"I Have Lost All Ability To Can":

Is Internet Really Ruining The English Language?

Oyedokun-Alli Wasiu Ademola[1] Ph.D

[1]Department of English and Literary Studies, Federal University, Oye –Ekiti, Nigeria

Correspondence: Oyedokun-Alli Wasiu Ademola, Ph. D, Department of English and Literary Studies, Federal University, Oye –Ekiti, Nigeria

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Abstract

Language is an important instrument through which members of a given community express their thoughts, feelings and emotions; it is one of the most fundamental means of human communication and a primary object of the study of linguistics. It is perhaps no more than trite to suggest that the internet has become a fact of social life globally. However, proving this fact needs an ordered frame of reference. Internet linguistics is yet another domain of linguistics advocated by the English linguist, David Crystal. It studies "new language styles and forms that have arisen under the influence of the Internet and other New Media, such as Short Message Service (SMS) text messaging", (Wikipedia). There have arisen great disputations on whether or not the use of the Internet is hindering language development. This paper examines these arguments in relation to students' proficiency in language use, generally. To what extent can one generalize the findings in other climes within the Nigerian context? Using both the Critical Discourse Analysis theory and Braddock communication model, the study examines "*sent*" and "*received*" SMS and e-mails from the sample population, with a view to determining the impact on the users' proficiency level in English language

Keywords: Language, Internet linguistics, Text messaging

1. Introduction

The single greatest technological revolution that occurred in Nigeria in the last fifteen years or so is the ubiquitous use of micro-chip – dependent technology such as computer, laser, the Internet, satellite, videophones etc, to advance the frontiers of global communication. According to Tindell and Bohlander (2012), research in the U.S suggests that college students frequently use the cell phone during class time despite rules against doing so. Johnson (2009) has also raised the suspicion that "widespread mistakes in writing are strongly connected to the Internet, where educators have similarly reported new kinds of spelling and grammar mistakes in students". Yet in another research, it is reported many college students perceive cell phones primarily as a leisure device, and most commonly use the cell phones for social networking, surfing the internet, watching videos and playing games (Lepp, Li and Berkeley 2015; Lepp, Berkeley, Sanders, Rebold and Gates, 2013). This perhaps leads to the assertion of Levine, Crate and Bowinian (2001) that if typically utilized for leisure rather than education, then cell phones may disrupt learning within academic settings. Hence, the compelling need to determine, in the Nigeria setting, whether or not, the use of the internet is ruining the English language, especially among the high frequency cell phone users. It is pertinent to distinguish between high frequency and low frequency cell phone users as they pertain also to high/low reading culture. It is also found that among heavy internet users information seeking was associated with better academic performance, while video game playing was associated with lower levels of academic performance, Chen and Peng (2008). This, in essence, suggests that a student's academic performance is a reflection of the type of use to which he puts his cell phone. It is the attention given to the use of language on the internet and other "New Media" that culminated in the study of Internet Linguistics.

2. Perspectives on Internet Linguistics

Internet Linguistics is a domain of linguistics advocated by and chiefly associated with the English linguist David Crystal. The main thrust of Internet Linguistic is the study of new language styles and forms that have arisen under the influence of the Internet and other New Media, such as Short Message Service (SMS) text messaging. According to Crystal (2005), the study of Internet Linguistics can be done through four main perspectives: sociolinguistics, education, stylistics and applied. He however raises a caveat; that in view of the increasing number of users connected to the internet, the linguistic future of the internet remains to be determined as new computer mediated technologies continue to emerge and people adapt their language to suit these new media. What, however, is not in doubt is that the Internet continues to play a significant role in both encouraging as well as drawing attention away from the usages of languages, Crystal (2005). It is pertinent to consider the four main perspectives of the study of Internet Linguistics. This is with a view to highlighting their significance in the understanding of language study.

2.1 Sociolinguistic Perspective

This perspective "deals with how society views the impact of Internet development on languages". The advent of the Internet has revolutionized communication in many ways: it changed the way people communicate and created new platforms with far reaching social impact. Significant avenues include but are not limited to SMS Text, Messaging, e-mail, chat groups, virtual worlds and the web, (Wikipedia). It should be noted that the evolution of these new mediums of communication "has raised much concern with regards to the way language is being used ". But, according to Crystal (2005), "these concerns are neither without grounds nor unseen in history- it surfaces almost always when new technological breakthrough influences language; as seen in the 15th century when printing was introduced, the 19th century when the telephone was invented and the 20th century when broadcasting began to penetrate our society'. Computer medicated communication (CMC) such as SMS Text Messaging and mobile e-mailing "has greatly enhanced instantaneous communication. According to Cohen (2008), in schools, it is now common for educators and students to share personalized school e-mail accounts for communication and interaction purposes. He stresses further:

> …classroom discussions are increasingly being brought onto the Internet in the form of discussion forums. For instance, at Nanyang Technological University, students engage in collaboratively learning at the university's portal – edveNTUre, where they participate in discussions on forums and online quizzes and view streaming podcasts prepared by their course instructors among others .iTunes U in 2008 began to collaborate with universities as they connected the Apple music service into a store that makes available academic lectures and scholastic materials for free-they have partnered more than 600 institutions in 18 countries including Oxford, Cambridge and Yale universities.

He concludes that these forms of academic social networking and media "are slated to rise as educators from all over the world continue to seek new ways to better engage students".

2.2 Educational Perspective

The educational perspective of internet linguistics examines the Internet's impact on formal language use, specifically on Standard English, which in turn affects language education, Crystal (2005). The rise and spread of Internet use has brought about new linguistic features specific only to the Internet Platform. These include, but are not limited to, an increase in the use of informal written language, inconsistency in written styles and stylistics and the use of new abbreviations in Internet chat and SMS text messaging, where constraints of technology on word count contributed to the rise of new abbreviation, *ScienceDaily* (2005).

In fact, Nazaryan and Aleksandra (2006) opine that such acronyms exist primarily for practical reasons- to communicate through these mediums apart from technological limitations. They cite the following examples:

lol _ (laughing out loud) a general expression of laughter.

Omg (Oh my God!) Exclamation

Gtg (got to go).

Haylett (2006) puts up a strong defence of the educational perspective and its impact on language use:

> The educational perspective has been considerably established in the research on the internet's impact on language education. It is an important and crucial aspect as it affects and involves the education of current and future student generations in the appropriate and timely use of informal language that arises from Internet usage. There are concerns with the growing infiltration of

> informal language use and incorrect word use into academic or formal situations such as the usage of casual words like "guy" or the of choice of the academic works as noted by educators with the use of abbreviations such as "u" for "you" and "2" for "to" being the most common.

In the same vein, it is argued that widespread mistakes in writing are connected to internet usage where educators "have similarly reported new kinds of spelling and grammar mistakes in student works". But, Abram (2011) has countered this by submitting that "there is … no scientific evidence to confirm the purposed connection".

There are however, valid concerns about internet usage and its impact on students' academic and formal writing, its severity is however enlarged by the informal nature of the new media platform". For example, Baron (2008) argues in *AlwaysOn* that student writings suffer little impact from the use of internet- mediated communication (IMC) such as internet, chat, SMS, text messaging and e-mails, Baron (2008).However, in a recent study published by the ***British Journal of Developmental Psychology***, it is found that students who regularly texted (sent messages via SMS using a mobile phone) displayed a wider range of vocabulary and this may lead to a positive impact on their reading development, BBC News (2009). Onishi (2008) also reveals that the cell phones have also created new literary genre- cell phone novels. A typical cell phone novel consists of several chapters "which readers download in short installments; he adds that such novels are in their "raw" forms as they do not go through editing processes like traditional novels. They are also written in short sentences, similar to text messaging, Onishi (2008). Authors of such novels are also able to receive feedbacks and new ideas from their readers through e-mails or online feedback channels. But, despite their popularity, such novels have been criticized for "lack of diverse vocabulary" and poor grammar, Galbraith (2010). Also worthy of mention in the educational perspective are blogging, virtual words, e-mails and instant messaging.

2.3 Applied Perspective

The Applied Perspective "views the linguistic exploitation of the internet in terms of its communicative capabilities, the good and the bad", *ScienceDaily* (2005) .The Internet is said to provide a platform where users can experience multilingualism. Thurlow (2001) opines that although English is still the dominant language used on the Internet, other languages are gradually increasing in their number of users. This, in essence, exposes the internet users to avalanche of educational and scientific materials. The Global Internet Usage page provides some information on the number of users of the internet by language, nationality and environment. This multilingual environment continues to increase in diversity as more language communities become connected to the internet.

The internet "is thus a platform, where minority and endangered languages can seek to revive their language use and/or create awareness", (Wikipedia). Also, according to *ScienceDaily* (2005) this can be seen in two instances where it provides opportunities for progress in two important regards – language documentation and language revitalization.

2.4 Stylistic Perspective

This perspective examines how internet and its related technologies "have encouraged new and different forms of creativity in language, especially in literature", Crystal (2005).It looks at the Internet as a medium through which new language phenomenon have arisen. There is a surge of interest to study the new mode of language because "it is an amalgam of both spoken and written languages". For example, traditional writing is static compared to the dynamic nature of the new language on the Internet "where words can appear in different colours and font sizes on the computer screen", Cook (2001).

Cook (2001) also mentions that this new mode of language also contains other elements not found in natural languages. He cites the example of the concept of framing found in e-mails and discussion forums. He contends that in replying to e-mails, people generally use the sender's e - mail message as a frame to write their own message. They therefore, can choose to respond to certain parts of an e-mail message while leaving other bits out. Also it is found that "in discussion forums one can start a new thread and anyone, regardless of the physical location, can respond to the idea or thought that was set down through the Internet. This is something that is not found in written language, Cook (2001). Crystal (2005) has suggested for future research new varieties of expressions that the Internet and its various technologies are constantly producing and their effects not only on written languages but also their spoken forms.

In Nigeria, the internet "bug" has proliferated every nook and cranny of her tertiary education. Recently, the country's Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) introduced Computer-Based Test (CBT) for admission seekers into Nigeria's tertiary institutions. This has made the use of computer compulsory, particularly among college students. In the same vein, Osun state government, south west Nigeria, has recently introduced free

electronic tablets called '*opon imo*` [knowledge slate] to enhance educational advancement through computer. This, perhaps, explains the submission of Ayoola (2013) that Nigerian mobile telephone subscription has exceeded 60 million. And, in the view of Taiwo (2012), cited in Ayoola (2013), SMS is used widely in Nigeria for identity formation, romance, business and several others socio-cultural purposes. He stresses further that the SMS is also put into "negative uses by Nigerians which includes perpetration of fraud, fueling of ethnic causes, and examination malpractice, among other mischievous uses."

3. Aims and Objectives of the Study

The focus of this study is on the use of English on micro-chip dependent technology, particularly computers, the internet and smart phones. The overall objective is to assess the impact of the use of the internet and SMS messaging on the language proficiency level among students of Federal University Oye-Ekiti, Nigeria.

3.1 Sources of Data

The data for this study were sourced from SMS text messaging and e-mails from fifty students across (the current) four Faculties of the university: agriculture, humanities and social science, science and engineering.

3.2 Data Collection Instruments

Each of the students was requested to send to a general pool two SMS text messages and /or e-mails **sent to** or **received from** fellow undergraduates

3.3 Sampling Procedure

The students and the text messages were chosen at random. However, in order to ensure that through examination of several sources were carried out before the final choice of the corpus materials, and to ensure adequacy of our sample population representing all shades of social, ethnic and religious stratifications, the following have also been taken into consideration:

(a) Defining the population

(b) Listing the population

(c) Obtaining adequate sample

(d) Selecting a representative sample

(e) Eliminating sampling errors; and

(f) Validating the randomization process

3.4 Testing Procedure

In all, one hundred SMS text messages and e-mails were examined. For analytical expediency, six frames were adopted for the study. These include:

(i) Punctuation

(ii) Spelling

(iii) Abbreviation

(iv) Acronyms and initialisms

(v) Letter / number homophones

(vi) Accent/stylization

3.5 Analytical Procedure

The Analytical procedure adopted for this study involves both the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Braddock communication model. Simply put, Critical Discourse Analysis is concerned with the relationships between language ideology and power, Fairclough (1992). This approach is heavily influenced by Halliday's Systemic Linguistics. According to McCarthy (1991), genres in CDA "are seen as social action occurring within particular social and historical context. Age, class, gender, and ethnic bias are important in CDA along with the social practices they reflect. The concept of Discourse Analysis sees language "as performing some vital functions relevant to the general understanding of a linguistic structure, Ogunsiji and Olanrewaju (2010). This position is strengthened by Johnstone (2008) who argues that "Critical Discourses Analysis is a form of discourse and ideological (a set of beliefs, attitudes and behavior that constitute a perspective on **fine** world". He emphasizes the **impatience** of studying text in their full social and historical context. There are three levels of discourse context: macro, meso and micro. At the meso level,

analysis focuses on the context of production and reception of the text; who was it written by? What perspective might this person want to promote? What kind of person might read this text? At the Macro level, the analysis of the text assesses the relationship between the text and broader social processes and ideologies, for example, what social issues are of particular importance of time the texts were created?

The Braddock Theory of Communication is an extension of Professor Harold Lasswell Model of Communication, Oyedokun-Alli (2004). The main thrust of Braddock Communication Model hinges on the following:

(i) who (ii)says what? (iii) through which medium (iv) to who? (v) under what circumstance? (vi) for what purpose?, and (vii) with what effect? The essence is to situate the analysis of the corpus materials within a proper communication theory/ model.

4. Data Presentation

1) Punctuation

Punctuations are used in writing to mark off the different parts of a text as a pause is used in spoken language. But in the sampled texts from our respondents, this is done most haphazardly. Only about 30% of our respondents put appropriate punctuation marks.

2) Spelling

i.	*Pwetty*	pretty
ii.	*Naija*	Nigeria
iii.	*Luv*	Love
iv.	*Lik*	Like
v.	*Tnk*	Thank
vi.	*Cr8*	Create
vii.	*Fyn*	Fine
viii.	*Wat*	What
ix.	*2mao*	Tomorrow
x.	*Lag*	Lagos
xi.	*Dis*	This
xii.	*Av*	Have
xiii.	*Dat*	That
xiv.	*Nite*	Night
xv.	*Yrs*	Yours
xvi.	*Bt*	But
xvii.	*Wlcm*	Welcome
xviii.	*Wen*	When
xix.	*Cos*	Because
xx.	*Den*	Then
xxi.	*Biz*	Business
xxii.	*Ar/A*	Are
xxiii.	*Wld*	World
xxiv.	*Shld*	Should
xxv.	*Evr1*	Everyone
xxvi.	*Evrtn*	Everything
xxvii.	*n/nd*	And
xxviii.	*gud*	Good

xxix.	*2ru*	Through
xxx.	*frnd*	Friend
xxxi.	*4rm*	Form
xxxii.	*2geda*	Together
xxxiii.	*A /ar*	Are
xxxiv.	*Abt*	About
xxxv.	*Lappy*	Laptop

3) Abbreviation/ Shortening

i.	*fwd*	forward
ii.	*b4*	Before
iii.	*1day*	one day
iv.	*Congrat*	Congratulations
v.	*Pix*	picture
vi.	*Lik*	like
vii.	*Luv*	love

4) Acronyms/ Initialisms

i.	SMS	short message service
ii.	lol	laugh out loud
iii.	I L U	I love you
iv.	Omg	oh my God
v.	HBD	happy Birthday
vi.	HNM	Happy new month
vii.	NNY	happy new year
viii.	Uwc	you are welcome
ix.	LLnP	long life and prosperity
x.	IJN	in Jesus' name

5) Letter/Number homophones

i.	*Me 2 u*	me to you
ii.	*Gr8*	great
iii.	*3ice*	thrice (three times)
iv.	*Dis 4 u*	this (is) for you
v.	*Cr8*	create
vi.	*2geda –*	together
vii.	*2mao*	tomorrow.
viii.	1ness	oneness

6) Accent stylization

i.	*ain't going nowia-*	I am not going anywhere
ii	*love you like kilode-*	love you so very much
iii.	*bon voyage-*	safe journey
iv	*pwetty babe-*	pretty lady
v	*like seriously-*	so much indeed

vi   *I dey kampe-*   I am ok/ I am hale and hearty

4.1 Analysis, Findings and Discussions

4.1.1 Punctuation

The general trend observable in the corpus materials is non-conformity with rules of punctuation marks. Comas are visible only when marking-off an item is necessary. Full stops are omitted extensively due to economy of space and word count. Interjections are used mostly to emphasize a point. Examples: Oh!, My God! Dashes, brackets and colons are rarely used. Question marks also come handy only when emphasis is on a particular question.

4.1.2 Spelling

The most outlandish aspect of language use on the internet is the spelling format. As a deliberate ruse, there have appeared new spellings, corrupting the Standard English usage. Examples drawn from our data are "pwetty" for "pretty", naija" for "Nigeria" "cos" for "because", "msg" message", "2mao" for "tomorrow", etc. It is also observed that there is a "carry-over effect" of the spelling forms used on the Internet and SMS messaging on the academic writings of our respondents. In a marriage toast write – up, many of the students write "luv" (instead of love); 2geda/ 2gether (instead of together'). The idiosyncratic effect comes to fore mostly among first year students.

4.1.3 Abbreviations

Normally, abbreviations are allowed especially in informal writings. But, in this study, it is found that "new", corrupted forms of abbreviations hold sway. Examples found in the study include, but not limited to:

'*wld*" for "would"

"*cld*" for "could"

"*abt*" for   "in about"

"*fwd*" for "forward"

"*lappy*" for " laptop"

"*frnd*" for "friend"

4.1.4 Acronyms /Initialism

This phenomenon has been found to be a novelty created in language use on the internet and SMS messaging. The following form a veritable part of acronyms/initialisms in our data

Lol- laughing out loud

Omg-oh! My God

I o u -   I love you

Me 2 u   me to you

Uwlcm   you are welcome

Jst 4 u   just for you

HBD   happy birth day

I J N   In Jesus' name

4.1.5 Letter/Number Homophones

Ostensibly due to exigencies of time and space, letter/number homophones preponderates the use of language on the Internet and SMS messaging. Examples from our data:

c u 2   see you too

2 go   to go

Luv 4 real   love for real

Gr8   great

2geda/ 2gether   together

9ite   night.

9ja   Naija (Nigeria)

4.1.6 Accent/ Stylization

Stylistically speaking, certain words / coinages have created new species of expression in language use on the internet sms messaging. It is to be pointed out that unless such usages are understood by the linguistic participants, there will be communication breakdown. Such words include:

i.	Pwetty	pretty
ii.	Wen	when
iii.	Cos	because
iv.	Wlcm	welcome
v.	Av	have
vi.	9ite	night
vii.	9ice	nice
viii.	2day	today.

5. Conclusion

This work on the linguistic analysis of use of language on the internet and SMS messaging among undergraduates of Federal University Oye – Ekiti has been able to identify "grey" areas in language use among new generations of undergraduates in the institution". From the array of materials examined in the course of data analysis, the study found that the use of the internet indeed has both negative and positive impacts on the use of English of the respondents. The methodology adopted was the elicitation of incorrect expressions from the essays submitted by the respondents. The inferences from the study are that (i) new coinages, corrupted spellings and grammars become noticeable in the writings of more than 65% of the respondents, (ii) indiscriminate use of abbreviations form a larger part of idiosyncrasies among the respondents, (iii) 78.5% of the respondents admits to having benefitted largely from constant use of the internet, especially in areas of spelling and grammar check. And this reflected in their submissions to the researcher. (iv) on the general scale of probability, determined after the overall assessment of the respondents' write-ups and interactions with them, it was found that not much damage is done to the Standard English of our respondents. This is particularly so given the array of vocabularies and educational materials available to the learner through the Internet. It is commonplace to use the Internet and Smart phones to aid teaching and learning. The weakest (in terms of level of proficiency of language use) among them were found to be grossly involved only in games and "pinging", without recourse to carrying out research on their educational pursuits. The resultant effect of wrong use of the internet is the "loss of touch" with the benefits accruable to those who put it in good use. It therefore becomes intuitively evident that there are two categories of internet users- social users and educational users. The latter being the more beneficiaries of positive impact of the internet on language proficiency.

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