The Sociolinguistics of Persian SMS: Ways to Identify Age Limits

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Abstract

A kind of social system which eases communication is language. Any form of language is very important for different types of communication: interpersonal and inter-group. A form of this social system is short messaging system (SMS) or texting which has been used increasingly since 1990's. Text messaging, as a language style, is used in everyday life to maintain social networks, to regulate events and to help entertain oneself in the open moments of one's day. This paper thus examines the SMS style of language communication between two groups of young and middle-aged people. Thirty messages are taken randomly from 10 cell phones (five from each group). Then we analyze the effects of the writers' characteristic (age) on message length (number of words), dialogue structure (with or without an opening and a closing), and message function (informative vs. relational) to investigate variations among these two age groups. The paper concludes that a significant difference is found between young and middle-aged texters' linguistic properties.

Key words: Persian SMS; Text messaging; Sociolinguistics; Lexicology; Morphology

INTRODUCTION

Text-based communications in many forms are frequent in the lives of most people today. One of the largest growth areas in this kind of communication is SMS. SMS stands for short message service. It is also referred to as texting, sending text messages or text messaging (http://cellphones.about.com). Short messages can be sent from one cellphone to another cellphone or from the internet network to another cell phone through this service. Nowadays, it is pervasively used around the world especially among the youth: A recent study revealed that 36% of young adults sent text messages on a daily basis, while 29% sent instant messages (Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith, & Rankin Macgill, 2008).

This style became prominent in Iran during the introduction and advent of the mobile phones. The cell phone system was launched for the first time in Iran in 1994 by the establishment of network containing 9200 cell phone numbers. With respect to the needs of the society and the request of the people, in coordination with the world-wide society, telecommunication industry of the country has decided to expand the mobile network and has taken important precious steps towards this goal. By the end of the year 1383 (2004, March 20th), the number of the subscribers grew up to 3,450,000 subscribers; the number of subscribers is more than 57 million today (http://www.mci.ir). There is a developing revolution in Iranians' communication with the spread of SMS (one of the offspring of the cell phone system) especially among the younger generation. It was first introduced in Iran in 2002 and now seems to have taken the place of instant messaging 'chats' on the internet or emailing for many young people. According to Jadid Online (2009), overall, nine million messages are reported being sent a day from Iran's 15.5 million mobile phones, reaching a peak of 118 million messages on the Persian New Year's Day, replacing old-fashioned greeting cards.

The SMS style of communication is used for different communication purposes such as exchanging information on events; invitation to religious, social, political, or academic meetings; making business contact and sending goodwill messages (Taiwo, 2009). In Iran, like anywhere else, it has advanced to the stage of being used for advertising, providing information services, and also transmitting images and sound. In addition, the medium fits well with the love for poetry shown in traditional Persian culture, as well as jokes and anecdotes. So it can be considered as a kind of phatic technology because according to Rihll, Tucker and Wang (2011) "a phatic technology is a technology that serves to establish, develop and maintain human relationships" and fulfills social purposes.

Our communications options are becoming difficult with various options become available. But some of the important characteristics of SMS messages which make it common among teens and useful for other groups are: cheapness, speed of delivery and directness of communication from one person to another. Plester and Wood (2009) report that in 2007, Americans sent more text messages than made mobile telephone calls. They also pointed that texting has developed its own linguistic characteristics.

The language used in text messaging has developed its own unique style as have email and chat-room languages. Several linguists have argued that texted English is in fact distinct from standard English and may stand on its own as a separate language (Ling & Baron, 2007; Randall, 2002). It tends to create a novice language perhaps because of the technical restrictions of text messaging including limited space. As Doring believes SMS communication allows for the use of syntactic and lexical short forms, abbreviations and acronyms, which save character space and shows group affiliation and group identity, whereby they require a special shared knowledge to be able to understand and use the language (Doring, 2002).

The way in which SMS communication fits into the broader issues of communication and concerns about the way that standard varieties and conventional linguistic and communicative norms are affected (Thurlow, 2003) have come under different sociolinguistic studies. For example, researchers from the Pew Internet and American Life Project (2010b) report that most teens use their mobile phones to text more than they use them to talk. They also estimate that half of all teens use text messaging on a daily basis, sending more than 50 text messages per day, with some sending over 3000 texts per month. As another example we can point to a number of language and gender studies in recent years which show the difference between males and females in linguistic choices (Ellis, 2001; Gray, 2007; Montgomery, 2000; Yule, 2007 as cited in Rafi, 2010).

Sociolinguistic is a branch of both linguistics and sociology which investigates the connections between language and society and the way we use it in various social contexts. It can show us the difference between men and women speeches and describe the age, sex, and social class of the speaker. For example, researchers show that some of the speech characteristics vary at different ages including among them pitch, vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar. They examined use of slang language as an area of vocabulary which can designate age. Actually it is a feature of young people's speech. Also, if we look at the patterns of linguistic change, it becomes clear that adolescents use higher frequencies of vernacular forms (Holemes, 2008).

The popularity of text messaging has encouraged interesting discussions among sociolinguists. There have been many researches in the literature on the various factors influencing texting but Persian SMS text analysis in the domain of language and age is open to investigate. The present study investigates quantity, structure and function indexes of two groups of young and middle-aged people, the influence of age, on SMS language. Including in this analysis are factors such as differences in abbreviations, symbols, punctuations, etc. It looks into a) What are the characteristics of text messages with regard to length? b) Whether or not SMS language follows normal structure (the presence or absence of a salutation as a message opening and the presence or absence of leave-taking as a message closing)? c) What are the functions of messages?

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

In this research, the researcher has decided to work on the linguistic aspects of 30 Persian SMSes taken from 10 people selected randomly (three SMSes from each of them of their choice) at two different age ranges: 25-40 years (n=5) with the average age of 32.5 and 45-65 years (n=5) with the average age of 55. As this study aims to relate these linguistic features to the social side of SMS communication in the domain of age, it can be considered as a sociolinguistic study.

At this point of the study and with regard to the first research question, we first try to have a look at the findings of other studies and then to the evidence of the present study. The results of the previous researches show that while there are an enormous number of SMS messages being sent and received on a daily basis, there are clearly some groups who are more prolific. Data from those studies show that it is women and teens/young adults who are the most enthusiastic users of SMS. When considering the frequency of use, more than 85% of teens and young adults report sending SMS messages on a daily basis use. By contrast only 2.5% of those over 67 reported using SMS with this frequency (Ling, 2005). Another research from America reveals that those between 25-34 years of old send and receive 42 messages on average per day while those over 65 years of old send and receive just five messages on a daily basis.

The maximum length of an SMS message can be 160 characters. Does age play an important role on the length of the messages? And if so, does familiarity with SMS messaging have an effect? Or what are the differences between boys and girls? The earliest research in this regard was accomplished on English, Norwegian, Swedish and German adolescents and young adults between the ages of 13 and 27. Several methods were used in the study and the findings differed according to the method used. Message length, in small groups of participants who were known to the researchers, varied between 65 and 133 characters and 14 and 22 words (Deumert and Masinyana, 2008; Döring et al., 2005). In the other part of this survey which was a phone survey performed with a large number of participants, message length was shorter: 29 letters and 6 words (Ling, 2005). For the 13-to 34-year-old age group, Ling (2005) pointed up that girls wrote longer messages than boys (30 and 20 letters, correspondingly).

For each original message, we calculated the number of words (defined as a letter string with a space on either side). The data showed that for the first age group (young adults) the average word length was 20.86. By contrast, for the second group (middle-aged people) this average was 21.66. Therefore we can conclude that middle-aged people tend to write longer SMS messages.

Now we turn to the second research question. When describing the traditional rules of oral interaction between two people, Goffman (1967) insisted upon the importance of greetings and leave-taking. These rituals are described as obligations which allow individuals to keep face (a positive social value) in a given situation. To define the interactive outline of written language, Herring (1996) offered a basic three-part structure in which the ''contentful message'' is preceded by an ''opening epistolary convention'' and followed by a ''closing epistolary convention''(Bernicot, J., Volkaert-Legrier, O., Goumi, A. & Bert-Erboul, A (2012). Openings and closings are addressed directly to the interlocutor; they are discursive markers indicating how the speaker situates him or herself with respect to the addressee. Do we find this same structure in SMS interactions: the opening (greeting one another), the message (saying what one has to say), and the closing (taking leave)?

Ling (2005) carried out a study in which just 10% of the considered messages contained an opening or a closing. Spagnolli and Gamberini (2007) used an attractive method of photographing the messages on the cell phone and their findings demonstrated that, in young adults, 13% of messages had an opening while 35% had a closing. In another research concentrated on teens the same results were observed. Actually, Laursen (2005) concluded in his study that the perfect chain of opening--message--closing was very hardly used by 14-year-old teens (even when taking into account interactions with a succession of 2 or 3 SMSes). Spilioti (2011) carried out a research in which Greek-language participants moved

the messages stored in their cell phones (and exchanged among themselves over a period of several weeks) into a laptop computer. This participants also handed over information about their use of SMS.Overall, 30% of the messages included a closing. The analysis showed that closings are more present in the following circumstances: as a sign of social distance between interlocutors, as a sign of disengagement from the daily frame of contact between close friends, and as a mark of politeness in ''unpleasant'' situations (such closings are employed in an attempt to mitigate the potentially face-threatening act of refusing a specific request). Furthermore, closings are rare in messages which initiate interaction (in only 15% of cases).

We can conclude that as opposed to what is normally noticed in conventional oral or written interactions, there are SMS exchanges without an opening and/or a closing. We can consider it as a special characteristic of SMSes as compared to other types of technically mediated communication. It should be noted that in electronic mail, even if they are not systematic, openings and closing are much more frequent. In this study, each message was broken down into three segments: the opening (O), the message itself (M), and the closing (C). Our aim was to examine and discover whether this three-step arrangement is observed by SMS users, that is, they greet each other (O), they say what they want to say (M), and they take leave (C). In interactions taking place via SMS, unlike traditional oral or written exchanges, there are messages with no opening, no closing, or neither of the two. Generally, structure O + M constituted 13.3%, structure M, 60%, structure M + C, 26.6%, and structure O + M + C, 0% in the first group while the corresponding amounts in the second group were 26.6%, 20%, 0%, and 53.3% respectively. As the findings illustrate, there is a significant difference between these two groups with regard to the third and fourth structures (M + C and O + M + C): the percentage of M + C in the first group is 26.6, by contrast the relevant amount in the second group is 0. And this relation for the fourth structure is quite in reverse, that is, the percentage of O + M + C in the first group is 0, while the corresponding amount in the second group is 53.3. This shows the tendency of the middle-aged group to follow the mandatory opening-message-closing structure of traditional oral and written exchanges mostly because of politeness and face serving functions of these rituals. On the other hand, high percentage of structure M indicates that young adults do not mind to observe conventional rules of interactions in order to demonstrate a close relationship and reduce social distance with their interlocutors.

As Thurlow and Brown (2003) noted for SMSes written in English, text messages have various functions that can be classified according to two orientations: informative-transactional and relational. In Iran SMS or short message service as a new communication resource functions in a wide variety of economic, social, political

and cultural domains. In all, SMSes can be divided according to two indexes: form index, and content index. Content index includes irony (satire and parody), literary, religious, political, social, and emotional and form index includes two kinds of writing: prose and poetry. So,a message contains both form and content indexes as well as one or more properties. For example, it can be humorous and also political.

General Manager of Public Relations informant believes that the content of the SMS messages contain the following topics:

1. Satirical and humorous; 2. Social; 3. Political; 4. Love (Emotional); 5. Advertising - Commercial; 6. Religious; 7. Moral; 9. Informative; 10. Literary; 11. Sport. Data collected through this research illustrates that there are five main categories of SMSes in this study namely literal, social, political, socio-political and emotional. Again we can see major differences between two groups with regard to these functions. The clearest distinctive features are with regard to literal, sociopolitical, social and emotional functions, that is, the first group had a quantity of 20% for literal, 13.3% for sociopolitical, 26.6% for social and 40% for emotional category. In contrast, for the second group this quantity was 46.6%, 26.6%, 6.6% and 13.3% respectively. Therefore, we can say that these four function types can distinguish these two age groups. Result with regard to the social function was not very distinguishing. All in all, function can have a differentiating role with regard to age boundaries.

CONCLUSION

Our study enabled us to show that the SMS writers' characteristic (age) played a role in the length, structure, and function of the text messages they wrote. Long messages were mainly produced by middle-aged group. Young adults generally wrote messages without an opening or a closing and produced few traditional messages with an opening-message-closing structure. We also noted that function can have a distinguishing function between these two age groups. Future data collection should be extended to include both younger adolescents (ages 11-12 and 13-14) and adults, as these two groups are more concerned and familiar with information age.

A next step could be to compare the distribution of various functions in SMS messages with the distribution observed for other types of technically mediated communication such as oral communication over the phone (land lines or cell phones), oral communication via video chatting, written communication via instant messaging, online help forums, and written communication on social networks (e.g., Facebook and Twitter).

In the long run, relating the functions of SMS messages to their linguistic characteristics (length and dialogical structure) is likely to be that which will provide the greatest amount of insight into the SMS register.

We only analyzed a limited portion of the Persian-language corpus containing 30 SMS messages from 10 informants (between the ages of 25-45 and 65-45). A future analysis will enable us to compare the characteristics of SMSes produced by adolescents with SMSes produced by adults. A comparison between the Persian language and other languages will require the completion of studies in different countries using the same methodologies.

Additional research is needed to further our knowledge of the SMS register, particularly studies that take the speaking turn sequence of the two writers into account, and ones that look at the relationship between the functions and linguistic forms of text messages. Our data bring out the complexity of the SMS register. They argue in favor of Crystal's (2001) idea of considering computer-mediated writing not as a register located somewhere between the oral and written registers, but as a register of its own that differs from traditional oral communication, traditional written communication, and sign language. Unlike these other three major registers, computer-mediated writing does not remain stable over time and currently, its extremely rapid rate of change poses a true challenge to researchers in this field.

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