domains of the Nigerian society (business, official, education, the media, home, etc.) (Jowitt, 1991; Adegbija, 2004).

The kind of English used in Nigeria is one of those popularly referred to by Kachru (1985 and 1997) as "New Englishes." According to him,

the term symbolizes the functional and formal variations, divergent sociolinguistic contexts, ranges and varieties of English in creativity and various types of acculturation in parts of the Western and non-western world.

This English is a hybrid language, which is fashioned out mainly from English forms and partly from local forms in order to meet the cultural and communicative needs of the speakers. This domesticated and institutionalized form of English used in Nigeria is often referred to by scholars as "Nigerian English" (Akere, 1978; Bamiro, 1991). The variety of English used in Nigeria also fits into Kachru's (1997) outer circle Englishes, which are generally referred to as ESL (English as a second Language). ESL is a variety of English spoken by people whose mother tongue is not English. Such variety is commonly used for wider communication in former colonies of Britain. The language is a legacy left behind by the former colonial master.

It is against this background of new developments in communication and the interface between communication and language, coupled with the peculiarities of English usage in the Nigerian linguistic setting that we are examining the linguistic forms and functions SMS messages in Nigeria.

Communicating through mobile phones is gaining acceptance in Nigeria. According to *Afrol News* of June 12, 2001, Nigeria mobile users currently account for 14% of Africa's total mobile users and mobile subscriptions in Nigeria will exceed 30 million at the end of 2006. The growth in the use of mobile phones in Nigeria has created jobs for many young Nigerians as some of them now engage in selling prepaid phone cards or mobile phone accessories. It enables communication with members of the family who live in remote places as well as saving time and travel cost on face-to-face communication (Owens, 2006, p. 10). With the popularity of SMS, there is a gradual shift from the traditional oral culture to the writing

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