

# The Morphology of Sri Lankan Text Messages

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**Abstract**—Communicating via a text or an SMS (Short Message Service) has become an integral part of our daily lives. With the increase in the use of mobile phones, text messaging has become a genre by itself worth researching and studying. It is undoubtedly a major phenomenon revealing language change. This paper attempts to describe the morphological processes of text language of urban bilinguals in Sri Lanka. It will be a typological study based on 500 English text messages collected from urban bilinguals residing in Colombo. The messages are selected by categorizing the deviant forms of language use apparent in text messages. These stylistic deviations are a deliberate skilled performance by the users of the language possessing an in-depth knowledge of linguistic systems to create new words and thereby convey their linguistic identity and individual and group solidarity via the message. The findings of the study solidifies arguments that the manipulation of language in text messages is both creative and appropriate. In addition, code mixing theories will be used to identify how existing morphological processes are adapted by bilingual users in Sri Lanka when texting. The study will reveal processes such as omission, initialism, insertion and alternation in addition to other identified linguistic features in text language. The corpus reveals the most common morphological processes used by Sri Lankan urban bilinguals when sending texts.

**Keywords**—Bilingual, deviations, morphology, texts.

## I. INTRODUCTION

THE impact and importance of text messaging and the relationship it builds between a sender and a receiver is undeniable. The intention of advising a close friend and trying not to be offensive or hurtful may result in sending more than an unusual number of text messages just so that the message is properly conveyed. The answer may still baffle the reader: ‘u r changing the way i think’. This statement reveals the misplaced identity of text messages. There are many myths that texting is actually a way of killing time, encouraging illiteracy, bringing down the standards of language, so on and so forth. Then there is also the belief that it is used by teenagers or young adults who are crazy about using the latest technological devices or mobile phones. The deviant forms of language used in text messages are looked at as ways of being different and trying to break away from the norm. These beliefs are baseless and cannot be justified.

This study considers text messages or texts as written expressions that are sent from one mobile phone to another using the Short Messaging Service (hereafter SMS). Texts belong to Computer Mediated Communication (hereafter CMC) and share similar linguistic features with the language of emails, social networking sites and web chat. Texts are limited to 160 characters per message and writing a text message is actually a skilled performance. A texter will have

to make use of a complex array of keys on a mobile phone when typing out a message, with time and space constraints. Imagine a person driving and texting at the same time. A texter will therefore resort to many creative ways to shorten and deliver a .message. Added to this, the Sri Lankan bilingual will have at his/her disposal the use of two or more than two languages when writing a text message. The variety available at hand will open up an array of strategies to the skilled bilingual. Text messages sent by Sri Lankan bilinguals will undoubtedly have similar linguistic characteristics to code mixing in informal speech.

Text messages can be used as evidence to denote the linguistic identity of the user. Text messages may most often be heavily abbreviated, characterized by extremely informal language, use of non-conventional spelling and contain sentences that may appear incomprehensible to the reader. Indeed while conducting this study the investigator was baffled by some of the text messages as they were so bizarre and had to be returned to be deciphered by the senders. Texts are context based and senders modify each text based on the person they send the text message to. In essence, texts are deliberately modified written expressions created by the users to serve a variety of functions including creating individual and group solidarity. Although used by basically everyone in today’s context, it is mostly identified as a form of informal communication associated with the youth and as one of the main characteristics of the growing mobile culture in today’s society [1]. Just as code mixing [2], where speakers use other language items in speech in informal discourse, text language is often criticized by language purists due to the deviant forms in the content. The usual contention is that texting heavily influences the deterioration of the standards in languages. Text language is believed to have an impact on the written standard language especially when it comes to formal contexts. Having said that, at present, reminders, notices, instructions, directions, advertisements and even short memos are sent via text messages as they are easily accessible. Although a spoken out expression, a text is basically written and users try as much as possible to adhere to the norms and standards of the written language when communicating via messages [3].

This study recognizes that in each text message, a sender is creating and evolving the language used in the content. Language change is more visible in the content of the text messages as they show the variety and creativity of speakers in today’s time limited society. Due to time and space constraints of present day society, texts messages are an ideal source of evidence that reveals the creativity inherent with speakers irrespective of the fluency of the languages concerned. It is revealed [3] that in multilingual texting the mother-tongue influence is visible in the patterns used. Most often in bilingual text messages, English expressions are used

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for a variety of functions

## II. OBJECTIVES

The objective of this study is to reveal language change visible in the adaptation of morphological processes used by bilingual speakers in Sri Lanka when sending text messages. It will focus on the deviant forms used by bilinguals to create words or phrases when texting. The study will reveal the creativity in the new forms that serve communicative functions, similar to code mixing for both the sender and the receiver. The study will draw parallels between code mixing and text language that reveal language change in progress in present day Sri Lankan society.

## III. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

David Crystal's *Txtng: the Gr8 Db8* identifies text language as a 'variety of language' and a '21<sup>st</sup> century phenomenon' that is 'stylistically diverse' with a 'distinctive graphic style', 'full of abbreviations and 'deviant use of language'. The book argues that the stylistic innovations found in text messages are not new but extensions of existing morphological processes that are adapted by speakers to suit existing contexts. Variations in spelling, the use of abbreviations, acronyms and initialisms, the use of letter and number homophones, pictograms and logograms are identified as existing processes that are extended by the texters when texting. In this sense, the language in text messages is nothing new but an adaptation of existing morphological processes. The adaptation reflects language change.

Research into the language of text messages reveal a variety of terms used such as 'texters', 'slang language', 'a new hi-tech lingo', 'a hybrid shorthand', 'a digital virus' [3], 'sad shorthand', 'drab shrinktalk' [4] and SMS communication [5] as quoted by [6]. Reference [3] goes further on to document other terminology such as 'short messaging', 'short mail', 'smsing' and 'mobile messaging'. This study prefers to use the term text as it is the most familiar term with Sri Lankan bilinguals. Much of the research into the use of text messages have focused heavily on children and young adults who are believed to be the largest user groups of texting and CMC worldwide [7]. However, [3] argues that texting is not restricted to youngsters and that there is no justifiable reason to believe that it hinders literacy. [8] mentions text messaging as a result of the hectic life styles of the users, describing it as an emerging language variety. Negative appraisals of text language describe it as containing 'grotesque abbreviations', 'obscure ways of expressing', 'ambiguity', 'ridiculous emoticons', ever-changing abbreviations [9]. Reference [10] mentions that text language 'masks dyslexia, poor spelling and mental laziness'. The users are described as

'vandals who are doing to our language what Genghis Khan did to his neighbours eight hundred years ago. They are destroying it: pillaging our punctuation; savaging our sentences; raping our vocabulary. [9]

Whatever views held with regard to the language in text messages, one cannot avoid the fact that it is a result of the

technological advancement and the phenomenal use of mobile phones of the present century that has given rise to this code. It is a language variety, with distinct morpho-syntactic features. As in the case with many emerging language varieties, similar to code mixing, text language is a devalued linguistic phenomenon as many believe that it hinders literacy and signals the death of standards in languages. Counter-arguing this, many eminent linguists have revealed the creativity of the users of text language when adapting the standards of languages in the content of the text message. The linguistic features of texts are now identified as 'skilled' and as strategies that serve a 'specific function' by the users [11]. The patterns of omissions, the use or non-use of punctuation and capitalization, the frequency of deviant spelling, respelling or misspelling, omissions, deletions and retentions are identified features of text language. Speakers deliberately alter the words as they write, and their intention is to reveal a specific identity, to be different and creative. And they do so when they are extremely familiar with the person they are sending the message to. The use or the non-use of the standard forms of language is no longer indicative of the user's fluency of the language. Linguistic properties of text messages have been identified as

omitting punctuation, unconventional punctuation, omitting blank space, spoken-like spelling, consonant writing, conventional abbreviations, unconventional abbreviations, either all capitals or all lower-case, exchange long words for shorter, emoticons, asterisks, symbol replacing word, punctuation [5].

Apart from these features, [12] as quoted by [10] reiterates that the language of texts contains shortenings, acronyms, initialisms, misspellings or typos and non-conventional spellings. A variety of shortening devices has been identified in the literature such as clipping, phonetic respelling, capitalization, letter and number homophones. Apart from these, there are other strategies that texters use when writing. They are contractions, consonant-writing, phonetic respellings, capitalization, typos and other accent stylizations.

In addition, research show that texts serve a variety of functions for its users although this study does not focus on this area. The language of texts is indicative of group solidarity, a method of initiating, sustaining and maintaining relationships, a strategy for coordinating activities, a strategy of strengthening group membership and create individual and group identities. For linguists, it is indicative of language change.

The striking feature of text language is the use of shortened non-conventional forms, driven most often by phonetic spelling. Apart from text language literature, this study will make use of code mixing theories put forward by [2] where three strategies are identified as insertion, alternation and congruent lexicalization. The text language that bilinguals use in Sri Lanka are characterized by features of the mixed code that they use in informal discourse.

#### IV. THE PRESENT STUDY

This study was motivated by the fact that Sri Lankan mobile phone users use a variety of word formation processes when texting that reflect a bilingual identity. Therefore, this study ascertains that the language of text messages is indicative of language change. It will reinforce that most commonly used text language features are used by Sri Lankan bilinguals such as omission of punctuation, omission of apostrophes, use of pictograms, logograms, non-use of capitalization rules, abbreviations, phonetic spelling and in addition, other forms such as nominalization, clipping, loan translation and alternation are strategies revealed in the present corpus. These reflect that features of code mixing inherent in the informal speech of the Sri Lankan bilingual are visible in text language as well.

#### V. THE METHODOLOGY

This study presents data from a corpus of 500 English text messages collected from urban bilingual speakers residing in Colombo. The data was collected in 2016. The text messages were collected from an initial survey of more than 600 texts after which only those messages that reflect deviant forms of usage in spelling, use of abbreviations, clipping and other strategies that texters use were chosen for the purpose of analysis and categorization. The investigator only used messages from texters known to the investigator who were willing to share the texts as data. Each respondent was asked to forward messages they felt reflect interesting or creative ways of writing text messages. 30 respondents were asked to select messages that they have sent or received. The study only used the word formation patterns and other stylistic morphological devices in the data for categorization and did not record names of respondents as they were not relevant to the present study. The purpose of the study is only to identify the morphological processes and how they were adapted by texters. The study did not account for the fluency of languages of the speakers who provided text data to the study. It only looked at the ways in which words were created and recreated. The data was categorized based on the existing processes identified in text language literature by Crystal and the mixing strategies were categorized based on Muysken's CM typology.

#### VI. INITIALISMS

Initialisms is a striking feature of texting that appear in patterns as follows:

- For individual words  
Y –yes, L-love, K-kiss, G-good
- Elements of compound words  
GN-good night, GM-good morning, TC-take care, BS-Budu Saranai, VC-Vice Chancellor, BA-Bachelor of Arts, BF-boyfriend,
- For institutions or organizations  
OPD-Outpatient department, FCID- Financial crimes investigation division
- For words in elliptical or whole sentences  
BTW-by the way

- Other forms  
PPT – PowerPoint, PDN –peradeniya, KLN-kelaniya,

#### VII. RETENTION OF CONSONANTS

It appears that consonants play a major role in conveying messages via texts. Most often texters retain the consonants in the messages rather than omitting them. Hence, the retention of consonants clearly indicates the assumption that users think consonants carry more information than vowels. Most often, consonants that are not pronounced word finally have the probability of being omitted than retained. This study focuses on not what is omitted in text language but what is retained to describe the word formation processes used. If a consonant is deleted, it is only because the deleted consonant has no impact on the pronounced word and therefore no impact in distorting the meaning to the receiver. Consonants are also deleted when words carry an extra consonant. This reiterates the finding of this study that consonants carry more information to the sender. The retention of the meaningful consonants require a skill and an in-depth knowledge of knowing exactly how the word is spelt in standard orthography. In essence, skillful texters have an in-depth knowledge of the linguistic system of what to retain and what to omit in order to convey the exact meaning.

- Omission of consonants word finally that are not pronounced  
waitin –waiting, callin – calling, lunc-lunch, dign-digging,
- Omission of consonants in the middle that are not pronounced  
Would-wd, could-cd, should-shd,
- Omission of the extra consonant that is not pronounced  
Tell-tel, will- wl, kill-kil, bill-bil, passed-pasd, still-stl, till-til

#### VIII. THE VOWEL OMISSION

Similar to the retention of the most needed consonant, skilled texters also employ omission of vowels as a strategy. Vowels in unstressed positions have more chances of being deleted than the others. However, there is no hard and fast rule as some words simply omit all the stressed and unstressed vowels in the message. The message still can be understood. Observe the following data gathered from this study.

- Omission of the vowel word initially  
of –f, ok-k, in –n, and-nd, I am- m, exam-xm, extra-xtra, excellent-xclnt,
- Omission of the vowel word medially  
gvn-given, tkn, -taken, xlnt, excellent, bt –but, grt, great, thnk- thank, hw-how,  
cs- because, wy-way, knd-kind, gng-going, frm- from, tmrw-tomorrow, fr-for, lke-like,  
snd- send, hy-hey, wht-what, wrk-work, bck-back, nw-now, tml, temple, next-nxt  
mnth-month, swty-sweetie, swthrt-sweetheart, dr-dear, sng-song, cl- call, -cn-can,  
sgnl-signal, servcd-serviced, talkd-talked, pleasd-pleased, anyhw-anyhow, dyout-dayout

grt-great, asp<sup>1</sup>- asap, sn-soon, wl-wheel

- Omission of the vowel word finally  
th-the, hn-phone, msg-message, cm-come, sm-some,

#### IX. PHONETIC SPELLING

Shud-should, wud-would, cud-could, fri-free

#### X. NOMINALIZATION

In Sinhala-English code mixing, nominalization has been identified as one of the main mixing strategies that bilinguals use to integrate other language items in informal discourse [13]. Nominalizers are grammatical forms used in the process of nominalizing. In Sinhala-English nominalization process, English lone words are accompanied by the Sinhala nominalizer *eka*. *eka* is an independent nominalizer in colloquial Sinhala. The process of using *eka* results in a mixing strategy indicative of insertional CM. Observe the following example from text messages that are sent by institutions as a notice.

1. *onama mobile eka kin 990 amatha nawaloka rohal waidyawaru channel karaganna*  
(call 990 from any mobile phone to channel a doctor at the Nawaloka Hospitals)

Observe the following examples from text messages by respondents.

2. *snd me the english cert award eka date eka*  
(send me the date of the English certificate awards)
3. *grn wkshp eka me month eke*  
(The green workshop is on this month)
4. *ee jewelry set eka lassanai. Elegant look ekak hv. eka ganna*  
(that jewelry set is beautiful with an elegant look. Buy that)
5. *fb name eka mokakda?*  
(What is the Facebook name?)
6. *machan<sup>2</sup> free wenne keeyatada? Ape malli jpura management faculty eke 1<sup>st</sup> year. manta subject thoraganna podi upades tikkak ganna*  
(At what time will you be free? My brother, in the first year at the Faculty of Management at Sri Jayawardanapura University needs advice).
7. *Anee<sup>3</sup> dawas 4kin return karanna puluwan loku udawwak*  
bank due case *ekak*  
(please return it within 4 days, it's a bank due case)
8. *mam bus 1k*  
(I am in the bus)
9. *tell ko please*  
(please tell)
10. *call me ko*  
(please call)
11. *he sits and keeps his thady size knife*  
(he sits and keeps his huge knife)

<sup>1</sup> ASAP is an abbreviation. However, some texters have further shortened it in text language

<sup>2</sup> Machan is a borrowing in Sinhala, meaning 'buddy' or 'mate'

<sup>3</sup> expostulation

#### XI. ALTERNATION

1. *podu mathak kireemak*. Today, John Keells Media Conference for *kala pola* 2016. Isthuthiee.  
(a small reminder. Today, John Keells Media conference for the *kala pola* 2016)
2. *sleeping partner, your beau. Appo!*
3. *Wedak nee aney*. You are ditching the office  
(no point. You are ditching the office)
4. *Ayyo swty*, I thought September
5. *Joke aney*
6. *My father says strike is over heta!* U hv any news?  
(my father says strike is over tomorrow)
7. *Thaththa* is waiting *aney*.  
(my father is waiting)
8. *Ayyo* Im early
9. *Deaf school for sure apoi*

#### XII. CONVENTIONAL FORMS

Conventional spelling and standard syntax were retained in many text messages that were sent as reminders, notices and alerts by organizations and institutions such as Keells Super, ODEL, WOW.lkPROMO, Dominos, e-channelling, Asian alliance, Nawaloka, Dilly & Carlo, Pizza Hut, Healthguard, LECO, STAR PROMO, AIA Sri Lanka, Earl Regency, Nations SMS, Nexus Mobile, Singer, Arpico, Club Vision. In the text messages sent from these, traditional orthography, punctuation and standardized styles are still retained as in the following example.

1. *Supply will be interrupted from 0800 hrs*  
However, deviations from the norm occur as in the following example:
2. *KFC Cricket hot deal, 20 pc Hot Drumlets & a 2 L Pepsi for just Rs 990/-. Valid for Dine-in & Delivery*

#### XIII. CLIPPING

- Clipping word finally:  
Answer-ans, account-acc, department-dept,
- Clipping word finally:  
Supervisor- sup, second-sec, situation- situ, minute-min, information-info

#### XIV. EXCLAMATIONS

*Phew, oops, appo, budu ammo, apoi, yupi yupi, sigh, ah ok, phew*

#### XV. L1 SYNTACTIC STYLES

1. *Have no idea, they said there was no meeting no...so no idea*
2. *Im parked right in front of perera and sons. Train came ne*
3. *Drawing and bathing*
4. *You are not here ne*
5. *Its kelan.*
6. *Who was that pretty baduwa*

## XVI. OTHER FORMS

hkz- a slight smile, dr- dear, onw-on the way, mmm...,  
hmm..., ppl-people, app developer-a person who develops  
apps, w-were, v-we,

## XVII. CONCLUSION

The findings of the study reveal an adaptation of existing morphological processes to extend the vocabulary in text language by the Sri Lankan bilingual. The morphological extension is apparent in the use of morphological processes such as initialisms, clipping and code mixing processes such as insertion revealed in nominalization and alternation strategies in the data. The significant finding of the study is in the omission of vowels which appears to be the most productive process used by texters. Both stressed and unstressed vowels are omitted by texters in most cases. Vowels tend to be the most likely candidates to be deleted from text language than the consonants. The retention of consonants too depicts a pattern. Consonants are only deleted when there is an extra consonant available or when the consonant is in an unstressed position with no impact on pronunciation. Hence, it can be concluded that the text words containing omission or retention of consonants are phonologically marked whereas text words containing omission of vowels are morphologically marked. The data revealed text words with just one consonant where the initial vowel was deleted. The consonant still carried meaning to the receiver. In certain text words 'w' replaced 'were'. This is also indicative that the omission of all the vowels and consonants have no impact on meaning. The texter was using conventional orthography in the content. These instances revealed morphological marking of the text words. In addition, the Sri Lankan texter makes use of L1 patterns to create new syntactic styles in text data as revealed in exclamations, use of the tag 'no' and 'ne' and inclusion of code mixes in data. These are features of the mixed code used by urban bilinguals in Sri Lanka in informal speech. This study reveals that features of the mixed code are present in the text language. These morphological processes unique to the bilingual broadens the bilingual's capacity to be creative and appropriate in the bilingual context. The strategies reveal language change.

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