Chapter 29
Beliefs in GSM Text Messaging Among Academics in Two Nigerian Universities

Akin Odebunmi
University of Ibadan, Nigeria

Moses A. Alo
University of Ibadan, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

The chapter investigates the assumptions that academics in two universities in Southwestern Nigeria (namely, University of Ibadan- a federal government-owned institution- and Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomoso- a state government-owned institution) work with when sending GSM (Global System of Communication) text-messages. The research on this aspect of GSM interaction, which has received little attention from scholars in Computer-mediated Communication (CMC), is approached, in the present paper, by a random sampling of 400 text-messages from the ‘sent’ (out-box) compartment of cell phones of academics in the sampled universities. The analysis of the texts is based on insights from contextual beliefs, collaborative theory and implicature. The findings reveal that senders of text messages exploit two beliefs, namely, language-based beliefs and subject matter-based beliefs, which are constrained by participants’ conception of co-interactants’ relative status in inclusive or exclusive terms, itself a determinant of the degree of the assumptions made. The findings further show that the messages which are based on research and academic activities, themselves covering research and supervision, academic promotion and advancement, general academic matters and academic obligations and assignments, are characterized by a variety of short hands, context-driven indices of assumptions and flouts of quantity and manner maxims. It is concluded that with the high level of assumptions made, aided by various linguistic tools, messages communicated by academics could be exclusive to the in-group members. Finally, future research is invited to compare the beliefs of academics with those of other groups of professionals.

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INTRODUCTION

The Global System of Mobile communication (GSM), has greatly facilitated human interactions globally, and has expanded the limits of erstwhile users of telephone facilities, which means that more people across the world now have access to the new telephone system, which is, by far, more available and facile to operate than the old location-restricted wired, telephone technology. With this development, one expects a large body of scholarly works on GSM communication as almost all humans in the world have used the technology on a daily basis.

It is however surprising that not as much attention as is expected has been paid to language use constrained by the GSM both in terms of the verbal codes engaged during telephoning and those used when sending text messages. The present study is however interested in the codes used in messaging.

STUDIES ON TEXT MESSAGING


A number of these studies have been devoted to medical communication as they focus on reminders for patients and treatment (e.g. Downer, Meara, Costa and Sethuraman 2006; Robinson et.al 2006). Some others have concentrated on equally non-language-based issues such as archival discourse (e.g. Herman 2007), pedagogy (e.g. Naismira 2007), politics (e.g. Prete 2007), media discourse (e.g. Enli 2007) and psychological discourse (e.g. Raskauskas and Stoltz 2007).

The language-based studies have explored “the interplay between user relationships and language use” (Thurlow and Poff 2009:4). These include Ishii (2006), Ling (2008), etc. Some others have concerned themselves with the “thematic content or functional orientation of text messages” (Thurlow and Poff 2009:4). Studies in the category include Ling (2005) and Harper (2002). All these studies do not address pragmatic issues, and are therefore not within the scope of the present study. Studies that have pragmatic foci have discussed discourse structures (e.g. Spinalli and Gambarini 2007) and code-switching (Haggar 2007). It is evident that none of these studies has addressed the pragmatic concern of beliefs that occupies the present study.

Many studies on text-messages, with reference to Nigeria, have largely examined the linguistic features of the messages (Awonusi, 2004; Chiluwa 2007; and Mgbemena 2007). Some others, in particular, Taiwo (2008) and Faley (2008) treat SMS texts as exhibiting a variation of English. Chiluwa (2008b) studies how Pentecostal Christians in Nigeria construct values and sentiments with the linguistic resources engaged in text messaging. One common trend in the studies (with the possible exception of Chiluwa 2008b) is their tilt towards pedagogy. Each of them has considered the samples studied as having some pedagogical implications, especially as it relates to the correct learning and use of English in the second language context. This focus separates the studies from the present one which concerns the pragmatic issue of beliefs.

Going by the space yet explored on text messaging, rare are the studies that have concentrated on the beliefs that background messaging between cell phone users in the global and local (Nigeria) contexts, and rarer are studies that have explored the beliefs of a group with respect to same. This chapter, therefore, charts a relatively new path by