

MORPHOLOGICAL STRATEGIES IN TEXT MESSAGING AMONG NIGERIAN USERS OF GLOBAL SYSTEM FOR MOBILE COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

Text messaging is the application of abridged morphological forms in order to communicate and it is one of the fastest means of communication since the emergence of the Global System for Mobile Communication (GSM) in the world. In text messaging, we apply innovative language forms with morpho-syntactic structures that have become acceptable since they are understood by the 'texters' (senders) and the 'textees' (receivers) of the message. There are applications of morphological strategies in the form of omissions, word order violations, contractions, abbreviations, acronyms, compounding, blending and lack of punctuation. All these characterize the morpho-syntactic elements in the Short Message Service (SMS) texts messages. However, there is no hard and fast rule with regards to the morphological choices in SMS. Texters use a combination of letters and numbers in their text messages and in some cases they use only numerals. The texters ignore the basic orthographic and syntactic rules of formal English Language syntax to suit the semantics of their message. This paper, therefore, examines the creative strategies of word formation found in the morphology and syntax of select SMS text messages marked out for this research. Our data was collected from select SMS of individual users and the service providers of GSM. Our thesis statement is that these morphological patterns as used in SMS are already becoming standardized forms being adopted by the Nigerian users of GSM.

Keywords: *Morphology and Syntax, SMS texts, GSM (Mobile Phone), Semantics, Nigerian English.*

Introduction

According to Katamba (1993, 58), "Morphology is the study of the internal structure of words and the rules governing the formation of words in a language". This means that morphology is traditionally concerned with the study of words, forms of words and word formation in language in different uses and constructions. The analysis of words begins with the identification of the units called morphs. Oha (2005, 6) sees the morph as, "a physical form representing some morphemes in a language". According to Syal and Jindal (2010, 78), "when a word is segmented into parts, the segments are referred to as 'morphs' ". Thus it is the distinctive recurrent sound segment or sequence of sound segments. Each morph represents a particular morpheme. Udofot (1998, 45) defines the morpheme as, "the smallest unit of meaningful speech. It is the smallest unit of grammatical analysis". Olu Tomori (1977, 66) adds that "a word is said to be a

morpheme when it cannot be further broken down into parts without destroying the meaning. Therefore, meaning is important in the study of words since morphemes are meaningful units ”.

Examples:

1. ‘Toy’ is one morpheme
2. ‘Toys’ is two morphemes (toy + s)
3. ‘Involuntarily’ is three morphemes (in + voluntary + ly)

Morphemes could be free or bound. Free morphemes are the root of the words that cannot be divided further without affecting or destroying the meaning, while the bound morphemes are appendages to the root morpheme in order to create more words or word forms. They are the affixes that occur in derivational or inflectional forms. They cannot stand on their own as independent words. The inflectional affixes or morphemes occur at the end of words in English. They are also called suffixes. By the rule of English words, they do not change the class of the word and no morpheme is added after the inflectional morpheme. This means that it is impossible to have more than one inflectional morpheme in a word. Examples:

4. ‘-s’ Morpheme creates plural as in ‘boy’- ‘boys’
5. ‘-s’ Morpheme creates third person singular as in ‘John works’
6. ‘-ed’ Morpheme creates past tense as in ‘John worked’

However, derivational affixes or morphemes are used in the formation of new words. They occur in various ways either at the end or beginning of English words. Derivation belongs to the subfield of word formation. According to Olu Tomori, (1977, 74), “derivational morphemes could change the meaning and grammatical class of the base word”. For instance:

7. Beautiful (adjective), Beautifully (adverb)
8. Slave (noun), Enslave (verb)
9. Break (verb), Breakage (noun)

In this research we are not concerned about the inflectional and/or derivational morphemes rather we are concerned with the various morphological processes that occur in word formation among the users of text messages through GSM. We will examine some of these morphological forms like compounding, borrowing, acronymic applications and other forms, which would be outlined before the analysis.

Text messaging is a general term that is used to refer to the short written messages usually sent through phone and other portable devices over a network. Ong’onda et al. (2011, 1) observes that the terms ‘text messaging’ or just ‘texting’ refers to the brief typed messages sent using the Short Message Service (SMS) of mobile/cell phones, personal digital assistants (PDAs), smart phones or web browsers. Language has been an integral part of communication and human beings, being compulsive communicators, continue to find new ways of communication in an attempt to bridge the distance between individuals. Internet technology has greatly influenced human life especially in the area of communication. According to Adejubi, (2010, 2), the entire world comprising six continents and many countries of about 6,881,800,000 (as the estimated population United States Census Bureau) has been reduced to a global village through the dynamism of communication with the aid of information technology (ICT).

ICT is a term used to refer to a range of technologies for gathering, storing, retrieving, processing, analyzing and transmitting information. The SMS (short message service), which serves as the latest way of quick communication since the invention of SMS texts, came alongside with the global technology. Lexemes are used to facilitate the effectiveness of this device. The effectiveness of this medium of communication depends on the appropriate combination of the words it carries, and in the combination of these words lie what is known as the message. This communication technique is currently in use in all areas of life; in offices, schools, markets, homes, advertisements, churches, etc. The component service (the phone) is unique for its smallness and mobility. Due to the smallness, there is a limited space which leaves subscribers no choice other than pursue simple sentence structures and other language short-forms to enable them exhaust their message. Crystal (2001), contributing to the small character space of the mobile phone, contends that subscribers have created new linguistic forms to enable them maximize the available space and at the same time, make sure they say all that is to be said to the understanding of the receiver. Supporting this view, Rafi (2010) observes that through the new written conventions, texters have developed a written form of sounds that replaces the ability to hear spoken utterances. This study therefore, seeks to examine the morpho-syntactic patterns of the innovative language forms in text messaging.

Historical Overview of SMS Text Messaging

Laconically, the SMS is that part of a phone, web or mobile communication system used globally for the exchange of short text messages between discussants. SMS, according to Oladoye (2011, 16), was first used in December 1992 by a 22-year old named Neil Papworth. He says that the concept of SMS was developed by Friedhelm Hillebrand, Bernard Ghillebaert and Oculy Silaban in 1984, in the Franco-German GSM cooperation; since the invention, the mobile telephone has been the latest way to communicate quickly.

However, Doring (2014, 9) notes that “SMS communication allows for a reasonable use of syntactic and lexical short forms, which save character space, or touches of the handset keys, as compared with using the full forms of words”. According to Rafi (2010), it pursues simple sentence structures for communication. They also make use of written sound of words and in other cases bring code mixing into it. Rafi (2010) further observes that SMS syntactic and lexical choices by the texters are not so different from a child language; for instance a child expresses his feelings through simple present progressive tense e.g. *mom eatin* for ‘Mom is eating’ and *Eating* for ‘I am eating’, etc.

The equipment in its uniqueness affords most texters a much economized means of communication. Chilwa (2007, 96) explains that the SMS gives the subscriber the advantage of choosing a specific number of words that would communicate comprehensively, but briefly, with minimum cost. Due to the inconveniences caused by the limitation in the time and space that comes along with the SMS, texters are forced to find new ways for sending text messages. Letters and numbers are also often combined

(or used alone) for compression and convenience. Discussing on the brevity of the electronic discourse, Crystal notes that the technical restrictions of text messaging has led to the development of language short forms in SMS communication. The sender of a text message is known as a 'texter'. SMS text service itself has different colloquialisms depending on the region. Our area of study geographically is the analysis of SMS text messaging in Nigeria.

GSM and SMS in Nigeria

In the words of Bodomo (2010, 110) "mobile phone in Nigeria was introduced in 2001 with the evolution of Global System for Mobile Communication which two people or more exchange messages by coding and decoding texts received and sent from their cell phones". Oladoye (2011) writes that the commencement brought the Short Message Service (SMS) to limelight in the Nigerian communication system; ever since then, text messaging has taken different turns. SMS text messaging as used by modern handsets is a part of the Global System for Mobile communication (GSM), as a means of sending messages of not more than 160 characters to and from GSM mobile handsets. In Nigeria, most SMS messages are mobile - to - mobile text messages, although the standard supports other types of broadcast messaging as well. Linguists and scholars of related fields have conducted researches on the general use of SMS text messaging since it became a part of the Global System of communication in Nigeria. The global technology for Mobile communication was introduced in Nigeria in the year 2001 and following the inception, SMS text messaging has become a major medium of passing cross information from one person to another irrespective of the distance between the 'sender' and 'receiver', (texter and the textee). MTN, which happened to be the first GSM Company in Nigeria, commenced its commercial services in August 2001.

SMS text messaging has become a vital part of our communication system in Nigeria. It serves as a cheaper alternative for many Nigerians today, in which they pay less, as against the higher costs on oral phone calls. It has found a place for itself and it has come to stay. Various new devices are now developed to promote its usage e.g. Blackberries and I-phones. In Nigeria today, people receive invitations to employment interviews, warnings, announcements, etc. via text messages. SMS text messaging is moving fast on a wide range in the Nigerian communication system and even in the whole of Africa.

Morphological Strategies in SMS Messaging

As explained earlier, morphology studies the internal structure of words. Thus, morphological processes are those processes employed in linguistics to form new words in a language. Sanmi (2010) identified eight ways by which words are formed. They include: compounding, reduplication, acronym, blends, conversion, back-formation, clipping, etc. We shall only discuss the morphological processes common in SMS applications among the Nigerian users of GSM. These are compounding, blending, acronym application, deletion/omission, contraction, abbreviation and phonic mutation, use of symbols and numerals.

A. Compounding

Compounding is neither inflection nor derivation; it is a combination of two or more independent words. The product of the words formed stands as a free morpheme. According to Bodomo (2010), the compound formed is a morphological complex unit in linguistics; it is unquestionable among linguists. It can be formed by adding a noun to another noun as in **starlights**, noun to a verb as in **kickback** etc. Examples in text messages 10 and 11:

10. D outbreak of ur breaktru in dis new yr shall be faster dan rocket stars. God shall grant u all ur effort wit gudsucsess.
11. Join us @ d doortodoor evangelm by 2pm

In 10 and 11 above, we have such compounds as: breaktru (break + through), gudsucsess (good + success) and doortodoor (door + to + door). 'Breaktru' is a normal compounding in English but 'gudsucsess' and 'doortodoor' are abnormal compounding which the texter applied in order to manage the space available in the message environment. It would rather be called 'clustered words' used for managing text spaces. We see deliberate attempt to combine two and three words to form single words while at the same time creating precise morphological forms in order to capture meanings. The combinations are not derivational or inflectional; they are combinations of two or three words that are independent in meaning.

B. Blending

Blending is a process in morphology where new words are formed by combining the initial and the final segments of two or more already existing words in a language. Ndimele (2003) says that blends are words made of parts of morphemes usually formed by joining the parts of two different words together. There are two types of blends; the first cannot be analyzed into constituents but contains elements, which may remind us of other words similar to them. For instance 'smog' tells us of smoke and fog in blended form. Quirk and Greenbaum (2000) contend that the second type of blend consists of words seen as contracted forms of compounds, that is, words in which one element is fragmentary when compared to its corresponding uncompounded form. Examples 15-17 are examples of blending applied in SMS application:

15. Imagin a wrld witout youpipple, witout love, luv is sometinelse dat al cherish, few understood. Let us define it wit our lives.
16. Broda rejoice with me d battle is ova, my father hz fulwon d case.
17. Plz am in d chuchoir

In examples 15 to 17, we have such blends as: 'youpipple', (you + people), 'sometinelse' (something + else), 'fulwon' (fully + won), 'chuchoir' (church + choir). Except 'something-else' which seems a popular blend in English, the others are created based on the discretion of the texters. They are not standard forms in English.

C. Acronyms

They are new words formed from joining the first letters of two sets of words. Oladoye (2011, 36) writes that “when the initial letters are pronounced with the name of the letters of the alphabet, they are called ‘alphabetisms’ but when they are pronounced like individual words, they are called acronyms”. Examples include: WHO (World Health Organization), NEPA (National Electric Power Authority), YES (Youth Empowerment Scheme), AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) etc. The morphological style is language specific, that is, the word formation rule differs across languages. However, in this study we are specifically concerned with the formation rule in English language Acronyms are commonly used as found in the data 18-20.

18. May u live long laik corruption in Nigeria, may ur generocity spread laik poverty and AIDS in naija, may ur enemies fall laik naira value, may ur blessing increase laik fuel price in naija, may ur happiness rise laik unemployment, may u nt fail laik NEPA in Nigeria nd may God fight ur enemies more powerful than Boko Haram in Nigeria. Api new month!
19. Conventn hold at Arewa hall by 10am prompt. NYM secretariat
20. NGN8, 000 has been debited with your account on 30-Aug- 2013 by cash W/D self. Bal NGN20, 000.32CR

In examples 18-20, acronyms are applied in several forms. We have AIDS, NEPA, NYM, NGN, W/D and CR. Example 20 is a typical bank alert text message indicating a banking transaction. The abbreviations NGN, W/D and CR are common in banking SMS. NGN means ‘Nigerian Naira’, W/D means ‘withdrawal’ while CR means ‘Credit’. It is almost getting standardized as a text pattern for the banks in Nigeria.

D. Deletion/Omission

Deletion is a syntactic operation that removes constituent in a construction and therefore cause it not to appear in the surface structure. Many sentences in SMS texts involve discourse ellipsis, that is, contextually determined omission where the subjects/agents and objects are intentionally deleted or omitted because they are either implicit in the verb or are known by the interlocutors in the discourse. The elements seen as omissions are deleted at the surface structure for purposes of economy and user’s reasonability in understanding the rules of text composition. The omission shows that there is a shared context or background between the interlocutors about the object in question. This also bears out the postulation that the stylistic feature of syntactic omissions in SMS discourse relies on the fact that communications with close friends, partners and family members allows one to organize messages pragmatically as a common background exists. Determiners are also omitted in texts of SMS users.

21. Saw ur cal. Whats gwan?
22. Sure wil be there 2 conzol u. Get on wit ur laif
23. Love the card, tanks
24. Tanks, I love the card

In 21 - 24, there are deletions of the subjects in the text messages of the discussants. From the data, the subjects deleted are mostly pronouns such as ‘we’, ‘he’, ‘she’ especially the personal pronoun ‘I’. This is very common in texting. More so, we have

‘ur’ (your), ‘wil’ (will), ‘conzol’ (consol), ‘tanks’ (thanks). All the deletion attempts are aimed at creating economy of space in the message.

E. Contractions

Contraction is a term used for words or group of words whose orthographic letters are not fully represented; they are shortened for want of time or space. SMS communication makes use of contractions. The words are contracted by cutting the middle of a word or by attaching the first letter of the first word to the second word and removing the rest of the letters of the first word.

22. Wassup? I de house
23. G/evening sir & hw r u doin. Diz is 2 officialy invite u 2 my bday party
24. D guy name apia for notice bod, they say he take exam 4 sbody. O boy don go bi dat oo
25. I no eat 4 nite com de tek bfast 4 eleven o’ clock. Dis assignment de show me
26. Ngozi’ll wed 15th Dec. Hope u’ll bring wedin gown.

In examples 22 to 26 respectively the phrase ‘what is up?’ is contracted as ‘wassup’, more like a cliché. Others include ‘birthday’ as ‘bday’, ‘somebody’ as ‘sbody’, ‘breakfast’ as ‘bfast’, ‘Ngozi’ll’ for ‘Ngozi will’. The contracted forms, which are derived from two or three sets of self standing words, do not lose their property of a fully independent word. However, if the practice continues overtime, the fear is that the novice language created by texters may cause some words to lose their property of a fully independent word and acquire the properties of a morphological affix.

F. Symbolic Morphemes

This occurs whenever Internet ready symbols are applied for communication in SMS. The commonest of such symbolic morphemes is ‘@’ symbol which means ‘at’ in interpretation. Examples

27. we mit @ love garden by 2 pm plz kindly dress formal
28. I said it @ d initial tym, tnk God 4 my kind of person.

In examples 27 & 28, we see the application of the symbol @ representing ‘at’ and it shows a form of symbolic morpheme applied for the sake of brevity in the SMS.

G. Phonic Mutation

This occurs when the texters violate proper spellings by applying words that capture the phonic realization of the original words intended in the message. The application helps to reduce lengthy words, and at the same time allow room for more spaces to be used for more words. Examples:

29. Feeling so happy, so kul, so high. Do u know why? cuz i m so lucky, do u know how? cuz God loves me. Do u know how? cuz he gave me a gift. Do u know wot? its YOU my love.
30. Wnt 2 com Bac 2dey.I wil come 2morrow. Ope (hope) u r ok.
31. D guy name apia for notice bod, they say he take exam 4 sbody. O boy don go bi dat oo
32. I no eat 4 nite com de tek bfast 4 eleven o’ clock. Dis assignment de show me

33. Life ends wen you stop drimin, hop ends wen you stop believing and luv ends wen you stop caring. So drim hope and love...Makes Life Beautiful
34. God has givn u d opportunity to rule & reign ova life's sacumstances.

In 29, we have kul (cool) cuz (because), luv (love), 'wot' (what), in 30 we have 'wnt' (want), 'bac' (back) 'Ope'(hope); in 31 we have 'apia' (appear), 'bod' (board), 'dat' (that); in 32 we have 'tek' (take), 'Dis' (this). In 33 we have 'wen' (when), 'drimin' (dreaming), 'hop' (hope), 'wen'(when) 'drim' (dream) while 34 has 'sacumstances' (circumstances).

H. Numerical Morphology

This is one of the most interesting aspects of text messaging in Nigeria. The GSM users who mostly apply the SMS often use mathematical figures that sound similar to certain words in order to reduce the length of the messages. Some figures like 1, 2, 4, 8, 10 etc. are often in use. Examples:

35. Its beta nt 2 fall in luv wit 1 who doesn't luv u in return. I said it @ d initial tym, tnk God 4 my kind of person.
36. Wnt 2 com bac 2dey.I wil come 2morrow.
37. D guy name apia for notice bod, they say he take exam 4 sbody.
38. Have a gr8 day

In example 35, we have '2' for 'to'; '1' for 'one' and '4' for 'for'. Example 36 shows a tighter combination with words and figures as in '2com' for 'to come', '2dey' for 'today' and '2morrow' for 'tomorrow'. In 37 we see '4 sbody' (for somebody) while 38 has 'gr8' for 'great'. In all gr8 seems the most creative of all numerical morphology because the figure 8 is used to compress a long word 'great'.

Conclusion

The analysis in this research is based on the standard norms of the structure of English language words. It has been discussed under the following headings: Compounding, where we analyzed unique forms of morphs; there are also blending which like the compounding selections are personal creative forms of the texters. There are acronyms applied for brevity; deletion and/or omission are also constantly applied in order to make use of the little text environment for more information sharing. We also examined cases of contractions but some special morphological forms like Symbolic Morphemes, Numerical Morphology and Phonic Mutation occur constantly in most texts. There are digital symbols which represent words and texters apply them for brevity. Numerical morphology which entails the application of mathematical symbols is also very commonly used. However, the most commonly applied of all these strategies is the phonic mutation. Texters tend to write any creative similar sound combinations resembling the desired words but shorter in form. All these morphological strategies have been effectively used by most of the text messages analyzed here.

In examining the select text messages used by some Nigerians here, we took into focus the morphological aspects that underlie the linguistic characters of the writers. From the study, there is no hard and fast rule with regards to the users' choice of letters in abbreviation. Texters use a combination of letters and numbers in their text messages and in some cases they use only numerals. The data shows that morphological

processes of word formation such as compounding, acronyms and blends are common features that are found in messages of the interlocutors. The analysis also reveals that the SMS text is seriously controlled by socio-linguistic variables as shared background knowledge of the user's reasonability and efficiency. Thus, our research concludes that SMS texts capture word modifications and linguistic creativities which show excessive linguistic liberty to the users and has given rise to special morphological registers which affects the morphology of the Standard English format.

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