RESPELLING IN SHORT MESSAGING SYSTEMS (SMS): PATTERNS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR ORAL ENGLISH PROFICIENCY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Interest in the use of Short Messaging Systems (SMS) has been growing steadily during the last decade. However, less attention is given to the influence of respelling on phonological proficiency of its users, hence the need for this study. The paper examines respelling patterns in randomly selected text messages from mobile phones of students through a questionnaire method. The texts were analyzed to identify the patterns of SMS respelling within Nigerian socio-cultural environment and to assess possible implications of these patterns on the oral proficiency skill of English speakers in a Second Language (L2) environment as Nigeria. Findings reveal that about 60% of educated Speakers of English in Nigeria do not recognize the vast difference that exists between the representation of digraphs such as "th" and "er" in SMS texts and their standard pronunciation forms. The work further discovers the negative impact of respondents' assumptions about homophones on

Resumen

El interés por el uso del servicio de mensajes cortos (SMS) ha crecido de forma progresiva en la última década. Sin embargo, no se ha prestado tanta atención a la influencia de la grafía en la competencia fonológica de sus usuarios, de aquí la necesidad de este estudio. El artículo analiza los patrones de grafía en mensajes de texto de teléfonos móviles de alumnos elegidos de forma aleatoria por medio de un cuestionario. Los textos se analizaron con el fin de identificar los patrones de grafía de SMS en el entorno socio-cultural de Nigeria y para valorar posibles implicaciones de estos patrones en la competencia oral de hablantes en un entorno de inglés como segunda lengua (L2) como es Nigeria. Nuestros resultados demuestran que alrededor de un 60% de hablantes de inglés cultos de Nigeria no reconocen la gran diferencia existente entre la representación de dígrafos como "th" y "er" en textos de SMS y sus formas de pronunciación estándar. El trabajo también concluye el impacto negativo de los supuestos de los encuestados sobre los homófonos en

pronunciation proficiency. The study concludes that Nigeria, as an example of English as a Second language environment does have a lot to benefit from SMS respelling pattern which is often sound-spelling compliant, if properly harnessed.

Key Words: Respelling, Short Messaging Systems, Oral English.

cuanto a su competencia en términos de pronunciación. El estudio determina que Nigeria, como ejemplo de un entorno de inglés como segunda lengua (L2) se beneficia en gran medida del patrón de grafía de SMS que a menudo coincide con su expresión oral, si se utiliza de forma correcta.

Palabras clave: grafía, sms, inglés oral.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The rapid dissemination of electronic communication devices such as the Short Messaging Systems (SMS) has triggered the emergence of new forms of written texts, indirectly patterning the spoken form and charting a new path for especially learners of English as a Second Language (L2). According to Crystal (2006), 'new' linguistic phenomena found on the Internet very often escape traditional linguistic notions and categories. One prominent form of such phenomena or writings, which may be impacting oral proficiency skills of learners of English especially in Nigeria is called **Pronunciation respelling** (emphasis mine). Gupta (2006) confirms that although spelling in English is strict, respelling can be deliberate as in "leets speak" for let us speak and that it gets a lot of publicity on the web. Respelling is a type of notation system used to convey the pronunciation of words, in a language which does not have a phonemic orthography (such as English). According to Posteguillo, Esteve and Gea-Valor (2007) "Respelling' is a term used in the orthographic literature to refer to non-standard spellings: for example, "txt" for *text*. In this pattern, there is a non-conventional use of alphabetical symbols which exhibit interesting and pedagogically relevant phenomena that could be contributory to already existing knowledge on English language studies and this is the whole essence of this study. Specifically, this study examines phono-graphemic phenomena in the text messages of some Nigerian University students capable of either improving or weakening their oral proficiency skills.

1.1 LITERATURE REVIEW

Generally, it appears that text messages do not have abundant linguistic literature, presumably due to the fact that text messages constitute a relatively recent communication medium. However, "a growing body of linguistic research" is beginning to emerge on language use in SMS (see Awonusi 2004, Chiluwa 2008, and Taiwo 2008). On the whole, SMS language is still the subject of a few linguistic studies notably in Nigeria, some of which have been mentioned earlier; and of fewer in phonology, which makes the present study pertinent.

SMS messages are characterized by massive but systematic deviations from the orthographic norm and tilt more towards what Posteguillo, Esteve and Gea-Valor (2007) refer to as pronunciation spellings. This paper focuses on messages via the Short Messaging Systems (SMS) and their impacts on pronunciation proficiency of particularly the Educated English users in Nigeria. This is required because several studies (Bamgbose 1995, Soneye 2007) have confirmed through empirical analyses, phonological variations that exist between Nigerian Spoken English (NSE) and Standard English accents and the need for Nigeria to standardize its form of spoken English to enhance intelligibility. Achieving this goal may be difficult in view of emerging respelling phenomena in SMS text messaging.

Features recurring in SMS texts have been emphasized, prominent among which is the extraordinary orthographic variability of lexical forms (Carrington 2005). This variability is also the result of an informal style of communication, which licenses many deviations from the orthographic simplification of repeated consonants through deletion or elision as in actual speech. Kim, Kim, Park, & Rice, (2007) also confirm the existence of these features in various forms of electronic discourse. The usual alphabetic system competes with a more "phonemic" type of writing (e.g. "U" for *you* and "rite" for *right*), as well as with traces of a "consonantal" spelling wherein vowels are deleted, as in "Pls." for *please* or "wdt" for *without*. Users take advantage of different phonetic spellings in order to create different types of verbal effects such as these in their messages. Written representations of the sounds and compressions are common phenomena in SMS language. Users may be thinking of utterances in their spoken forms, even though every other part of the text message may well be created within a written framework.

According to Grinter and Eldridge (2001:17) "if text messaging shares similar properties with e-mailing, we could expect these compressions to stabilize and become more widely known over a period of time." Indeed, some SMS spelling forms are already stabilizing as we shall discover in this study and

either infiltrating into or dictating the pattern of students' phonological transcription exercises in class. Grinter and Eldridge (2001) discuss features of text messages such as shortenings (i.e. missing end letters), contractions (i.e. missing middle letters), clippings (i.e. dropping final letter), letter/number homophones and accent stylizations which are common in SMS texts. English spelling however, is often based on etymological and morphological motivation rather than on simple sound-spelling correspondences (Carney 1994). There are respellings where a phonologically unlikely spelling attracts regularization to phonetic correspondence such as the words *night* "nite", *what* "wot" and *phone* "fone". Awonusi (2004) describes some pertinent features of SMS text messages in Nigeria, among which are the construction of an informal telegraphic style with features such as phonetic spelling and a unique spelling convention occasioned by the influence of the mass media, computing and Americanisms. Others are some general abbreviations occasioned by space, time and money constraints. Examples are in the spelling convention of the following words:

> To - 2
>
> For - 4
>
> At - @
>
> Before - be4, b4
>
> Tomorrow - 2morrow, 2mrw
>
> Today - 2day, 2dy
>
> Forever - 4ever, 4evr
>
> Forget - 4get, 4gt
>
> Tonight - 2night, 2nite

The present study digresses from the usual line of discourse in previous studies in two specific ways. First, this study seeks to examine the phonological features exhibited in text messages within Southern Nigeria (Yoruba ethnic group); rather than the pragmatic and syntactic orientations common in previous studies. Second, the work compares such text items with actual phonemic representations in English in order to ascertain whether respelling constitutes a plus or a minus to Oral English proficiency in Nigeria.

2.0 METHOD AND PROCEDURE OF DATA GATHERING

The spelling pattern of a total of 120 SMS messages (written in English) sent into personal "inboxes" of lecturers by students and colleagues in a Nigerian Southwestern University were observed. Twenty of these messages were selected (see Appendix A); from which a questionnaire comprising relevant test items (words) was generated (see Appendix B for the questionnaire). Most of those that sent or were recipients of such messages are of the Yoruba ethnic origin, thus some of the phenomena or findings cannot be generalized to Igbo or Hausa indigenes. These other groups of Nigerians may form corpus of future studies. The present study takes cognizance of features pertaining to phonological processes such as elision or deletion, phonemic spelling, weakening, and phonological interference in the messages. Twenty students were required to fill-in words with TH" digraph either at word initial, medial or final positions such as *the, with, that, they, this* and *thanks* as they appear in their inboxes. They were also required to write out the spellings of words which have "er" at either medial or final positions in the spaces provided in the questionnaire. This process was undertaken to validate earlier general observations found in text messages sent to lecturers. The students were afterward required to pronounce the words to test for various ways the voiced dental fricative / /, the voiceless dental fricatives /θ/ and the schwa /Ə/ are being articulated.

3.0 RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

The questions this study intends to examine are as follows;

a) What are common Nigerian English sound-spelling compliant patterns in SMS of educated Nigerians of Yoruba origin?

b) With the emergence of respelling, will Nigerians improve or worsen in their skill acquisition of the dental fricatives and the schwa sounds?

c) Does Nigeria have anything to benefit in terms of Oral English acquisition proficiency in view of these emerging phenomena in SMS respelling?

3.1   ANALYSIS OF DATA AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

S/N	Standard Spelling	Respelling	[126]ENSE phonemic representation	Standard phoneme	% of Standard phoneme recognition	
					SV	NV
1	**Th**rough	Thru/ tru	/t/	/ θ/	15	85
2	**Th**e	D	/d/	/ð/	10	90
3	wi**th**out	Widout/wdt	/d/	/ð/	25	75
4	wi**th**	Wit/ with	/t/	/ θ/	40	60
5	**Th**eir	Dia	/d/	/ð/	40	60
6	**Th**is	Dis	/d/	/ð/	40	60
7	**Th**at	Dat	/d/	/ð/	40	60
8	**Th**ose	Dose/those	/d/	/ð/	40	60
9	**Th**anks	Tanx	/t/	/ θ/	20	80
10	Mon**th**	Mnth/mnt	/t/	/ θ/	40	60
11	Ent**er**	Enta	/a/	/∂/	10	90
12	Nev**er**	Neva	/a/	/∂/	10	90
13	Lat**er**	Lata	/a/	/∂/	10	90
14	F**o**rev**er**	4eva	/a/	/∂/	10	90
15	Forw**ar**d	4wod/4wd	/ó/	/∂/	5	95
16	S**er**vice	Savis	/a/	/∂/	25	75
17	p**er**mit	Pamit	/a/	/∂/	20	80
18	ret**ur**n	Ritn	/ó/	/∂/	60	40
19	better	Beta	/a/	/∂/	20	80
20	begger	Bega	/∂/	/∂/	25	75

Table 1: Pattern of respelling for TH- and -ER digraphs in Nigerian English.

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[126] Educated Nigerian Spoken English
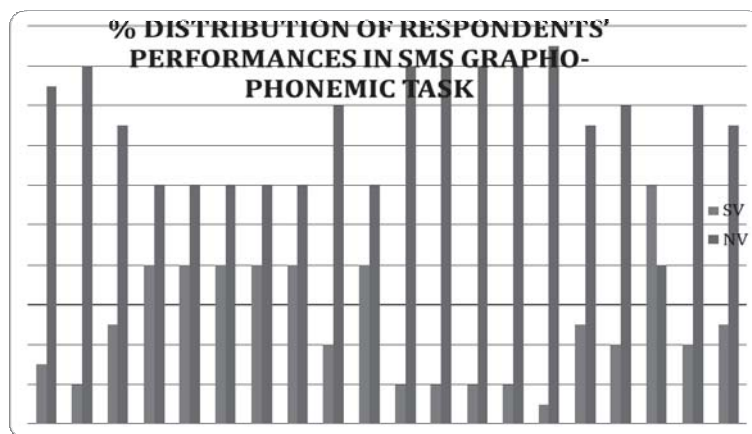
SV= Standard Variant

NV= Nigerian Variant

Fig. 1

3.2   DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

SMS texts, as used among Educated Speakers of English in Nigeria are capable of revealing definite structure or patterns in Nigerian Spoken English, especially the phonemes. One striking feature of SMS messages is respelling or pronunciation spelling, in which letters are used to denote phonetic symbols or represent speech (pronunciation). The graphemes used as letters are based on the phonetic similarity of the spoken words. According to Awonusi (2004: 52) these phonetic spellings in SMS messages sent by or to Nigerians betray some of Nigerian English pronunciation. Table 1 reveals some of these striking features which will be discussed in various sub sections below.

3.2.1.   SOUND-SPELLING CORRESPONDENCES AND ACCENT SIMULATION

A pattern that features consistently in the SMS texts of Educated Speakers of English in Nigeria is what can be referred to as accent simulation. Simulation, simply put is the development of an altered form of a word by association with another word wrongly taken to be its source. In table 1,

numbers 4 and 8 (*with* and *those* respectively) were constantly spelt the same way the words *wit* and *dose* are spelled. The definite article "the" is consistently and indeed perennially represented as "d" by 90% of the respondents. Appendix A has all the frequently abbreviated words and simulation. Findings from this study reveal among others the following:

a) the voiced dental fricative /ð/ orthographically represented with the TH digraph in word initial position of the words *the*, *them*, *that* and *there* is consistently written as the grapheme 'd' (see nos.2, 6 and 13 of appendix A for examples). These words are consequently pronounced as the voiced alveolar fricative /d/ instead of /ð/. This also is the case with the TH in medial position of the word *without* often written as *widout* or *wdt* (see nos. 3, 13 and 19 of Appendix A).

b) the voiceless dental fricative / θ/ often spelled as TH has also been reduced in spelling to "t" and often articulated as a voiceless alveolar fricative /t/ in word initial and final positions. Examples of such words are *through*, *thanks, worth, with and month* written as *tru* or *2tru, tanx or tanks, wit, wot* and *mont* respectively (see Appendix A, nos. 2, 4, 7, 15 and 18).

c) The schwa /∂/ which indicates that a syllable is unstressed in disyllabic or polysyllabic words has been reduced qualitatively to somewhat back full vowel /a/. Little wonder therefore that both the long and short schwa sounds are seldom found in the repertoire of even very educated Nigerians. Words like *later, better, sender, enter* and never belong to this category (see Appendix A, nos. 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 16 for details).

This phenomenon is corroborated by Chiluwa (2008:12) when he describes SMS as having "new linguistic forms, coinages and spelling innovations that are situationally distinctive and context sensitive". The same way it happens in Nigerian spoken English, where a native English speaker may have to depend on context to demarcate or recognize the word that is being referred to between *those* and *dose* or "wit" and *with*, so it is, even in SMS texts. It is important to note that only 40% of respondents were able to recognize that /θ/ and /ð/ are not synonymous with /t/ and /d/ respectively.

3.2.2 LETTER AND NUMBER HOMOPHONES

Another very important phenomenon in the SMS texts can be described as 'letter and number homophones'. This assumption has the capacity to influence

the pronunciation of speakers in words which are assumed to be homophonous, but which in practice are not. In table 1, number 14, the word *forever* is always written as "4ever" or "4eva". The pronunciation of the word *four* is completely different from that of the initial syllable in *forever* which is *for*. While *four* is pronounced with a back vowel as in the word *ball*, *for* in *forever* is pronounced with a schwa. Even the /t/ in number two (2) /tu:/, which some use in representing the words *through and to* (Appendix A nos. 1, 8,10 and 12) does not have the same allophonic quality because the *t* in number two is released suddenly (plosion) due to the CV structure while the initial *t in through is* 'unreleased and occurs in a CCV structure.

As long as these phoneme-to-grapheme assumptions exist in the minds of Nigerian English speakers, their pronunciation cannot be near native or of maximum intelligibility particularly to native speakers and may cause ambiguity even among the non-native speakers.

4.0 CONCLUSION

These common features in SMS text messages in Nigeria are capable of impeding phonological proficiency if not highlighted and constantly discussed as done in this paper by drawing a contrast between what exists and what the ideal is. Also, with the emergence of respelling, Nigerians must demarcate between the various contexts of SMS messaging and actual speech. Results from this study reveal that appreciable percentage of educated speakers/users of English in Nigeria fail to recognize the vast difference that exists between the representation of "th" and "er" digraphs in SMS texts and that of standard pronunciations. Nigeria has a lot to benefit from these emerging phenomena in SMS respelling, which is often sound-spelling compliant in the following respect:

a) It makes the pronunciation pattern of Nigerian speakers of English clearer and codification of a pronouncing dictionary more realistic.

b) It amplifies the areas of weaknesses where attention is needed to enhance Oral English acquisition proficiency.

c) It creates an easy platform for a contrastive analytical teaching of phono-graphological features to learners of basic pronunciation.

d) Holistically, it draws attention of English users to the all-important feature of English as a language which has spellings that learners cannot depend on for pronunciation.

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APPENDIX A

A LIST OF TEXT MESSAGES WITH TH- AND -ER GRAPHEMES[127]

S/N	TEXT MESSAGES	STANDARD ENGLISH SPELLINGS
1.	Gd wil C U **2ru** dis chalengs sir.	God will see you **through** these challenges sir
2.	**Tanks** 4 ur intrest ma. Sm circumstances hav necessitated d postponement	**Thanks** for your interest Ma. Some circumstances have necessitated **the** postponement
3.	**Widt** dbt I shl arrive b4 2pm sir	**Without** doubt, I shall arrive before 2 P.M. sir.
4	I appreciate all U hv gone **tru** & I promise 2 stand by U still. **Wit** lots of Luv frm me	I appreciate all you have gone **through** and I promise to stand by you still. **With** lots of love from me.
5	Kd U pls come **lata** wt d mechanic?	Could you please come **later with the** Mechanic?
6	Dis **mont** wil not be convenient 4 d meetg sir	**This month** will not be convenient for **the** meeting sir
7.	**Thks** for everything. We shl talk lata tnait. 4eva urs.	**Thanks** for everything. We shall talk later tonight. Forever yours.
8	**Dose** dt hav not arrivd 4 d **savis** hd beta remain in dia halls. We shl 4wd d notice 2 dem later.	**Those that** have not arrived for **the service** had **better** remain in **their** halls. We shall forward **the** notice to **them** later.
9	Pls **enta** tru d back gate or the one near d kiosk of d bega. D frnt gate wil nt be opn 2 studnts til 1.00p.m	Please **enter** through the back gate or the one near the beggar. The front gate wil not be open to students till 1.00 P.M.
10	**Neva** giv ur notebk 2 him again. I wil **pamit** him to photocopy **d** pgs he left out in klas & 4eva kp my distans frm hm.	**Never** give your notebook to him again. I will **permit** him to photocopy **the** pages he left out in class and forever keep my distance from him.
11	Bye 4 now & C U **lata.**	Bye for now and see you **later.**
12	**Enta** d bus goin 2 Surulere nia d bridge. Refuse 2 be dauntd. Rememba our moto 4wod eva bkwod **neva.**	**Enter** the bus going to Surulere near the bridge. Refuse to be daunted. Remember our motto forward ever backward **never.**
13	**Widout** U by me, dia **treats** wil bkm reality.	**Without** you by me **their threats** will become reality.
14	Mama is getin **beta** and **beta** daily. I praise God	Mama is getting **better** and **better** daily. I praise God
15	**Tanx** 4 ur e4ts. I shl nt 4get dis luv U hv shone 2 me	**Thanks** for your efforts. I shall not forget this love you have shown to me.
16	I ritn 2 **senda**. I'm in no mood 4 kosli jks.	I return to **sender**. I am in no mood for costly jokes.

[127] The significant words and text forms are highlighted in both columns (emboldened by the author).

17	**Tink** 2wice b4 U reply, a bega as U know has no choice.	**Think** twice before you reply, a beggar as you know has no choice.
18	4give me sir. I know I'm nt **wot** dis concesion.	Forgive me sir. I know I am not **worth** this concession.
19	U wil nt be allowed in **wdt** ur passport sir.	You will not be allowed in **without** your passport sir
20	**Dose** dt wounded ur **driva** hav run away.	**Those** that wounded your **driver** have run away.

APPENDIX B

QUESTIONNAIRE

Please look into your inbox and write in the space provided each of the following words (in the column titled "respelling") the usual way such words are spelt by those communicating with you through SMS. Also indicate if the spellings of the letters in bold prints are representative of the 'correct' pronunciation.

S/N	Standard Spelling (structural words)	Respelling	Is the spelling the same with pronunciation of the word?
1	**Th**rough		
2	**Th**e		
3	wi**th**out		
4	Wi**th**		
5	**Th**eir		
6	**Th**is		
7	**Th**at		
8	**Th**ose		
9	**Th**anks		
10	Mon**th**		
11	Ent**er**		
12	Nev**er**		
13	Lat**er**		
14	Forev**er**		
15	F**or**ward		
16	S**er**vice		
17	p**er**mit		
18	ret**urn**		
19	bett**er**		
20	begg**ar**		