

SMS English: Boon or Bane of Technology

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Abstract

Growth of technology has made a great impact on English language. It led to the rise of SMS English and brought a new genre of language. Modern mobile phones with modern technology of Short Messaging made SMS English to flourish. However, the attempt here would be to find out whether this new language is a boon or bane of technology.

Keywords: Technology, SMS, Language, Message, Style

Introduction

How difficult is it to understand the term 'technology' today? Even if we do not understand the science of it, we do understand the importance of it in our daily life. Technology has changed our world and our life style enormously. It has changed our class rooms and our teaching-learning processes. We have moved so far from our earlier life styles so much so that we do shopping, we buy and sell things, and we meet people and our old school friends online. Technology has helped us in saving time out of our busy schedule and has made our life comfortable. Even to prepare an article we take help from technology, from typing to collecting materials to the use of dictionary. At the same time there are many demerits of this technology dogging us. It keeps our young generation away from nature; they prefer online games rather than outdoor games. Things such as 'cyber-crimes' are happening day-to-day. Social networking sites are misused. Therefore we should not forget that if technology can make our life comfortable then it can also be hazardous in our life.

Technology has now made its strong impact even in language. After the invention of machine called 'Computer', a new word 'computer' entered into the language. Similarly, terms like 'photography' due to camera, 'photocopy' due to xerox, 'network' due to satellites, 'telephone', 'television' etc. It is interesting to know that often the name of machines themselves became words suggesting their function. Meaning of certain words also changed with the development of technology, e.g; 'mobile' which meant mobility now also stood for a machine of communication which works through networks. We cannot deny the fact that in every field of work technology has provided new vocabulary and to a great extent developed English language.

Similarly it has also led to the growth of SMS language which developed with the invention of mobile phone and a facility that it provides for sending messages. It is different from the general language as it does not follow standard rules for language. Let us find out whether this language is a boon or a bane of technology.

What SMS English is

SMS English is a part of SMS language. It has marked a new beginning of English language. Language used due to the necessity of mobile phone text messaging can be called SMS language. SMS stands for 'Short Message Service'. The language used in SMS and other form of communication such as email is similar. It would not be wrong to say that the origin of SMS language lies in the invention of mobile phone. The sender types less word but communicates more quickly than writing letter because words are shortened maintaining the clarity of the matter. Words can be shortened in such a way: eg. 'time' can be written as 'tym'; sometimes numbers can replace words eg. 'nine' can be written simply as number '9'. In such cases the words contains homophonic quality. It can be viewed as short-hand writing, also known as stenography. Oxford Dictionary defines 'Short-hand' as 'a quick way of writing using special signs or abbreviations'.¹ It says things in a shorter way. Similarly SMS language says things in a shorter way as telecommunication companies have limited the number of characters per SMS. The companies also charge for the SMS due to which lengthy SMS costs high, therefore to keep the price low SMS is kept short. In this process a different kind of language has come into existence which does not follow standard grammar, spelling of words, and sentence format.

The Science of SMS Language

It is quite difficult task to grapple with the science of SMS language. However, with the help of technology itself, by surfing Google, have been able to understand partly its ways of functioning. It is a kind of wild fairy tale where machines communicate through numbers and codes helping us to communicate easier.

Short Message Service has a cell through which it functions practically known as SMS-CB. It broadcasts messages to all the mobile users living in various areas. When users type message it goes to the short message service center (SMSC) for technical process. We also get delivery report from the center. Delivery report can be achieved by SMS settings which is available in every modern mobile phone. We can send a message by typing certain numbers or codes as per the direction sent by companies to make it active. Transmission of short messages between the center and the mobile phone is done through 'Mobile Application Part' (MAP) of the SS7 protocol. MAP is SS7 protocol providing communication to the mobile phone users and SS7 stands for 'Signaling System No. 7'. Its main function is to receive and tear down calls. The length of message is limited by the constraints of signaling protocol which is precisely 140 octets (140 octets = 140X8 bits= 1120 bits). Octet is a unit of digital information in telecommunication. Now let us move from science to the style of SMS language.

1 Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (7th Edition), Oxford University Press, 2005.

SMS Language Quality and Style²

Few researchers namely Crispin Thurlow, Lopez Rua and David Crystal among many others have proposed some properties of SMS language. They are as follows:

1. *Initializations*: Long sentences can be shortened using initials eg. LOL. It can stand for 'lots of love', 'loads of love', 'laugh out loud' etc.
2. *Shortenings of parts of speech*: Vowels can be removed from the word and the reader interprets the word by adding the vowels. Eg. 'dictionary' can be written as 'dctnry', 'crying' can be written as 'cryn' etc.
3. *Interpretation of the shortened words*: Shortened words are interpreted depending on the context of the message. To understand the context one must read the message carefully otherwise it can be misinterpreted or even may appear nonsense.
4. *'Reactive Tokens'*: It includes phrases or words that signify a reaction to the previous message, eg. 'yeah I saw tat'. It can be found in Internet Chat as well. The conversation can be well understood through 'reactive tokens'.
5. *Pictograms and logograms*: The conversation can also be done using pictures, single letters or numbers. Eg. 'you' can be written as 'u', 'am' as simply letter 'm'. Number of face symbols known as emoticons are also used reflecting the emotion of the sender.
6. *SMS with-* a) no capitalization, b) capitalization of only first word, c) full capitalization.
7. *Variation in spellings*: The words are spelt in multiple ways in SMS language. Eg. 'better' can be spelt as 'bettr' or 'bttr'; 'take care' as 'tke cre' or simply 'tc'. Spellings of words differ from user to user, from one place to another. Standard spelling cannot be found often in SMS language.
8. *Punctuation*: Punctuation is used by users in their own way to maintain clarity in order to understand the message clearly and easily. It is not mandatory in SMS language to use punctuation as per standard grammar.

Few Examples of SMS English

'OMG' - Oh My God. There is also a movie titled 'OMG'. Isn't it so interesting to know that human kind has all the means to convey their message, especially the short message? In our hectic life style when we go for everything that is 'instant' why would we not go for SMS which saves our time and energy and at the same time conveys our message to the world? Few other examples are as follows:

'Luv' - love; 'B4' - Before; 'y' - Why; '4' - for/ four; 'k' - Okay; '4get' - forget; '2day' - today or some write it as '2dae' also.

2 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Short_Message_Service (accessed on 24/Apr/2013).

As we look at the SMS English users we find many ways of writing the same word. Older generation do not use much short forms of words, whereas younger ones frequently use and invent new ways of shortening the words. They shorten it from words to letters e.g; 'k' for 'okay'. It was written as 'ok' now days users have shortened it to only letter 'k'. 'Happy Birthday' is written as 'happie birthdae' or simply 'hbd'. Receiver must be familiar with these abbreviations or else they can mean nothing. Getting deeper into this line of thought let us see whether SMS English stands today as a merit or demerit of technology.

SMS English - Boon or Bane of Technology

Technology has brought a huge change in the language through SMS language. English language has been affected mostly. Break from standard grammar, deviation from correct spelling of words has given a new form to English language. And it has become a matter of great concern. How far does it destroy the essence of the language, especially when native languages are written in English? Hindi can be written using English alphabets. How far can the essence of the native language be found in it? Does it destroy the proper knowledge of the correct English? Many questions can follow thus.

SMS, no doubt, destroys the meaning of a language, especially the younger ones. The use of it can be found in class assignments frequently. This shows that to some extent the English language has been deteriorated. The richness of the language has started to lose its beauty with lots of spelling mistakes, incorrect grammar, improper sentence structure, and less or no use of punctuation. John Humphrys (Welsh Journalist and Television Reporter) has criticized SMS language. He finds it to be 'wrecking our language'.³ As everything has a shorter way to be fulfilled now-a-days, so does the SMS which in a way stands as a corruption for the language. It creates undesirable reading-writing habits among the youths which can damage the ability of the young ones to develop their literary skills though it saves our time in sending messages in our busy schedule. The difficulty lies in understanding SMS language found in messages. Though it is faster to write, it takes time to read and understand the message because it depends on the sender's concept of the message. The receiver must be familiar with such SMS words otherwise the message could go haywire. Eg. LOL. The sender can write 'LOL' with some specific meaning attached to it but it depends on the reader how s/he interprets this 'LOL' as it can be understood in many ways,- 'laugh out loud', 'lots of love', 'loads of love' etc. Sender has the choice in writing the message which has been termed by Michael Halliday as 'register'.⁴ This reminds us of Roland Barthes "From Work to Text", which gives more power to the reader.

Another interesting thing to look at is how SMS English is no more limited to English language. Users use English letters to frame words in their vernacular. From the names

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

of Indian (Hindi) movies to mobile messages we can find several examples of it. To cite as an example let us take first the names of Hindi movies; '*Jab Tak Hai Jaan*' which when translated into English becomes something like 'Till There's Life'. In this case instead of translating the name they choose to keep it Hindi in essence using English alphabet. Similarly SMS is also written where the users try to maintain the originality of their language by keeping it bilingual, e.g; '*Hi! Tum Kaise Ho?*' It has become very common to be bilingual in SMS. The language in which we think overcomes the language in which we communicate with others. In a way there seems no necessity to translate such messages into Standard English within the same language community. So far advertisements, names of movies, and messages are concerned we can accept it without hindrance. It can also be viewed as an important effect of postcolonialism where we do not stick to the Empire's language neither in speech nor in writings.

But there is another side of it which is hazy. This way of using English language can definitely destroy our knowledge of both the languages (whichever be the language we use). By writing vernaculars using English letters has already destroyed our knowledge of those vernaculars, which is to say that we can no doubt speak our mother language but often we fail to write it correctly. We face various difficulties such as spelling mistakes, less vocabulary etc. Only a few who make conscientious balance is on the safer side.

The idea does not end here. As everything has two sides so does the SMS language (English). It has become a new trend in the language-world. It has created on the other hand a new language. Looking back at the history of English language and literature we cannot deny the fact that English language has gone through various changes and its reflection can be viewed in its literature.

It is important to keep in mind the choice of language made by individuals in the expression of their thoughts. It is more important to make meaning out of their individual ideas. In this sense both sender and receiver are active participants. It is interesting to see how English language can be used in different ways. SMS English has therefore opened a new vista for the language users. Descriptive message would charge high price therefore SMS is usually written in dialogue form. Both the sender and receiver must be aware of the context in which they communicate for

(SENDER: 'hi! Did u watch?' RECEIVER: 'yeah....wat abt u?')

If they are not aware of the context the whole message could stand meaningless. It is not only about the context but also having the knowledge of SMS language, e.g; 'cryn'. The meaning of 'cryn' can be understood as 'crying' or 'crayon' after reading the sentence. SMS language includes both literary and common words. For SMS language we can also use the term 'under-lexicalisation' invented by Roger Fowler as it lacks in 'adequate set of words'⁵ in expressing particular concept. An important element that

5 Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory* (1st Indian Edition), Manchester, Manchester University Press Oxford Road, 2008, p. 215.

we find in this language is the presence of 'collocation',⁶ term used by Ronald Carter. It is visible that a particular group makes use of the words and expression familiar to the member of that group, are to take care;

(SENDER: 'hi! Got late?' RECEIVER: 'yeh....')

It is not necessary in this case to explain the matter. We can consider another example:

(SENDER: 'da class was.....' RECEIVER: '.....yeah I knw')

In this case it is understood by both sender and receiver how the class was. The expression used in their message appears to be familiar for both of them. SMS English has already entered into our day to day life whether in the form of message or language itself. It has introduced unique language and has showed us unique ways of modulating English as per the choice of the user. So far it would not be wrong to call it another language having its own style.

SMS English as Gendered

Another important factor that needs attention is the gendered language. We are all aware of how for such a long time feminist thinkers have been dealing with the issue of gendered language. The concern out here would not be to differentiate gendered language but on how SMS language differs according to its users on the basis of gender. Messages written by female writers are often found to be lengthier than the male ones and the words are not too shortened. We can even find a kind of pattern in their messages, many times full of emotion (love, anger, sloth etc.). On the other hand men usually use shortened words or letters, frequently use emoticons, and their messages are not always sentimental. Male users are found to be keeping their messages short and straight unlike female users, for example male users usually send only numbers if asked for somebody's contact number whereas female users generally send name with contact number or some other messages along with the number. But there lies some exception which we should not overlook. This study can lead us into linguistic and feminist study which though worthwhile in it to be appropriate here. The basic idea is that SMS language if studied deeply can take us too many other theoretical studies.

Conclusion

SMS English yet to be received and better understood in a greater way beyond linguistic barrier. If viewed properly language is dynamic as everything else and is bound to change. Our concern would be to understand this change and to find its effect, both negative and positive, in society and in our lives.

Technology has made its impact in our lives and language too. SMS is a commercial matter. Companies earn through such SMS where certain amount is charged for

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

certain length of the message. Today we have 'SMS pack' where we are provided free SMS for certain number of days after which we pay certain amount for the free SMS. The word 'free' is interesting to note. Nothing is free. Mobile phones with advanced software are found everywhere and are used by everybody. We are affected by it both positively and negatively in social as well as linguistic sense. The more developed form of technology launched in the market the more complex will be the system of language. When enquired with few of the closest friends about the question whether SMS English is a boon or bane of technology they shared their opinions as follows:

Raunak Subba, an IIM student in Kolkata, opined that the change in the language was ever since the creation but its speed changed since the last decade mostly driven by technological advancement. He also said that youngsters prefer abbreviations and shorter phonetically correct words for a variety of reasons from speedier typing to sharing a common code for chatting and this type of new language is helping them and these youngsters would be a society tomorrow with the language which suits them the most. So is SMS English. Therefore SMS English is neither a boon nor a bane but a gradual change in the needs of the newer generation. He also accepts the fact that this will damage the standard language if not balanced in the use of it.

Karun Pradhan, translator at United Nations, notes that language is in a phase of evolution by which he means that the more technology shrinks and becomes smaller so does the language from Shakespearean to e-language. He thinks, like the former, that SMS English is part of the process of evolution in English language itself.

Therefore it would not be wrong to say that SMS English is both a boon and a bane of technology. It would be more right to say that SMS English is a new technology based language and is in its initial phase which requires more attention for its development and acceptance in the field of language. After all it depends all on the user. If we use it only in sending messages through mobile phones, through e-mails and not in our assignments and articles then only it can stand as a separate technical language without harming the essence of the proper English language. It is also important and interesting to see how this newly found language opens up new vistas of learning and understanding the effect of technology bringing new changes in both social and linguistic worlds.