

TEXTING LANGUAGE AS A DIGITAL SYMBOLIC CURRENT: IMPLICATIONS FOR PRAGMATICS AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE.

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Abstract: This study investigates the influence of texting language on digital communication and its implications for pragmatics and intercultural communication. Utilizing a case study approach, the research examines the written work of final-year linguistics students at the University of Benin, Nigeria, to understand the extent to which short messaging service (SMS) abbreviations permeate academic writing. Building on the metaphor of texting language as a "common symbolic current" akin to the sardine metaphor, this paper explores how digital communication transcends cultural boundaries and creates new linguistic norms. The research is grounded in a comprehensive analysis of questionnaires, written assignments, and examination scripts from 62 students, highlighting the prevalence of SMS-related abbreviations in their written work. The findings reveal that while students frequently use texting abbreviations in informal contexts and notetaking, their usage in formal academic writing is more restrained (Braimoh, 2020). This indicates an awareness among students of the need to adapt their writing style to different contexts, thereby demonstrating a nuanced understanding of pragmatic competence in digital communication. Furthermore, the study discusses the broader implications of texting language on intercultural communication, emphasizing its role as a digital symbolic current that facilitates cross-cultural understanding. The paper concludes by suggesting that future research should explore the intersection of digital technologies, linguistic practices, and intercultural communication to further elucidate the impact of digital communication on language and culture.

Keywords: Academic writing; digital communication; intercultural communication; pragmatics; texting language.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background on Digital Communication and Texting Language

The advent of mobile technology has significantly transformed the landscape of communication, introducing novel forms of interaction and linguistic practices. One of the most pervasive manifestations of this transformation is the use of texting language, characterized by abbreviations, emoticons, and other non-standard linguistic features (Crystal, 2008). Initially designed to facilitate communication within the constraints of early mobile devices—limited to small keypads and character counts—texting language has evolved into a ubiquitous mode of digital expression. It offers users the ability to convey messages succinctly and efficiently, fostering a dynamic and interactive communication environment (Thurlow, 2003).

1.2. Importance of Studying Texting Language in Academic Contexts

The integration of texting language into everyday communication has sparked considerable debate among educators and linguists regarding its impact on traditional literacy and academic performance. While some argue that the frequent use of texting abbreviations may degrade language skills and lead to poor writing habits (Humphrys, 2007), others posit that it can enhance linguistic creativity and metalinguistic awareness (Crystal, 2009). Given the increasing reliance on digital communication, it is imperative to understand how these new linguistic forms affect academic writing, particularly among university students who are at a critical juncture in their educational development (Winzker, Southwood & Huddleston, 2009).

1.3. Overview of the Sardine Metaphor and Its Relevance to Digital Communication

This study draws on the metaphor of the sardine, as proposed in the call for papers, to conceptualize texting language as a "common symbolic current" in the digital age. Sardines, despite their vulnerability, exhibit remarkable resilience and adaptability, often moving in unison to evade predators. Similarly, texting language, while seemingly informal and unconventional, represents a collective linguistic adaptation to the demands of digital communication. It traverses cultural and social boundaries, creating a shared symbolic currency that facilitates interaction in the digital realm. This metaphor underscores the strategic and unifying potential of texting language within the broader context of information and communication technologies (Veyrat, 2022).

1.4. Objectives and Research Questions

The primary aim of this study is to investigate the influence of texting language on academic writing and its implications for pragmatics and intercultural communication. Specifically, the research objectives are to:

1. Examine the prevalence and patterns of texting language usage among final-year linguistics students at the University of Benin.
2. Assess the impact of texting abbreviations on students' written academic work, considering both formal and informal contexts.
3. Explore how digital communication technologies shape linguistic practices and intercultural communication dynamics.

To achieve these objectives, the study addresses the following research questions:

- How frequently and in what contexts do students use texting language in their academic writing?

- What are the students' perceptions of the impact of texting language on their writing skills and academic performance?
- How does texting language function as a digital symbolic current, and what are its implications for pragmatic competence and intercultural communication?

By addressing these questions, this research seeks to contribute to the understanding of the role of digital communication in shaping contemporary linguistic practices and educational outcomes.

2. Literature Review

Digital communication has fundamentally altered the way language is used and perceived. The emergence of texting language, often characterized by abbreviations, emoticons, and other non-standard linguistic features, is a significant phenomenon in this transformation. According to Crystal (2008), texting language, or "textese," represents a natural evolution of language driven by the technological constraints and affordances of mobile devices. Theoretical perspectives on digital communication emphasize the adaptability and creativity of language users, who develop new linguistic forms to meet the demands of concise and rapid communication (Thurlow, 2003). This theoretical framework underscores the dynamic nature of language and the role of digital platforms in shaping linguistic practices.

2.1 *Previous Studies on the Impact of SMS Abbreviations on Academic Writing*

The impact of texting language on academic writing has been a contentious topic among researchers. Some studies suggest that the frequent use of SMS abbreviations can lead to negative outcomes, such as increased spelling errors and a decline in formal writing skills (Humphrys, 2007). For instance, Winzker, Southwood, and Huddlestone (2009) found that the pervasive use of texting abbreviations among high school students in South Africa correlated with a higher incidence of non-standard language forms in their academic work. Conversely, other researchers argue that texting language can enhance linguistic awareness and flexibility. For instance, Crystal (2009) posits that texting encourages users to play with language and develop a deeper understanding of its structure and nuances. Freudenberg (2012) supports this view, suggesting that the cognitive demands of switching between textese and standard language may improve overall linguistic competence.

2.2 *Intercultural Communication and Pragmatic Competence in the Digital Age*

Digital communication also plays a crucial role in intercultural interactions, where pragmatic competence is essential. Pragmatic competence involves the ability to use language appropriately in different social and cultural contexts, a skill that is increasingly important in our interconnected world (Hymes, 1972). The digital age has introduced new modes of interaction that transcend geographical and cultural boundaries, enabling individuals from diverse backgrounds to communicate more easily. This shift necessitates a reexamination of how pragmatic competence is developed and maintained in digital contexts. Research by Dijk et al. (2016) highlights the importance of understanding the pragmatics of digital communication, as users must navigate various cultural norms and expectations while interacting online. Texting language, with its informal and often playful nature, presents unique challenges and opportunities for fostering intercultural understanding.

2.3 *Symbolic Currents in Digital Communication: The Sardine Metaphor*

The sardine metaphor, as articulated in the call for papers, offers a compelling lens through which to examine texting language in digital communication. Sardines, despite their small size and vulnerability, exhibit remarkable resilience and cohesion, moving collectively to evade predators and navigate their environment. This metaphor captures the essence of

texting language as a "common symbolic current" that unites users across cultural and linguistic divides. Texting language, like sardines, is adaptable, pervasive, and resilient, facilitating communication in the fast-paced and often fragmented digital landscape (Veyrat, 2022). This symbolic current underscores the strategic and integrative potential of texting language, highlighting its role in creating shared meanings and fostering connections in the digital age.

By integrating these theoretical perspectives and empirical findings, this literature review provides a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted impact of texting language on academic writing, intercultural communication, and pragmatic competence. The subsequent sections of this study will build on this foundation to explore the specific implications of texting language among university students, contributing to the broader discourse on digital communication and its role in contemporary linguistic practices.

3. Methodology

3.1 Description of the Study Design and Approach

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive analysis of the impact of texting language on academic writing and its implications for intercultural communication and pragmatic competence. The quantitative component involves the collection and analysis of questionnaire data to quantify the prevalence and patterns of texting language usage among students. The qualitative component includes a detailed examination of written assignments and examination scripts to contextualize the quantitative findings and provide deeper insights into the students' linguistic practices.

3.2 Participants

The participants in this study were 62 final-year students from the Department of Linguistics and African Studies at the University of Benin, Nigeria. These students were selected because they are at a critical stage in their academic careers and are frequent users of digital communication tools, making them ideal subjects for investigating the impact of texting language on academic writing. The demographic composition of the participants included 48 female and 14 male students, reflecting the gender distribution in the department.

3.3 Data Collection Methods: Questionnaires, Written Assignments, and Examination Scripts

Data were collected using a multi-method approach to ensure robustness and triangulation. The primary data collection instrument was a structured questionnaire designed to capture students' usage patterns and perceptions of texting language. The questionnaire comprised 21 questions, divided into sections on general information and specific questions about texting language use in various contexts.

In addition to the questionnaire, the study analyzed 72 notebooks, 126 written assignments, and 85 examination scripts provided by the students' professor, who obtained ethical clearance for their use. These written materials were examined for occurrences of SMS-related abbreviations and other features of texting language. This dual approach allowed for the validation of self-reported data against actual written work, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of texting language's impact on academic writing.

3.4 Ethical Considerations and Data Analysis Techniques

Ethical considerations were paramount in this study. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Benin's review board, and informed consent was secured from all participants. The anonymity and confidentiality of the participants were maintained

throughout the research process, with all data being securely stored and accessible only to the research team.

Data analysis incorporated quantitative and qualitative techniques. The questionnaire data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine the frequency and patterns of texting language usage. This included calculating percentages and frequencies for each response category. The qualitative analysis of the written assignments and examination scripts involved coding and categorizing instances of texting language features. This analysis aimed to identify patterns and contextual factors influencing the use of texting language in academic writing.

By employing a mixed-methods approach, this study provides a nuanced understanding of the impact of texting language on academic writing, highlighting its implications for pragmatic competence and intercultural communication. The methodological rigor ensures reliable and valid findings, enhancing the broader discourse on digital communication and linguistic practices.

4. Results

4.1 Prevalence of SMS Abbreviations in Students' Academic Writing

Table 1: Frequency of Use in Informal vs. Formal Contexts

Question	Regularly	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	No
Do you use texting language in a formal situation?	5 (8.1%)	21 (33.9%)	12 (19.4%)	22 (35.4)	2 (3.2%)
Do you use texting language in an informal situation?	17 (27.4)	29 (46.8%)	4 (6.5%)	3 (4.8%)	9 (14.5%)

The analysis of the collected data revealed distinct patterns in the use of SMS abbreviations among the final-year linguistics students at the University of Benin. The prevalence of SMS abbreviations was notably higher in informal contexts, such as personal notes and casual communications, compared to formal academic writing. Specifically, 94.4% of the students reported using texting language abbreviations regularly when taking notes during lectures, indicating a high level of comfort and familiarity with this mode of communication in less formal settings (Braimoh, 2020). In contrast, the frequency of SMS abbreviation usage significantly decreased in formal contexts, such as written assignments and examination scripts. Only 45.2% of the assignments and 30.6% of the examination scripts contained any form of SMS-related abbreviations, demonstrating a more restrained application of texting language in these settings.

4.2 Comparison of Notes, Assignments, and Examination Scripts

Table 2: Notes, Assignments, and Examination Scripts

SMS	Present	Absent
Assignment	45.2%	54.8%
Examination scripts	30.6%	69.4%
Notebooks	94.4%	5.6%

A comparative analysis of the students' notes, assignments, and examination scripts provided further insights into the contextual variability of SMS abbreviation usage. The students' notes were replete with abbreviations, reflecting the need for speed and efficiency in capturing lecture content. In contrast, written assignments exhibited a more balanced approach, with students selectively using standard abbreviations recognized in academic writing, such as "i.e." and "e.g.," alongside occasional texting language features like "u" for "you" and "4" for "for" (Braumoh, 2020). Examination scripts showed the least incidence of SMS abbreviations, suggesting that students are mindful of the formal requirements of examinations and adjust their writing accordingly. This adaptability indicates a nuanced understanding of the different registers of language appropriate to various academic tasks.

4.3 Students' Perceptions of Texting Language and Its Impact on Their Writing

Table 3: Insights from Questionnaire Responses

Question	Regularly	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	No
Do you obey grammatical rules?	5 (8.1%)	47 (75.8%)	6 (6.7%)	3 (4.8%)	1 (1.6%)
Do you use texting language in an informal situation?	17 (27.4)	29 (46.8%)	4 (6.5%)	3 (4.8%)	9 (14.5%)
Question	Yes	No	Not sure	It depends	No
To this end, would you consider texting language as detrimental to your academics?	22 (35.5%)	12 (19.4%)	1 (1.6%)	17 (27.4%)	10 (16.1%)

The questionnaire responses provided valuable insights into the students' perceptions of texting language and its impact on their writing. A majority of the students (75.8%) acknowledged that they do not always adhere to grammatical rules when using texting language, attributing this to the informal nature of digital communication (Braumoh, 2020). Despite this, 61.3% of the respondents believed that their use of texting language did not negatively impact their academic writing, indicating a perceived separation between their informal and formal writing practices, and a misconception about the demerits of the use of texting language in academic writing.

Table 4: Analysis of the use of texting language during examinations

Question	Yes	No	No response
Are you sometimes tempted to use texting language during examinations?	27 (43.5%)	26 (41.9)	9 (14.6%)
Have you ever used texting language during examinations?	10 (16.1%)	42 (67.8%)	10 (16.1%)

In Table 3, 43.6% of the students reported feeling tempted to use texting language during examinations, yet only 16.1% admitted to actually doing so. This discrepancy highlights the students' awareness of the appropriateness of language use in different contexts.

and their ability to regulate their linguistic behavior accordingly. The qualitative feedback from the questionnaires also revealed that some students view texting language as a useful tool for note-taking and informal communication but recognize the potential drawbacks if it infiltrates their formal academic writing.

Overall, the analysis suggests that while texting language is prevalent in informal academic contexts, students demonstrate a clear ability to distinguish between appropriate language use in formal and informal settings. This indicates a level of pragmatic competence that allows them to navigate the demands of digital communication without compromising the quality of their academic writing. The insights gained from this study contribute to a deeper understanding of the interplay between digital communication practices and academic literacy, aligning with the broader themes of the special issue on the digital age and cultural symbols.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the role of texting language as a "digital symbolic current," a concept that parallels the sardine metaphor articulated in the call for papers. Texting language, with its informal and adaptive nature, serves as a unifying element within the digital communication landscape, much like sardines moving cohesively to navigate their environment (Veyrat, 2022). This metaphor highlights the resilience and adaptability of texting language, which allows users to efficiently convey meaning across various digital platforms. The prevalence of SMS abbreviations in informal contexts, as observed in the students' notes, suggests that texting language facilitates rapid and efficient communication, aligning with the need for brevity and immediacy in the digital age.

The study's results also reveal significant implications for pragmatic competence and intercultural communication. Pragmatic competence involves the ability to use language appropriately in different social contexts, and the students' selective use of texting language in informal versus formal academic settings demonstrates this skill. Despite the high frequency of SMS abbreviations in informal notes, the restrained use in assignments and examinations indicates an awareness of the appropriate linguistic register required in formal academic contexts. This ability to switch between different language styles reflects a nuanced understanding of context-dependent language use, which is a crucial aspect of pragmatic competence. Moreover, digital communication, including texting language, plays a pivotal role in facilitating intercultural interactions. The shared symbolic currency of texting language transcends linguistic and cultural boundaries, enabling individuals from diverse backgrounds to engage in meaningful exchanges. This aligns with the broader theme of intercultural communication, where digital platforms serve as spaces for cross-cultural dialogue and understanding (Dijk et al., 2016). The students' ability to navigate different linguistic norms in digital communication suggests that texting language contributes to the development of intercultural communicative competence, enhancing their ability to interact effectively in a globalized world.

The evidence from the data highlights the students' capacity to adapt their writing styles to different contexts. The marked difference in the use of SMS abbreviations between informal notes and formal academic writing underscores their pragmatic awareness. While 94.4% of the students used texting language in their notes, only 45.2% and 30.6% used such abbreviations in assignments and examinations, respectively. This indicates a conscious effort to adhere to the conventions of formal academic writing when required, demonstrating flexibility and context-sensitive language use. This adaptability is indicative of advanced linguistic and cognitive skills, suggesting that exposure to and practice with texting language may enhance rather than hinder academic writing proficiency.

Digital communication technologies have revolutionized the way people interact, offering unprecedented opportunities for transcultural exchange. Texting language, as a component of digital communication, exemplifies this transformative potential. The study's findings suggest that texting language functions as a common symbolic currency, enabling users to communicate effectively across cultural and linguistic boundaries. This capacity to transcend cultural barriers is particularly significant in the context of globalization, where digital communication serves as a vital tool for fostering intercultural understanding and cooperation.

The students' use of texting language, despite its informal nature, reflects a broader trend in which digital communication facilitates the blending and negotiation of cultural identities. The sardine metaphor aptly captures this phenomenon, illustrating how individuals, like sardines, move collectively within the digital ocean, navigating and negotiating their cultural identities through shared linguistic practices (Veyrat, 2022). This dynamic interplay between digital communication and cultural symbols highlights the transformative impact of technology on language and intercultural communication.

Thus, the implications of texting language as a digital symbolic current are far-reaching, influencing pragmatic competence, intercultural communication, and the adaptation of writing styles to different contexts. The role of digital communication in transcending cultural boundaries underscores the importance of understanding and leveraging these linguistic practices in an increasingly interconnected world. Future research should continue to explore these intersections, further elucidating the complex relationships between digital technologies, linguistic practices, and intercultural communication.

6. Conclusion

This study has provided a comprehensive analysis of the impact of texting language on academic writing and its implications for pragmatic competence and intercultural communication. The key findings indicate that while texting language is prevalent in informal academic contexts such as note-taking, its use is significantly restrained in formal academic writing, such as assignments and examination scripts. This demonstrates the students' pragmatic awareness and ability to adapt their language use according to the context. The study also reveals that students perceive texting language as a useful tool for informal communication but recognize the potential drawbacks if it infiltrates formal academic writing.

The findings of this study are highly relevant to the special issue's themes of digital technology and cultural symbols. Texting language, as a form of digital communication, represents a "common symbolic current" that transcends cultural boundaries and facilitates intercultural interactions (Veyrat, 2022). This aligns with the sardine metaphor, which illustrates the resilience and adaptability of linguistic practices in the digital age. By examining how texting language functions as a symbolic current, this study contributes to the broader discourse on the transformative impact of digital technologies on language use and cultural communication. Future research should further explore the intersection of digital technologies, linguistic practices, and intercultural communication. One potential area for investigation is the role of texting language in different cultural contexts and how it influences intercultural pragmatic competence. Long-term studies could explore how texting language impacts academic writing skills and overall language proficiency over time. Another area worth exploring is the impact of other forms of digital communication, such as social media and instant messaging, on linguistic practices and intercultural communication.

The study highlights texting language as both a challenge and an opportunity for academic writing and intercultural communication. While concerns about the negative impact of texting language on formal writing are valid, the evidence suggests that students are

capable of managing these influences and adapting their language use appropriately. Moreover, the role of texting language in fostering intercultural communication and pragmatic competence highlights its significance in the digital age. As digital communication continues to evolve, understanding its implications for language use and cultural exchange will remain a critical area of inquiry. This research contributes to that understanding, offering insights into the complex dynamics of digital communication and its impact on contemporary linguistic practices.

In conclusion, texting language exemplifies the adaptive and resilient nature of language in the digital era, serving as a symbolic current that unites users across cultural boundaries. By recognizing and harnessing its potential, educators and researchers can better navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by digital communication, ultimately enhancing both academic writing and intercultural understanding.

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