

Linguistic and Discoursal Features of Text Message Language Created by Iranian Male and Female SMS Users

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Abstract

The present study sought to examine the linguistic and discoursal features in the language of the text messages created by Iranian EFL learners. To this end, 400 text messages were collected from both genders. The contents of the collected data were analyzed in terms of linguistic features as well as discoursal features. The results highlighted the important role of gender in linguistic and discoursal features of text messages created by Iranian mobile phone users. More specifically, females' use of complex sentences, formal opening and closing, and expression of thoughts, feelings, and emotions in their messages were much higher than men who created simple, short and to the point messages. The findings of this study highlight the role of text messages as a pedagogical tool since they are widely used to send or receive learning or information contents.

Keywords: Discoursal features; gender; linguistic features; short message service; text messages

Introduction

Today the rapid development of technology has changed the life of people around the world. The invention of new facilities and utilities by the use of modern technology can enrich or change human life. The ever-growing modern technology has many effects on different aspects of human life including communication and language. In this regard, many linguists and sociolinguists are concerned about the effects of technology on language (see Ling, 2001 for a review) and point to the fact that

modern technologies need new linguistic elements like words and expressions to be disseminated (Elvis, 2009). According to Elvis (2009), one of the new inventions of the modern life is the mobile phone. The use of mobile phones and their different services among people has become very popular today and has opened the door to enhance or probably change the type of communications among people throughout the world. Among different services of the mobile phone, Short Message Service (SMS) is the most frequently used service, because it provides fast, easy and cheap voiceless communication everywhere.

Horstmanshof and Power (2005) state that texting can be regarded as one of the quiet ways of sending or receiving messages between communicators who may be involved in other activities such as watching TV, travelling in public transport, attending meetings, and so forth. They further commented that although the SMS text messages can be known as one of the popular ways of communication among people, its effects on different aspects of the language are inevitable. For instance, character limitation of each SMS message (160 characters) leads to using abbreviations and the development of a code between interlocutors. According to Hall and Hall (1990), the compressed format and limited number of characters in the messages need some agreements about abbreviations, acronyms, and acceptable tone between communicators. To do this successfully, the homogeneity of experience and information network like those found in high-context cultures is needed. As texting has been cheaper than voice calls, it especially becomes very popular among teenagers and young adults in Europe and Asia (Baron & Ling, 2007). In the same line, several research studies have found that text message is done mainly among peers because it requires some shared knowledge among interlocutors (Grinter & Eldridge, 2003). On the other hand, Horstmanshof and Power (2005) believed that since people can develop relationships, organize social gatherings and events and share exciting and new experiences through text messaging, mobile phone technology cannot be regarded just as technology, but it is culturally linked to patterns of personal and social behavior. Several studies have followed this research trends and suggested that text messaging and mobile phone calls can develop social bonds (Eldridge & Grinter, 2001; Fortunati, 2000; Ling & Yttri, 2002; Pertierra, 2005; Rheingold, 2003; Thurlow & Brown, 2003). Fortunati (2000) claimed that the popularity of using mobile phone calls, raising the probability of text message use, increases intimacy in relationships which leads to reinforcing social bonds between close friends.

Many scholars investigated the linguistic impacts of New Information and Communication Technology (NICT) on English (Beslisle, 1996; Herring, 2001; Hard of Segerstad, 2005; Thurlow & Brown, 2003). Herring (2001) listed several technological or medium variables such as synchronicity (e.g., instant messaging is synchronous, email is asynchronous, and SMS is defined as asynchronous), granularity (the length of the text: how long or short text maybe), and multimodality (the use of graphics, audio, and video), as well as other non-linguistic variables such as relationships, expectations, and so forth can affect the language. In a very extensive study, Thurlow and Brown (2003), defining SMS as asynchronous, text based, and technologically mediated discourse whose effect on the language like other text-based, Computer Mediated Discourse (CMD) tools (e.g., Email) is inevitable, concluded that text messages represent the same hybrid quality of both written and spoken discourse as emails and its language seems to enjoy 3 key sociolinguistic maxims of (1) brevity and speed; (2) paralinguistic restitution, and, (3) phonological approximation. He further noted that the maxim of brevity and speed can be shown by the use of the abbreviation and the minimal use of capitalization and standard grammatical punctuation among interlocutors just because of the ease of turn-taking and fluidity of social interaction. He believed that the use of capitalization and multiple punctuation (e.g., what????!!) and emoticons can be regarded as the use of the second maxim (paralinguistic restitution) among interlocutors. Thurlow and Brown (2003) also identified various linguistic parameters such as non-standard orthography or typography forms like (1) shortenings (i.e., missing end letters) contractions (i.e., missing middle letters), and G-clippings and other clippings (i.e., dropping final letters), (2) acronyms and initialisms, (3) letter/ number homophones, (4) misspellings and typos, (5) non-conventional spellings, and (6) accent stylization in his study titled as “Generation Txt? The sociolinguistics of young people’s text-messaging”.

Various linguistic analysis of texting has also been reported for several languages including German (Doring, 2002), Swedish (Hard of Segerstad, 2005), Norwegian (Ling, 2003), and English (Thurlow & Brown, 2003) and in several national contexts including Hong Kong (e.g., Bodomo & Lee, 2004), and Cameroon and Nigeria (Elvis, 2009). According to Bodomo and Lee (2004), the Hong Kong texters use letter/ number homophones like 88 “bye bye” (in English resembles the pronunciation of “8” in Cantonese) or 99 stands for “nite nite” means “

good night” in their text messages which showed the inevitable changes occurred in the language specially writing.

Another variable which may affect the linguistic and discoursal features of text messages is gender. According to “differences theory” (Tannen, 1990), males and females even when they are in the same group, live in different cultural worlds, so they have different ways of speaking. This theory is in line with the “two cultural theory” too, meaning that although the men and women live in the same group, environment and society, they act differently in society as if they belong to a different environment and culture (Uchida, 1992). This characteristics and features can also be observed in their language too (Nemati & Bayer, 2007). For instance, men and women may use different linguistics forms, words, vocabularies, and so forth. Climate (1997) claimed that females generally use speech to develop relationship, and speak and hear a language of intimacy and connection, but men speak and hear a language of independence.

With reference to the above review of the related literature and regarding the language and context sensitivity of the issue at hand, there seemed to be a gap as far as the linguistic and discoursal features of text messages in our domestic context are involved. So this study attempts to contribute to the related literature through investigating such linguistic features as Initialization, Truncation, Alphanumeric homophones, Logographic emoticons, Punctuation, and such discoursal features as opening, closing, message complexity, use of English words and abbreviations of text messages created by Iranian males and females in Iranian academic context. Regarding the significance of conducting such studies in our domestic context, one may refer to the functions of mobile phone learning or M-Learning projects is designing materials for use with mobile devices. Further, SMS as one of the functions of mobile phone services can be considered as a pedagogical tool since it is widely used to send or receive learning or information contents (Hayati, Jalilifar & Mashhadi, 2013). Therefore, text messaging among other functions of mobile phones, such as email, voice and multimedia capabilities, can be considered as an instructional platform or a medium to teach different language components such as grammar and vocabulary.

Accordingly, the following research question is addressed in the present study:

- *What are the linguistic and discoursal features of text messages language created by males and females in Iranian academic context?*

Methodology

The present study was designed as a descriptive research with one independent variable as gender and two groups of dependent variables as linguistic and discoursal features. Following are the detailed description of the participants and the way the data were collected and analyzed.

Participants

Participants in this study comprised 100 informants both male and female (40 males and 60 females) with an age range of 20 to 25 who were senior EFL Learners students at Sheikhbahae University, Isfahan, Iran. The participants had been involved in learning English for a minimum of nine years; six years in secondary school and three years in college with English as their major course of study. Therefore, it was assumed that the students had developed almost the same level of English proficiency.

Procedure

Data Collection Procedure

The participants were first asked to read or forward the content of the messages they had sent to their friends or received from them to the researcher. If the participants did not have such messages in their phone inbox, the researcher asked them to send their friends a message about ordinary tasks they were daily encountered like greeting, materials they had been supposed to cover, exams they had to prepare for, and assignments they were required to complete. They were then asked to forward their own text messages and their received replies from their friends to the researcher without any changes through one week. They could also send them to the researcher's E-mail address. All the text messages were either male to male or female to female ones totaling at 400. For the ethical reason, the participants were assured that their names and numbers would be remained anonymous.

Data Analysis Procedure

To analyze the collected data, first the whole text messages were classified into two groups of men to men messages and women to women messages. Then each text message was examined in terms of such linguistic features as Initialization, Truncation, Alphanumeric homophones, Logographic emoticons, Punctuation, and such discoursal features as opening, closing, message complexity, use of English words and abbreviations. Following are the findings of the data analysis with the order of linguistic features coming first.

Results

Table 1 reports on the frequencies and the percentages of linguistic features under investigation in the collected data.

Table1

The frequency and percentage of the linguistic features in text messages

Features		Male		Female	
		Frequency	%Percentage	Frequency	%Percentage
Initialization		20	4.88%	10	1.48%
Truncation		80	19.51%	30	4.44%
Alphanumeric homophones		60	14.63%	80	11.83%
Logographic emotions		10	2.44%	120	17.75%
Punctuation	Full Stop	140	34.15%	185	27.37%
	Comma	7	1.71%	28	4.14%
	Question Mark	93	22.68%	163	24.11%
	Exclamation Mark	0	0%	60	8.88%
Total		410	100%	676	100%

As illustrated in Table 1, use of the first letter of each word “Initialization” among Iranian texters is not very popular. The reason may lie in the form and structure of Persian language. In the collected data males and females used just 20 cases (4.88%) and 10 cases (1.48%) of initialization in their messages, respectively. Following are two examples from the data:

- 1) a. "*Baashe aakhare hafte s midam*". (Male)
b. "Ok, the weekend, S give-I".
c. (Ok, I'll send you SMS at the weekend).
- 2) a. "*Salaam emrooz PM daashtæm*". (Female)
b. "Hi, today PM have-I".
c. (Hello I received a message today).

Truncation is a short form of representation of words in the SMS text messages. It is a kind of orthographic transformation. It is popular by texters in Iran (23.95%). The analysis of the data revealed that males used truncation more than females. In our data males used 80 cases (19.51%) and females used just 30 cases (4.44%) of truncation in their messages. Following shows some examples in our data.

- 1) a. "*Ye chænd roozi umædæm esf*". (Male)
b. "For some days I came esf".
c. (I came to Esfahan for some days).
- 2) a. "*Ghorbaanæt be bæro bæch sælaam beresun*". (Male)
b. "Thanks, to guys say hello".
c. (Thanks, say hello to friends).
- 3) a. "*Baashe æzizæm pæs mæn hæm miyaam uni*". (Female)
b. "Ok honey, well I'll also come to uni".
c. (Ok honey, So I will come to the university too).

Alphanumeric homophone is a combination of letter and number to represent a word or a clause. It is usual and popular among Iranian SMS texters (26.46%). As illustrated in Table 1, males used 60 cases (14.63%) and females used 80 cases (11.83%) of such feature in their messages. Alphanumeric homophone is used for mentioning days of week or popular expressions. Following examples show the use of this feature in our data.

- 1) a. "*Sælaam mæn 2 shænbe ferestaadæmeshoon*". (Male)
b. "Hi, I Monday sent them".
c. (Hi, I sent them last Monday).
- 2) a. "*Mitoonæm modele tæghighæmo va3 2vomin baar ævæz konæm*". (Female)
b. "Can I the model of my research for the second time change?"

c. (Do you know whether I am allowed to change my model of research for the second time or not?)

- 3) a. "*Sælaam mer30*". (Female)
- b. "Hi, thanks".
- c. (Hi, Thank you).

The feature of the logographic emotions is using signs to express meaning. It is another popular feature which is used by the most of the texters (20.19%). It is more used by the females than males. As shown in Table 1, this feature was found in the 120 females' messages (17.75%) and just in the 10 (2.44%) males' messages. The analysis of data revealed that the use of some signs like Winking ";-)", Tong Sticking out ":-p", and Kissing ":-*" were more popular among Iranian females' messages than males' messages. While most of the Iranian women used such signs at the end of their messages, a few of men just used the sign of Happy "☺" or Sad "☹" in their texts. Iranian men rarely used the logographic emotions in their messages (10 cases just found in our data).

- 1) a. "*Sælaam æmno æmaan ☺*". (Male)
- b. "Hi, safe and sound ☺".
- c. (Hi, every thing is Ok ☺).

- 2) a. "*Sælaam emrooz PM daashtæm bemæn goftæen baayæd montæzer baashi bæraa jævaab ☹*". (Female)
- b. "Hi, today PM I had. They said to me I must wait for the result ☹".
- c. (Hi, I have received a message today. I was told that I must wait for the result ☹)

- 3) a. "*sa@ chænd ræfti uni?*" (Female)
- b. "What time went you uni?"
- c. (What time did you go to the university?)

The analysis of data revealed that the use of punctuations was very popular among females (64.5%) than males (58.54%). Males didn't pay attention to the punctuation. Most of them asked questions without any question marks. They didn't care to the use of other punctuations too. Although some of the females used some of the punctuation poorly especially commas and exclamation marks, they tried to use them in their messages. None of the males participated in our essay used Exclamation mark. The obtained results on this feature also revealed that Iranian men

preferred using full stops in their messages more than other punctuations (34.15%).

- 1) a. “*Sælaam, Mæmnoonæm. To khoobi? Belækhaere dirooz ye kæm gæshtæm. æmaa hænooz mozoo peidaa nækærdæm!*” (Female)
- b. “Hi, thanks, you’re ok? Finally yesterday a little I searched. But yet topic I haven’t found”.
- c.(Hello, thank you. Are you ok? Finally I searched a little yesterday. But I have not found any topic yet!

The second part of the results of this study comprise the analysis of using discorsal features as message complexity, opening, closing, use of English words and abbreviations in the content of text messages created by Iranian males and females. The obtained results are shown in the following table (Table 2).

Table 2

The frequency and percentage of the discorsal features in text messages

Features		Male		Female	
		Frequency	Percentage%	Frequency	Percentage%
Message Complexity	Simple	193	35.35%	12	2.05%
	Complex	7	1.28%	188	32.19%
Opening	Formal	34	6.23%	180	30.82%
	Informal	66	12.09%	20	3.43%
Closing	Formal	5	0.092%	10	1.71%
	Informal	146	26.74%	58	9.93%
Use of English words		65	11.90%	80	13.70%
Use of Abbreviations		30	5.49%	36	6.17%
Total		546	100%	584	100%

Message complexity can be considered as separate sentences, clauses in one construction (Elvis, 2009) and simple message can include just single sentence, clause or thought (Elvis, 2009). As shown in the Table 2,

the collected messages created by males and females divided into two categories as simple messages and complex ones.

The analysis of data revealed that the most complex messages were created by females (32.19%) and the least complex ones were created by males (1.28%). The most of the messages created by the women included two or three pages with many sentences which are not related to each other. No coherence was found in their messages. They didn't use any cohesion ties and discourse markers. The analysis of data revealed that most of the women used two or three topics in their messages and they also asked some questions at the end of their messages each of which has no relation with each other. They expressed their thoughts, opinions and their feelings in their messages. They often were not to the point and used many words to express just one sentence. The women didn't order but requested something. Most of them did not say just hello but they used other expressions like honey, dear, and so forth. They addressed each other with their names at the opening of the messages. They also asked their addressees' opinions about their own thoughts, feelings, and decisions at the end of the message. For example:

- 1) a. *“Sælaam.....jaan. merc, to khoobi? Dg fek konæm baayæd shoroo konæm. Nemidoonæm miresæm tæmoomeshoon konæm yaa næ? mitærsæm. Raasti dirooz zæng zædæm be oonæm mesle maast. U chi fek mikoni? Miresi tæmum koni?”*
- b. “Hi, dear, thanks. You're ok? Now I think I should start. I don't know I have time to finish them or not? I'm worried. Anyhow yesterday - I called..... She is like us. You what think? Do you have time to finish?”
- c. (Hello, dear....., Thank you. How are you? I think I should start now. I am not sure whether I can finish them in time or not. I am worried about that. By the way, I called.....yesterday. She did not do anything too. What do you think? Can you finish them in time?)

On the other hand males' messages were completely different from females' ones. Males' messages were short and to the point. Males' languages were simple and their sentences include just three or five words. They did not address their interlocutors with emotional expressions. They also did not mention their feelings and thoughts. If they want someone to do something for them, they directly order what

they want. No ambiguity was found in the messages created by men in our data. All the sentences were coherent and relevant to each other. Just one question was asked in the messages created by each male. Imperative verbs were used more by males. Females rarely used imperative verbs in their messages. Following shows some examples:

- 1) a. "*S. Khub pish miri?*"
b. "Hi, Is everything ok?"
c. (Hello, how is everything?)
- 2) a. "*Kojaaee. Biyaa dige mæn hæm residæm*".
b. "Where are you? Come soon. I have also arrived".
c. (Where are you? Come here soon. I have just arrived).

As shown in Table 2, another feature observed in our data was the type of opening and closing of the messages. The analysis of data revealed that the most of the messages created by women followed the traditional way of writing a letter especially in the opening of the messages. They were almost included formal salutations' expressions like: *Azizæm* (honey, dear), *sælaam golæm* (Hi, my darling, sweet), *sælaam..... Jaan* (Hi, dear.....), *sælaam khoobi?* (Hi, you're ok?)

On the other hand, the most of the females didn't use closing expressions at the end of their messages. They usually ended their messages by asking questions or mentioning their feelings like:

- 1) a. "*To chi? Jævaabaa raa peida kærdi?*"
b. "What about you? The answers did you find?"
c. (What about you? Have you found the answers yet?)
- 2) a. "*To raazi hæsti? Khoobe?*"
b. "agree? Is it ok?"
c. (Are you agree? Is it good?)
- 3) a. "*Mæn ke kheili negæraanæm. To chi?*"
b. "I'm too worried. What about you?"
c. (I am too worried about it. What about you?)

The analysis of the data also revealed that males (26.74%) used fixed informal closing expressions more than females (9.93%). The most informal closing expressions used by males were as "*Kheili chaakerim*", "*Aaghaaee*", and "*Mokhlesim*" (highly informal words which is used instead of regards at the end of messages especially by men). Data

analysis also revealed that men opened their messages by asking informal questions without any salutations like: Chetori? (How are you?), Ozaa æhvaal? (How is everything?), Ye væght soraaghi az maa nægiriya? (Haven't seen you for ages).

The obtained results indicated that few of the males' messages (20) included just the simple word of "salam", "hello" as the opening expressions. Males did not use any emotional words like dear, honey and so forth in their salutations. The opening of other messages created by males included just simple questions without any salutations. The analysis of this feature indicated that usually Iranian texters don't use formal expression for closing of their messages like "Khodaahaafez" (good bye). It also revealed that most of the women rarely use closing expressions in their messages. As mentioned above they preferred using fixed expressions and signs like "boos", "miss you", "Kissing sign", and "Winking sign" at the end of their messages. It should be noticed that using this feature was investigated among messages created by males to males and females to females. Therefore, the effect of culture and its influence on our data should not be neglected. If we added two more categories in our investigation as messages created by males to females, or females to males, we might face with completely different results due to Iranian culture in this section.

As illustrated in Table 2, females' messages (13.70%) consisted of English words or mixed languages more than males' messages (11.90%). While men preferred using the Persian words in their messages without using any mixing words, using expressions like "University", "SMS", "Search", "Thanks", "Honey", and so forth were popular among women. The investigation of messages also revealed that females used pinglish for writing of their messages more than males.

As shown in Table 2, the use of abbreviations in the messages created by both Iranian males and females were almost equal (30 and 36 cases were found by males' and females' messages respectively). Males and females preferred using abbreviations for most frequent English words like "U" instead of "you" or "C" for "See", and so forth. This feature was very popular especially between students of English.

- 1) a. "*RU awake?*"
b. (Are you awake?)
- 2) a. "*Tnx, U2.*"

b. (Thanks, you too.)

The obtained results in this section indicated that there were some differences between the language of text messages created by males and females regarding the linguistic and discoursal features. Females' text messages are more complex and formal and have more punctuation marks and emoticons, while males' text messages are more truncated and have more initializations. Following is the detailed discussion of the obtained findings.

Discussion

Generally, it can be claimed that the results of this study support both the studies on the differences between the language of males and females (Eisenmen, 1997; Lakoff, 1975; Nemati & Bayer, 2007) and the studies on the impact of New Information and Communication Technology (NICT) like mobile phone and E-mail on the languages. (Baslisle, 1996; Bodomo & Lee, 2004; Elvis, 2009; Rettie, 2007; Thurlow, 2005).

The analysis of the obtained results regarding the linguistic features showed that texting brings new vocabularies, expressions and words with itself (Elvis, 2009). The result of this study revealed that the popularity of mobile phone usage among Iranian people, affect Persian language like other languages. For example use of new vocabularies like SMS, delivery, or use of logographic emotions become very popular among Iranian texters especially females. Using various methods of shortenings or abbreviations for some Persian words like "S" for "Salaam" (Hello) or "b" (The second letter of Persian Alphabet) for "be" (to in English) has changed the old method of writing messages in Iran. The popularity of this feature was very obvious among Iranian texters who were students of English.

70 percent of EFL learners used mixed languages (both Persian and English) in their messages. Some Persian misspellings were found among Persian messages created by those texters who were English students. This may be rooted in the use of pinglish form of texting among English students. For example they wrote "تتبیق" "Tætbigħ" (adaptability) instead of "تطبیق" because of the pinglish form of "tætbigħ". They were confused in choosing the correct type of Persian alphabets especially for some homophone alphabets like "ز، ظ، ض" "z/ sound in English" or "ط، ت" "t/ sound in English". Using some English words instead of their

Persian counterparts were very popular among English students too. For example they used “u” instead of “To” “the second person pronoun in Persian” in their messages just for politeness and euphemism. Using some fixed English expression such as “kiss”, “miss”, “Hi” and so forth were also popular among them. Using borrowing or loan words again were seen more in the messages created by women. It may support the idea that women try to gain prestige more than men. The analysis of our data revealed that the Persian written language was affected more than the spoken one because of the use of NICT tools like mobile phones. No care was seen for the use of correct word order, choice of words, grammatical points and punctuations in the messages created by both genders.

The analysis of the discoursal features also indicated that females used more complex sentences in their messages. They also expressed their thoughts, feelings and questions in their messages while males created simple, short and to the point messages. No cohesion and coherence were found among long messages created by most of the females. Females also used more intensifiers and tag questions in their messages than males. The use of emotional signs and expressions were popular among Iranian females than males. It should be noted that the effect of Iranian culture should not be neglected too. For example Iranian males don't use emotional words and expressions in their messages because of their cultural constraints. In Iranian culture males are regarded as powerful, firm, strict and unemotional persons especially where they are in contact with other males while females are regarded as kind, flexible, and emotional persons. As Iran is known as a multicultural country, this feature may differ in various regions too. This characteristic can be examined more completely if we investigate two more categories as the language of text messages created by males to females, and females to males.

Conclusion

As there was a gap in the related literature on the linguistic and discoursal features of the SMS text messages created by Iranian people and mobile phone users, the goal of this study was to fill this gap by focusing on finding whether there is any difference between the language of SMS text messages created by males and females regarding various linguistic features and criteria like punctuation, Truncation, initialization, Logographic emotions, Alphanumeric homophones and discoursal ones as message complexity, opening, closing, use of abbreviations, and so

forth. The results of this study also suggest that there are noticeable differences between the language of SMS text messages created by males and females in Iran. This may lend support to “difference theory” or “two cultures theory” (Tannen, 1990).

The present study has its own limitations especially in gathering and collecting data. Since Iran is a multicultural country, the importance of investigating the language of messages created by people who live in various parts and regions of Iran should be taken into the consideration. As collecting SMS text messages from different people in different cities was not possible for the researcher, there was a lack of sufficient data for analysis in various parts of Iran. Moreover, investigation of the language of messages created by two more categories as males to females and females to males may provide more comprehensible and reliable results. So the results of this study need to be generalized by conducting the similar researches with more participants and data in various parts of Iran. The same study can be done regarding to more variables like age, region, degree of education and so forth. The result of this study can be useful for the linguistic analysis of texting in Iran and its impact on Persian Language. As mobile phones and its different functions can be used as a foreign language learning context in an English classroom (Hayati, Jalilifar & Mashhadi, 2013), the implication of this study will be of use for educators, syllabus designers, and technologists in order to design appropriate tasks for the use of this platform for language learning and teaching.

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