A Morpho-graphological Description of Alphanumerical English Words in SMS Text Messages in Nigeria

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Abstract: SMS, which is said to be extremely interactive and dynamic, has been observed to convey one's thoughts to another. Whenever a sender of a message uses numerals and alphabets to form a word and send to a receiver, it is now left for the recipient to decipher the intended meaning of the message. Though, SMS text messages most often come in written form, but it is has been argued in the literatures that the spoken form of language predate the written form. Numerals and alphabets have replaced sound meanings in most of the SMS messages sent on telephones, even e-mails are not exceptional. The main concern of this paper therefore, is to investigate how words are formed in SMS messages with the use alphabets and numerals to convey the intended meaning to the recipient. Data analysis shows that numerals, alphabets and wrong symbols have overridden the usual phonetic symbols even when students write examination essays. To most Nigerian users of English, this type of writing convention is presumably acceptable in examinations at different levels of academic, even up to higher citadel of learning.

Key words: Numerals, Alphabets, Symbols, Messages

I. INTRODUCTION

It is no more news that mobile phones are owned by over 90 percent of the world population, this is because when it was introduced in Nigeria as far back as 2001,"it had almost 1 million subscribers and had national (primarily urban) spread, making the possession of a phone/line no longer the preserve of the upper class or noveu riche" (Awonusi 2004:47). Mobile phone has become a powerful tool of relational interaction among both young and old, consequently, this has taken over the ancient system of communication – letter writing. Letter writing is the process whereby human thoughts, feelings or ideas are graphically represented on paper with ink for others' consumption. This has become obsolete. Hardly do we see people these days collating their thoughts in pen on paper (POP). Even in this modern day technological era, researchers prefer preparing their findings through electronic machines to writing them in black and white on paper. Nowadays, letter writing on paper is no more in vogue. It is only in examinations you can find such. In fact, the Nigerian system of education is now discouraging POP examination by canvassing e-examinations whereby students would only be making use of computer to write their examinations. A good example is the recent introduction of e-examination, popularly referred to as Computer Based Test (CBT) by Joint Admission Matriculation Board (JAMB) in Nigeria.

Electronic typing of any written document is not optional, simply because if one handwrites in black and white nowadays, it is still expedient that it has to be typed with electronic machines. Assignments in school (even at the elementary level), theses, seminar and workshop papers are all prepared and presented in specific typing formats and not in manuscripts. Therefore, the act of committing a piece into calligraphy before electronic typing could be described as a waste of time, energy and resources.

But then, the features of most of these e-typing are different from primitive ways of writing. The characters (fonts) are well harmonized but that of primitive are not. Addition and deletion can neatly and easily be done in such a way that it will not deface the pages of the sheet of paper. Changes can be perfectly effected by swinging backward and forward.

One distinct feature of SMS messages is the combination of numerals and alphabets to form a word. Like the name implies – Short Message Service (SMS), it is shortened and precise. What actually accounts for this shortness is not far-fetched. For example, if one is in a hurry to convey his/her thoughts or emotion, he/she can put up a few words that would represent them and send to the receiver. Another reason is that if there is low credit on the airtime, one may choose to adopt SMS. Even though a page of a cell phone provided for message

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allows a maximum of 160 characters (including symbols, numerals, punctuations and other devices), users still struggle to confine their messages within the space provided, otherwise, a character above 160, attracts an extra charge.

SMS, which is said to be "highly interactive, dynamic and spontaneous" (Thurlow et al 2004:125) has been observed to convey one's thoughts to another. When a sender uses numerals and alphabets to form a word and send to a receiver, it is now left for the recipient to decipher or decode the intended meaning of the message.

Numerals and asymmetrical alphabets have replaced the conventional spellings in most of the SMS text messages sent on telephones, even e-mails. The main concern of this paper therefore, is to investigate how words are formed in SMS messages with the use of numerals and alphabets and how such messages are understood by the receivers.

II. OBJECTIVES

Orthography has been described as the accepted way of spelling and writing of words in a language. Crystal (1992) refers to orthography as the use of graphic or visual symbols to represent the speech patterns of a particular language. The paper investigates how users of English presumably represent orthography with phonetic symbols in SMS text messages and how these messages are interpreted by the recipients. This current endeavour aims at studying the implications of the frequency of the usage of SMS on both the written and spoken forms of Nigerian users of English. The study sets out to provide answers to the some reasons for the combination of numerals and orthography by the users of SMS text messages. Questions such as whether or not SMS is deleterious to the written English of its users and what is the level of the acceptability of the features of SMS have been answered in one way or the other by numerous scholars (see Crystal 1992; 2009; Chapelle 1998; Awonusi 2004; Levy & Kennedy 2005; Bushnell et al 2011; Jacob 2011; Kim 2011; Dansieh 2011; Gorney 2012; Njemanze 2012; Mahmoud 2013). But little or no effort has been dedicated to the phone-to-spelling correspondence in SMS text-messaging. The main thrust of the present endeavour, therefore, is to investigate the implication of the combination of numerals and alphabets in SMS text messaging on the phonology of English, particularly, on the stress patterns.

III. METHODOLOGY

The data for this study were sourced from different SMS messages composed and sent to various destinations. Also, the written English of some undergraduates were considered for analysis. This is because the writing system of most Nigerian students has been decrepit as a result of their frequent usage of SMS text messages. These messages, which are from different parts of Nigeria, were gathered from the cell phones of 50 Nigerians who users of English, ranging from students to working class. These students comprise of undergraduates and working class, both in private and public sectors. The SMS text messages are composed of symbols, numerals and letters which all represent orthographic spellings that were retrieved from their cell phones. The main theoretical concept utilized for analysis is Interactional Sociolinguistics (IS) propounded by Gumperz (1982). According to him, the theory is an approach to discourse analysis that has its source from the search for replicable methods of qualitative analysis that account for the ability to interpret what participants intend to convey in everyday communicative practice.

3.1 Classification of Data
The data collected were classified into eight groups, namely;
(i)   irregular spellings: this group refers to words with substandard spellings;
(ii)   phonetic representations: these are the speech sounds used in SMS text messages;
(iii)   phonetic spellings: these are the spellings that closely match the sounds they represent;
(iv)   the use of symbols: these are the images commonly employed in SMS to represent something else;
(v)   abbreviations: this is a set of shortened lexical items in text- messaging;
(vi)   numerals; a numeral is a symbol representing a number;
(vii)   alphanumerals; these are the combination of letters and numerals to form words in SMS messages;
(viii)   alphabetism: this is a set of letters in a fixed order representing the sounds of a language.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data are analyzed in accordance with the above classifications. This section showcases data collected from various cell phones from Nigerians who cut across Southwestern part of the country. The data are represented in tabular forms, in which each of the tables is divided into three columns, viz; *Standard British English, Common SMS Coinage and SMS Coinage Alternative*. The data are analyzed and discussed in relation to their usage in text messages.

4.1 Irregular Spellings

There are some spellings that are irregular or substandard to the Standard British English (SBE) which are widely accepted as SMS spellings. These types of spellings characterize SMS text messages since this is generally acceptable by all who employ text messages as a means of communication. These irregular spellings are targeted to correspond to certain orthographic meanings. Table 1 below presents some of the irregular spellings that were gathered for the purpose of this study. From the table, we have three columns: Standard British English, Coinages that are commonly used in SMS and different alternatives to their usage.

Table 1: Irregular Spellings

SBE	Common SMS Coinage	SMS Coinage Alternative
love	luv	lov, lv
because	coz	cos cuz
have	hav	hv, av
better	beta	
school	skul,	skool, scl
would	wud	whd, wld
thanks/thank	tx/tk	thanx, tanks, tnx, t, tnks, fenks/tnk
new	nw	
heart	hrt	
nite	nyt	
never	neva	
family	fmly	
how	hw	ao
express	xpres	
enter	enta	
success	suces	
commitee	c'mttee	
news	nus	

Some of the text messages where these irregular spellings are employed are presented below.

(i)   i wish i neva had u as a memba of dis c'mttee, coz ur fmly membas hv xpres dia cntinuos negligens & abadonmnt diafta.

(ii)   tnk God 4 d suces of ur exam. i wish u a beta tmrw.

(iii) ao r u sa. dis just 2 ask if u'll b in skul tmrw moni bcos i hav a gud nus 4 u. Gud nite sa.

(iv) hw r u AY? I hope u will com to skool 2mrw

Apart from the fact that the spellings in the texts above are not conventional English spellings, some inconsistencies are notable in their usage. For instance, "because" and "have" are spelt as 'coz' and "hv" in (i) while they are spelt as 'bcos' and "hav" in (iii) respectively. Also in (iii) above, "how" and "school" are spelt as "ao" and "skul" respectively while in (iv) they are spelt as "hw" and "skool"

The most important thing about this irregular use of spellings is that it is widely embraced and understood by their users. And of course, the main purpose of communication is to understand the message sent. According to Soola (1989:9) communication in his own view is:

The process of conveying, receiving and acting on information, ideas, thoughts, attitude and feelings. It usually provokes the desired response when the persons involved in the communication exchange use words, codes or symbols that are mutually understandable.

However, it is not all the users SMS that are attuned to these irregular spellings, especially, the first timers (i.e those who are using it for the first time). Many beginners have one time or the other complained about the difficulties in understanding such SMS style of writing, but by and by, the understanding was not only enhanced but the frequent and proficient usage also.

It must also noted that the frequent usage of SMS text messages in English has encroached into the written English of most Nigerian youths to the extent of demonstrating in essays where they are expected to employ SBE, such as school assignments and even, answering of examination questions.

4.2 Phonetic Representations

Another common feature of SMS text messaging is the use of a phoneme to represent a whole word which has been technically referred to as phonetic representations. Phonetics has been described as a branch of linguistics that studies the properties of sounds (this include how speech sounds are produced and the organs that are used to produce them, how the sounds are transmitted and how they are perceived). Examples of this feature are also demonstrated in the data for this study. These phonetics are revealed in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Phonetic Representations

SBE	Common SMS Coinage	SMS Coinage Alternative
and	n	nd
be	b	
you	u	
we	w	
of	f	
see	c	
are	r	
you have	u'v	
the	d	
okay	kk,	k

From the table above, such messages as "lift u up", "more blsn n more of….", "d fragrance of God's glory" "c u tmrw" etc are derived. These examples clearly show that a word is derived through the pronunciation of a phoneme as the combination of phonemes. The intention here is to represent orthography with sounds.

4.3 Phonetic Spellings

Derivation of words in this feature of SMS text messaging is a little different from phonetic representation. In phonetic representation, only one phoneme represents a whole word while under phonetic spelling, words are derived through the combination of not less than two letters (alphabets). Table 3 below reveals the usage of phonetic spellings in SMS text messages.

Table 3: Phonetic Spellings

SBE	Common SMS Coinage	SMS Coinage Alternative
have	hav	hv av
night	nite	
know	no	
they	de	
morning/money	moni	am, morin
that	dat	dt
good	gud	gd
evening	evni	
meeting	mitin	
meet/meat	mit	
this/these/that	dis/diz/dat	dt
with	wit	wif, wt
bless	bles	bls
happy	api	apy
afternoon	aftnu	
need	nid	
submit	sumit	
look	luk	
sir	sa	
daughter	dota	
workers	wokas	

The table above summarizes the types of phonetic spellings as employed by the users. Examples of such SMS composition in the data are "gud evni sa", hav a 9ice de", "gud nite", "d mitin of Moba LG holds…." "I dnt no dat boy" etc. These spellings are common in SMS text messages among Nigerian users of English.

4.4 The Use of Symbols

A symbol is said to be the representation of ideas, concepts or objects. For instance, $ is the symbol representing the US dollars. Senders of SMS text messages in Nigeria employ symbols to represent their ideas, thoughts, feelings and emotions. This type of means of communication can be likened to Chinese people who use word symbols in writing. Some of these symbols are revealed in Table 4 below.

Table 4: The Use of Symbols

SBE	Common SMS Coinage	SMS Coinage Alternative
sun	☼	
in care of	℅	
at	@	
star	*	
love	♥	
and	&	+
smile	☺	
equals to	=	
why	?	
less	-	
dollar	$	
song	♫	♪
therefore	.:	

The symbols in the table above are gathered from the cell phones of Nigerians SMS text messages. The messages include " mit m @ hom", "u r d ♥ of my laif", "4rm Mr & Mrs Agbaje", "I dnt no ? he's nt pikin my calls", "d ☼ is scorching", " ☺ " (representing smiling), "d leta is ℅ Mr. Gbolagade" "d ♫ was 2 long" "he's d * f d fmly".

4.5 Abbreviations

The use of abbreviations in SMS text messages is distinct from the conventional usage. There is a peculiar by which abbreviations are used in SMS text messages. These types of abbreviations are now found in the written English of Nigerian students. These abbreviations are revealed in Table 5 below.

Table 5: Abbreviations

SBE	Common SMS Coinage	SMS Coinage Alternative
tomorrow	tmrw	
blessed	blsd	blesd
text	txt	
message	msg	sms, bb, watsap
have	hv	hav
credit	crdt	cr
your/year	yr	ur
yours	urs	
become/because	bcom/bcos	coz

These abbreviations are retrieved from the SMS text messages from Nigerians users of English for the purpose of data analysis in this study. Consider the following instances: "c u tmrw", "u r blsd", "send sms", "pls watsap m", "I hav low crdt", "…coz he didn't c ur file" etc.

4.6 Numerals

Numerals, apart from the primary functions they perform, have assumed a different role in the composition of SMS text messages. An Arabic numeral is a symbol that is not a word but represents a number. In SMS, reverse is the case, it is number that represents a word. This feature of SMS opposed the original function of numerals. Table 6 below reveals some of the numerals that are commonly used in SMS text messages.

Table 6: Numerals

SBE	Common SMS Coinage	SMS Coinage Alternative
for	4	
to, too	2	
eight, hate	8	
one	1	
ten	10	
nine	9	
three	3	
cease	6	

The instances from the data are demonstrated in the following text messages:
"dis is 9ice", "I 8 dat guy", "I nid 1 of u", "tx 4 d oda time", "pls hep m giv it 2 Kola".

4.7 Alphanumerals

Alphanumerals is the combination of alphabets and numerals to form a word. These numerals could come before or after the alphabets. The case where the numeral is located in-between the alphabets is not common. There is only one instance in the data (i.e e4t). The alphabets combined together with numerals are at times shortened or abbreviated. The abbreviation does not follow the usual SBE convention. Table 7 below demonstrates some of these alphanumerals.

Table 7: Alphanumerals

SBE	Common SMS Coinage	SMS Coinage Alternative
forget	4get	
wonderful	1daful	1dafl
great	gr8	gre8
forward	4wd	4ward
thank	10q	10k
today	2de	2dy, 2day
tomorrow	2morw	2moro, 2mrw, 2mao
nice	9ice	9is
before	b4	be4
forum	4rum	
effort	e4t	
into	in2	
forces	4ces	4ziz
appreciate	aprici8	
photos	4tos	
foreign	4reign	4rein
turaya	2raya	
therefore	dia4	
triple	3ple	3pl
form	4m	4om
through	2ru	
forever	4eva	4ever

If SMS, being an instance message, were to be read aloud by the receivers, does not follow the template of the English syllable structure. For instance, it is observed from the table that the combination of the alphabets and numerals into words does not follow the stress patterns of the English syllable structure. In the process of the combination, the stress is not properly situated in some of the words, especially, where numerals come before alphabets. One of the functions that stress performs on the lexical items is the conversion of word class; SMS does not distinguish word class in the placement of stress. Also, stress is used to distinguish between content words and function words. According to Bamisaye & Ojo (2008), content words are usually stressed in a sentence while function words are not. This is violated in SMS text messages.

From the data, some syllables that are unstressed in SBE enjoyed stress patterns in SMS. Consider the following illustrations:

Gloss	Coinage	SBE	SMS
forget	4get	forGET	FORget
today	2de	toDAY	TOday
forever	4eva	forEVER	FORever
forward	4ward	forWARD	FORward
together	2geda	toGETHER	TOgether

It is obvious that the pronunciation of the above lexical items has been affected by the wrong placement of stress. It is therefore implies that the recipients of messages with these types of combination would have to infer the intended meaning of the senders. This confirms what Esizimetor (2004:259) says, that "the use of special phonetic symbols is a better option that would certainly mark accuracy in pronunciation, it would only be accessible to those who are familiar with how these symbols and alphabets are sounded"

However, some of the words are properly stressed. From the data, we have examples such as, "forum" (4rum), "wonderful (1daful), "great" (gr8), "form" (4m), "foreign" (4rein), "therefore" (dia4) etc.

4.8 Alphabetisms

Alphabetisms are a set of letters in a fixed order to represent the sounds of a language. Oladoye (2011:36) asserts that "when the initial letters are pronounced with the name of the letters of the alphabet, they are called alphabetisms" Alphabetisms are also display in SMS text messages. Table 8 reveals some of the alphabetisms that are frequent in SMS.

Table 8: Alphabetisms

SBE	Common SMS Coinage	SMS Coinage Alternative
happy new month	HNM	
happy birthday	HBD	
long life and prosperity	LLNP	
as soon as possible	ASAP	
God bless you	GBY	GBU
Laugh(ing) out loud; Lots of laugh	LOL	
In Jesus name	INJ	IJN
Happy Wedding Anniversary	HWA	
Happy new year	HNY	
Wishing you happy wedding anniversary	WUHWA	
You are welcome	UWC	
Automated machine	ATM	

The most commonly used are occasional, such as birthday wishes; HBD, LLNP; wedding anniversary greetings; HWA, WUHWA; new month wishes; HNM, HNY. Others are UWC, GBY in response to appreciation;

V. CONCLUSION

Analysis of data revealed that numerals, alphabets and symbols are arbitrarily employed to derive a word in SMS text messages and as a result, pronunciation of the word that is produced in such word-formation processes has been affected by the wrong placement of stress. Interpretation of the message comprising such words is at the discretion of the recipient. The knowledge of how the items in the combination of the word are sounded would result to accurate understanding of the message.

Furthermore, analysis of data revealed that users of SMS language are carefree about conventional spellings of Standard British English words, punctuations are not observed to demarcate thoughts or ideas, and there is no distinction between functional words and lexical words, pronouns are represented in conditions that are electronic message compliant.

It was also observed that word formation in SMS text messages is not systematic and consistent. For instance, a word can have varieties of spellings; it depends on the type the sender prefers to use.

Finally, it was observed that there is mutual cooperation between the sender (the writer of the SMS) and the receiver (the reader of the SMS) for him to understand the composition of the message; otherwise, he would make nonsense out of it, hence, there would distortion of communication.

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