Chapter 6
The Sociolinguistics of SMS Ways to Identify Gender Boundaries

Muhammad Shaban Rafi
University of Management and Technology, Pakistan

ABSTRACT

The chapter aims to observe sociolinguistic aspects of SMS with a view to identifying gender boundaries. Ever growing text-based communication through mobile phone triggers an important question: Do we need to review the parameters – phonological variations, stylistic range e.g. discourse analysis and conversational interaction – for gender identification? Having suggested a new parameter to gender identification, the study draws on: (a) SMS varieties between female to female, male to male, male to female texter (b) SMS varieties to identify gender variations, and (c) the sociolinguistics of SMS for gender identification. A corpus of over 300 SMS messages was collected from students of different age groups spread over educational institutions in Pakistan. The data were enlisted under five variables: compressions, abbreviations, symbols, tenses and punctuation to investigate variations among male and female texters on the former variables. Two more factors, use of mother tongue and second language, were also analyzed to address the research questions (a-c). The data analysis reveals that SMS texting identifies gender boundaries and the evolution of some sociolinguistic variations among the texters.

INTRODUCTION

Short Messages Service (SMS) text based communication in many forms is proliferating in the lives of most people. The popularity of text messaging has come to evoke interesting discussions among sociolinguists how to identify genderlects through SMS corpus. The terms SMS, mobile text messaging and texting are used interchangeably in the present study.

Different linguistic choices by males and females have led to a number of language and gender studies in the recent years (Gray 2007; Montgomery 2000; Yule 2007; Trudgill 2007; Wardhaugh 2004; Macaro 2005; Napoli 1996; Doughty 2005; Ellis 2001; Jule 2005; Sudo 2007; Cameron 2005; Shehadeh 1999).
The Sociolinguistics of SMS Ways to Identify Gender Boundaries

However, SMS texting and genderlects have not received considerable attention. This chapter aims to identify gender boundaries through SMS corpus analysis.

Reid (2006) concludes in his study on “Tex-mates and Text Circle ...” that texters are more likely to be younger and female. The evidence that young females are more likely to use and benefit from electronic communication is also found in the Pew Trust’s project (2001) on the Internet and American Life and Ling’s study (2006) on the sociolinguistics of SMS. The kinds of SMS that are exchanged among male and female texters depend on the nature of the relationship between them. The phrase “time passing” occurs frequently in discussions of texting between males and females. This time passing activity gradually takes over and becomes an integral part of the social and economic life of the youths. It is among the teenagers that the culture of SMS lives predominantly (Rafi, 2008). Castells (2006) reinforces the aforesaid point that across the globe adolescents and young adults are playing very active roles in adapting and appropriating services such as SMS. Thurlow (2003) says that young people are the slaves of growing text messaging culture. Haig (2002) reinforces the fact in a study, showing that 90% of teenagers claim to text more than they talk on their phones.

SMS follows differential paths of diffusion and use according to age, gender, class, ethnicity, race and culture, and it is appropriated by people in terms of their values and needs. Some researchers have doubted that gender boundaries can be drawn through SMS corpus analysis. Most gender differences observed are found to be statistically insignificant. For example, in an online survey in Spain, Valor and Sieber (2003) conclude that there is no significant gender difference in the usage of mobile phone. Although the male teenagers are more likely to use the mobile phone for fun, the researchers declare that this is not a very important aspect. Female teenagers are also found to be using the mobile phone because it makes them more available for others to contact; whereas, boys tend to have a more technical and autodidactic interest in the phone. In Turkey, Israel, and Norway, researchers have identified little or no differences in how men and women use mobile phones (Nordli and Sørensen 2003; Özkan and Koçak 2003; Lemish and Cohen 2005). However, the present study assumes gender boundaries can be delineated in SMS corpus collected from males and females. This parameter is discussed in more detail in the background and research design of the study.

BACKGROUND

In some cultures, there are marked differences between male and female speech. Yule (2007), while discussing a dialect survey, says that female speakers tend to use more prestigious forms than male speakers with the same general social background. That is, forms such as I done it, it growed and he ain’t can be found more often in the speech of males, and I did it, it grew and he isn’t in the speech of females. We can conclude that males regress to colloquial expression; whereas, females tend to produce so called standard version of a language. SMS messages indicate that both males and females opt for non-standard or admixture of languages, which have given a birth to a new and creative variety. This seems to be challenging the stereotype that females tend to opt for standard varieties; whereas, males regress towards non-standard choice of these varieties in a speech community.

Rafi (2008) explains in a study on “SMS Text Analysis: Language, Gender and Current Practices” variations among males and females in texting messages. Pointing out this dichotomy in Figure 1, he says that 38% males and 62% females prefer SMS for communication respectively.

Ling (2006) concludes in his study that although men are early adopters of mobile phone technology, it is among the females that the