Japanese Deaf Adolescents’ Textisms

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated how texting was used by deaf adolescents in Japan. A small corpus of dyadic messages exchanged via cell phone between 2 deaf high-school students at a residential school was collected to examine the features of unconventional spellings typically used in text messages, or “textisms.” The characteristics of this text-message corpus were analyzed along with the factors associated with texting behaviors of other deaf adolescents in their school in order to explore the features of textisms adopted by these deaf adolescents. The study found that in the pair’s 356 messages, the deaf adolescents adopted characteristics of textisms very similar to those used by the hearing adolescents studied by other researchers on Japanese mobile communication.

Keywords: Corpus Analysis, Deaf Students, Japanese Text Messages, Mobile Communication, Text Message

INTRODUCTION

Text messaging is one of the most popular means of peer-to-peer communication among teens in developed nations. In Japan, the mobile phone is called keitai, and the number of keitai subscribers reached 132.76 million by March 2012, according to The Statistical Handbook of Japan (2013) issued by Japan’s Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications. The most popular usage of cell phones among adolescents is keitai meeru, a Japanese equivalent of text-messaging (Breuer, 2009; Igarashi et al., 2005; Miyake, 2007). Research on texting in English has shown that computer slang, such as gr8 (great) and LOL (laugh out aloud), are ubiquitous in SMS, e-mail, and other formats of digital writing. It has also been found that expressions used in the dyadic informal exchange of English text messages range from lexical to morpho-syntactic to orthographic features, and these unconventional spellings are termed textisms (Plester et al., 2008). There are other similar labels such as Txt (Shortis 2007). For consistency, the term textisms is used in this paper. Although there are some similarities, textisms produced by Japanese adolescents are fundamentally different from those reported in the studies about texting published in English for the following reasons. First, Japanese orthography consists of three different scripts: the phonology-based syllabic script called kana, the morphographic script called kanji, and the much less utilized alphabetic script called romaji (the Latin alphabet). Thus, Japanese text messages are written in the combination

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of these three scripts. Second, young Japanese frequently use two types of picture icons in their text messages: kao-moji and e-moji. Kao-moji refers to horizontally drawn smileys and other symbols with facial expressions, similar to English emoticons (e.g., (T_T) or (^O^)/). This pictograph is a Japanese equivalent of emoticons but is far more extensive and complex than the English version (Miller, 2004). By contrast, e-moji icons are brightly colored and finely illustrated graphic symbols that resemble objects and concepts (e.g., 🌈), similar to blinkies used in English blogs, except that e-moji is static in nature. These keitai pictographs are usually downloadable from the phone’s database. Young Japanese use both types of pictographs frequently in their messages as a visual strategy to express emotions, cuteness, and other social cues (Hjorth, 2003; Miyake, 2007). The use of the pictograms is a phenomenon said to be influenced by the popularity of visual arts, such as manga and anime, as well as by a relatively strong visual orientation inherent in Japanese culture (Katsuno & Yano, 2007; Miyake, 2007). Japanese youths’ texting is known to embrace unconventional scripts, such as code-like expressions called gal-moji. Characteristics of gal-moji represent an unconventional orthographic mixture (e.g., a sudden appearance of Roman alphabet spelling in a Japanese sentence) and use of the Greek symbols used in mathematics (e.g., ψ), or other foreign fonts such as Cyrillic letters (e.g., Д). However, there are also similarities between Japanese and English textisms. As with English texting, a more colloquial writing style is preferred in Japanese texting as a way to increase intimacy and creativity, and word play is frequently used to add humorous, nonchalant effects (e.g., Satake, 2005; Masuda, 2005; Miyake, 2007) similar to informal e-mail exchanges among Japanese adolescents. Other linguistic features of English textisms, such as frequent word truncation, are also common features of Japanese high-school and college students’ texting (e.g., Nakamura, 2005; Satake, 2005; Miyake, 2006). Unfortunately, these characteristics only represent the textisms of hearing adolescents typically recruited as subjects in the previous research.

Several studies did compare deaf to hearing adolescents’ use of the Internet and other modern technologies (e.g., Gillard et al., 2007; Power et al., 2007; Pilling & Barrett, 2008; Barak & Sadovsky, 2008; Power & Power, 2009) and claimed that cyberspace is equally utilized by both deaf and hearing communities as a means of personal and group communication. These studies postulated that technology mediated communication (TMC) empowers people with hearing impairment. However, some caution needs be taken before making that postulation. One reason is that the deaf subjects in most of these studies are adults, most of whom became post-lingually deaf. In other words, these subjects are likely to have strong reading and writing skills, and are able to take full advantage of the visually-oriented nature of IM, e-mail, and SMS. For this post-lingual population, digital technology can potentially remove job-related discrimination or communication barriers with the hearing community. Literate deaf adults may indeed have embraced the texting technology for daily personal or social communication across different locations and time zones. By underestimating the issue of low literacy levels among many deaf students, the potential of texting technology to “empower” the whole deaf population may not be fully achieved. What has yet to be investigated is how pre-lingual deaf adolescents manage to write in this non-manual language, not for academic purposes but for peer-to-peer interaction, by texting to each other. Moreover, the impact of literacy on TMC needs be examined not only in English-dominant nations but also in the countries with different orthographies, such as Japanese. Although the aforementioned studies do claim that new communication technologies have been integrated into deaf individuals’ lives, little or no research has documented how deaf adolescents, whose face-to-face communication is done through signing, write text messages.

In Japan, approximately 6,700 students are said to have attended 106 schools for the
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