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Behind the Text: A Socio-Stylistic Analysis of Chain Text Messages in Cameroon

INTRODUCTION

With the advent of new communication technologies, cultural exchange has been facilitated by mass communication especially with the coming of the internet. Communities have expanded and companies have built solid economic empires like Yahoo, Google, and Microsoft all of which are found in the United States of America. With the internet, through personal computers (PCs), laptops, ipods and mobile phones, education and the spread of information has covered a wider scope through distance learning although it is still very expensive for developing countries. In addition, on the Internet, websites have been created by many countries to showcase their cultures in the domain of tourism. In this massive spread of information, the importance of a small mobile and prestigious gadget—the mobile phone—cannot be minimised.⁴

The cell phone first found its way into Cameroon in 2002 following the liberalization of the national “Mobile phone sector”. The cell phone has caused the decline of landline use (what we call in our context the fixed phone which has a receiver and an ear piece) and communication has become easier and more instantaneous. This new gadget is now used all over the world even in remote areas like Foru-awa and Madigrin in the North West and North Regions of Cameroon respectively. Many Cameroonians regarded the ownership of a mobile phone as an indication of the economic strength of its users and how “connected” they were. About a decade ago, only the rich could own a mobile phone. Today, everyone can own one and they are not only affordable but also thought to be a necessity. Thurlow (2003 81) states that mobile phone ownership is universal, people use them constantly, and that if you do not have a mobile phone, you are effectively a “nobody.” Thus, Cameroonians go as far as sacrificing what is so dear to them to own one, irrespective of their economic status and the quality of the

⁴ We are grateful to Christopher Mayack for commenting on an earlier version of this paper.

mobile phone. Though viewed by many as misplaced priorities, this is how pervasive the mobile phone is today in the Cameroon society.

It has been observed that Cameroonians of the low-income group own more expensive and sophisticated mobile phones in comparison to those of the medium income group. Generally, they go in for the well-animated ones with multimedia options that are very expensive. However, the way these mobile phones are used is often undesirable and a call for concern. Students do not only use them to cheat in exams but also to distract their friends in the heart of lessons especially in our state universities. It was reported, before the prohibition of the use of mobile phones by students in secondary and high schools, students went as far as watching pornographic videos during lessons in school in some of the major cities such as Douala and Yaounde. The (mis)use of mobile phones in Cameroon has generated a lot of social instability and conflicts in homes which in few extreme cases has led to break-ups in relationships. There has also been an increase in the number of reported cases of assaults in taxis and homes among other mishaps. Nevertheless it remains a vital tool in the running of businesses, homes and other personal commitments. This, in part, accounts for the boom in the number of investors that we are witnessing in the field of telecommunication.

Call rates for cell phones are relatively cheaper today and this greatly contributed to the introduction of the SMS—short message service—(Kechawah 4), also known as text messaging or texting. Chain messages are text messages that carry a variety of themes and they circulate in a wave. They host emotionally manipulative stories and exploit superstition to threaten the recipient with bad luck (or even physical violence or death) if he or she “breaks the chain” and refuses to adhere to the conditions (see Thorlow). Typically, chain text messages are comparatively longer epigrams, jokes or word plays, seasonal greetings, and wishes which are passed on from texter to texter. In this paper, chain messages shall include messages that are received and (or) forwarded in waves even if the chain texter was not instructed to do so (for examples, see text 1 in the supplemental information).

Generally, text messaging is exploited more so with chain messages in developed countries than in developing ones. Cameroonians lack a good reading culture unlike most western societies, so the ability to read and write largely depends on the background of the reader. However, when language is influenced by a phenomenon, there is usually an unstoppable desire to provide answers to the questions and solutions to the problems that are brought about by the changes that usually accompany it. This work is not an

exception. The research investigation emanates from the fact that chain text messages conceal a lot of meaning beneath its characteristic of word play. Many texters do not take into account the ramifications of these chain messages when it comes to interpretation. In addition, most texters are not aware of the fact that etiquette exists when texting and that a lack of which would be considered as a form of disrespect. We therefore investigated the following questions regarding chain text messaging. What are the attitudes of Cameroonian texters towards chain text messages and what is the driving force behind their circulation? How is meaning conveyed in these chain text messages? What degree of ethics is observed by texters when they receive or forward these chain text messages.

METHOD

The conceptual model of virtual communities and general stylistics were used to ensure reliability and validity. Cameroonian texters, text when their network provider gives them free SMS texting services (usually during special occasions), where a good number of text messages are sent usually after 10 pm, therefore this time frame was used to generate the data found in this study.

The target population of the study consisted of Cameroonians who own mobile phones and use them regularly to send and receive text messages in English. The judgmental sampling and simple random techniques were used to ensure the validity and authenticity of the findings. Using these techniques, we sub divided the population into youths (between the ages of 17 and 24) and adults (above 25) from different walks of life. From these target populations, using a questionnaire and an interview, data were collected for analysis on chain text messages that were sent, forwarded, or received in English. From the general sample of one hundred and sixty (160) informants (80 from the North West Region and 80 from the Centre Region), sixteen (16), 10% of the informants participated in the interview. Of the 16 informants two respondents were randomly selected from each sub-region, two boys, two girls, two men, two women, making a total of eight (8) respondents from each region. A questionnaire was prepared and piloted before it was finally administered to the target population. The first section focused on the personal information of the informants (their sociolinguistic background), while the second asked questions about their attitudes towards texting in general and chain text messages in particular.

An in-depth interviewing technique was used to elicit information that gave a holistic understanding of the informant's point of view. In accordance with this technique, the informants were asked open-ended questions, which adopted two approaches: the informal conversation interview and a general interview. When the discussion was initiated, the respondents were allowed to speak freely as they reacted to the questions that were asked of them from a checklist. Each encounter took five (5) minutes on average. At the end of the entire exercise, we replayed the recordings of all the sixteen sessions and transcribed them orthographically for a qualitative analysis (for an example of the analysis see text 1 in supplemental information). A sample of these chain text messages are found below under their respective themes.

1. Friendship

Msg.1 — Do u know the relationship b/w ur 2 eyes? They blink 2gether, cry 2gether & sleep 2gether even though they never see each other. Friendship is just like this: Life is like hell without friends.

Msg.2 —If 2day was declared world's stealx day what will u steal from me? Reply pls and send this to many oda friends. U'll get lots of surprising answers. But answer me first.

2. Romance

Msg.1 — Shakespeare was a good writer but he never wrote a thing abt u bcos he didn't know u as much as I do.

Msg.2 — (I MISS U) (I MISS U) are 3 words that take 3 seconds to read, 3 minutes to think about, 3 hrs 2 understand, 3 days to demonstrate, 3 weeks to explain, & a whole life 2 prove!!!

3. Religion

Msg.1 — God created you without a SIM card, sustained you without credit, preserved you without charger, may you never go out of network and may your validity last 4 ever.

Msg.2 — Death mbanu! , failure no way, sickness tufiakwa, calamity, never! Sorrow lie lie!, weeping kojo!, poverty God forbid!, curses; thunder fire them. This is my prayer for you.

4. Inspirational

Msg.1 — Smiles are free gifts from heaven that go a long way to bring us lots of good things, strength, & friendship ties.

Msg.2 — The road 2 success is not as straight as u think. It has a curve called failure, a hole called confusion, speed breaks called friends & a red light called enemies.

5. Sex and Flirtation

Msg.1 — Have u ever done it before? Standing or sitting? On the floor or on the bed? With whom? Did u enjoy it? Did u do it today? I mean prayers.

Msg.2 — A boy asks his father what is POLITICS. "I will tell u in this way; I'm the breadwinner, call me capitalism, ur mum is the adm'stor of money, call her the gov't, we r to take care of ur needs, u are the p'ple, the nanny is e working class, baby e future. Now think if u can make sense from that." The boy goes to bed thnkx. Later that night, baby boy had soiled his diaper. He found mum asleep, not wanting to disturb her, he went to the nanny's room but the door was locked. He peeps through the key hole and found his dad on the nanny. He retired back to his bed. In the next mornx he says to his dad "I think I understand the concept of politics now." "Tell me in ur own words," "Well while capitalism is screwing e working class, the gov't is sound asleep, the p'ple are being ignored & the future is in deep shit."

6. Humour

Msg.1 — On behave of mango, popo, carot & banana wit gr8t sopot 4rm orange, apple, guava & pineapple, I wish u a fruitful week ahead, gd mornx.

Msg.2 — I bind every spirit of long silence in ur life. May u be given the spirit 2 text if u don't have the annointx 2 call. Receive the power to beep. Stay blessed.

RESULTS

Both male and female informants generated chain text messages. The reception of these chain text messages was greater in the Centre Region, 72.5% than in the North West Region, 27.5% and in general a larger proportion of individuals received more than five chain messages 62.75% against 37.25% who received less than five chain messages. In addition, across both regions youths received more chain text messages 65.8%, than adults who received 34.2%.

More women and men of the Centre region in the 25+ age group conceived chain text messages, 60.42% than those of the same age group in the North West region, 39.58%. Overall, of the general sample of one hundred and sixty people, 30% believed that the senders conceived the chain text messages they received in comparison to 70% who responded did not believe they did. This suggests that these informants were very critical in their chain text messaging exploits.

DISCUSSION

In general, the chain text messages contained some degree of cultural jargon, which was understood by all the texters because they all share a common cultural background. The language of some of the chain text messages was very informal and full of local colour. This language is characterised by the wide use of pidgin and borrowings from the Nigerian (Igbo) cultural background. For example:

— Death, mbanu! failure no way, sickness tufiakwa, calamity, never! Sorrow, lie lie!, weeping kojo!, poverty God forbid!, curses; thunder fire them. This is my prayer for you.

Norms of grammar, usage, and message structure tended towards informality, often relying on truncated sentence fragments. However, several chain text messages mimicked the formal structure of letters in their posts, excluding full salutations and closings. In addition, the tone of these chain text messages, overall, was unidirectional as opposed to the conversational.

Like regular text messages, chain text messages have features that do not follow all of the grammar rules. Some chain text messages had the subject deleted as in:

— Can't believe wat I heard abt u. I'm ashamed of u. I dnt kno how u wld rebuild ur lost reputation. Tell me it's not true. Is it really true that u bathe naked?

Here, the chain text message begins with the negative form of the modal “can,” “can't,” instead of the personal subject pronoun “I”. A grammatically correct sentence should have: “I can't believe...”

The quest to assert oneself in a group pushed chain texters into creating new chain text messages and letting them circulate. Here, originality has a pride of place as opposed to adapting chain text messages that were downloaded from the Internet and forwarded. Let us consider the following chain text messages:

— On behalf of mango, popo, carot & banana wit gr8t sopot 4rm orange, apple, guava & pineapple, I wish u a fruitful week ahead, gd mornx.
 — I don't like u bcos u talk too much. U cannot keep a secret. Why did u go round telx pple that Barack Obama is my uncle?
 — Have u ever done it before? Standing or sitting? On the floor or on the bed? With whom? Did u enjoy it? Did u do it today? I mean prayers.

— He watches ova u at nyt, slowly singx luv songs 2 ur ears & gently kissx ur skin. Believe it or not, mosquito is crazy abt u. Gudnyt.

Yet other chain text messages were generated from our sociolinguistic context by texters. They provide several interesting examples of the relationship between information emerging from the expertise of the texters and information already documented in existing sources:

—U're under arrest 4 making new friends wit'out telx me. 4 this reason; u're sentenced 2 be my friend 4 life.
— U are under arrest for ur constant night readx. U have to keep on for whatever u read shall be used against u in the G.C.E Board in the file of 2 papers.

They use the judicial procedure of reading a suspect their Miranda rights before being arrested: "You are under arrest for [...] You have the right to remain silent for whatever you say will be used as evidence against you in the court of law." Whatever the source of inspiration may be, the texters invented these text messages and let them circulate with an intention.

Perhaps because of their consistently strong focus on sensitive issues of the society, texters have a common over-arching intention to share information related to the concerns of individuals and groups of individuals. Let us consider the following chain text messages:

— Do not receive of any message or answer any call from this number: 76667700
— Read Psalms 51, 91 and Philippians 4:19. Jesus neva fails. Send it 2 20 pple & u wil receive gud news in 14 days pls let it leave ur hand within 96hrs.

Within this framework, some chain text messages reflected other more specific intentions by generating suspense, creating humour, expressing expertise, providing information, or criticizing government policies and certain social ills. These intentions are key features in the chain text messages below:

— An angel of God is moving and slappx pple and each blow is equivalent to 7,000 blessings. May he scatter ur jaws with 10,000 blows.
— They're makx contributns 2 pay a terrorist grp 2 terminate de Lions. Pay ur cntribtn by sendx 500frs of airtime to dis nmba: +23775644226
— May ur days be long as Paul Biya's speeches; ur blessings increase like fuel prices & ur enemies be confused as the Cameroonian gov't.
— May ur blessxs be as many as Abraham's descendants. May ur dream come true like that of Obama. Let ur enemies be shut with shoes like George Bush, may they be defeated like Mc Cain & may those who hate u become confused like Biya's gov't. May ur days be many like that of Metusela. Keep ur faith, follow de part of God & break through will be ur portion.

Most chain text messages did not make these intentions overt since they expressed public opinions and realities that are seemingly obvious. However, some of these chain text messages, which were all religious, made direct references to their intentions.

- Dis is our year of excellent manifestation. Pls blesx is calx u. Kindly read Psalms 51, 91, & Philippians 4:19. God bles u.
- God has seen ur struggle. He says it's ova. A blesx is comx ur way. If u believe in God, send to 12 pple. Pls don't ignore it. Bless u.
- Jesus never fails, He knows ur desires. He's lookx at ur tears . Send this 2 9 pple & 2morrow wil receive a miracle. Don't keep this msg; it works.

Such a scarcity of the intention made overt may be the result of the strength of the underlying shared intention of the group as a whole. That is, when all participants are in agreement about their goals, they do not feel that they need to state them directly, but can simply assume that their intentions will be accepted and understood by others within the group.

Reference was made to some service providers, especially to indirectly express dissatisfaction with inconsistencies in providing service. Let us consider the following chain text messages:

- God is not SONEL but He lights up ur life. He is not MTN but he provides u with a network which is always available “pray as u go” In fact God is ur best connection. May ur prayers this year never get into his voice mail, may it never be deleted, and may u never run out of prayer credit, Amen.

Here, the above chain text message refers to two big enterprises in Cameroon—AES SONEL and MTN—that provide electricity and telecommunication services respectively. From this religious chain text message, reference is abundant on the services of MTN but the messages they carry are not the same as the original one. “Pay as you go” has become “pray as you go.” The former slogan “MTN the better connection” has become “God is ur best connection.” Other examples include; prayers never getting into His voice mail, may these prayers “never be deleted” (“prayers” here replacing “calls” and “prayer credit,” “airtime”).

Reference to the Mobile Telecommunication Network has also been blended with that of a typical celebration of holy matrimony. The union here is not between the bride and the groom, but between mobile phone users. A shift has been made from the traditional “do you take [...] as you wedded

husband, and do you promise to live together with him according to God's commandments, [...] in sickness and in health, in good and in evil days until death separates you? If you do say yes I do." to:

— Do u promis 2 take me as ur bip mate, 2 bip & send call me backs in network probs & in low battery, in 90% discount & in 20% discount til lak of credit do us part? If u do, bip me now.

This virtual union between mobile phone users here is intriguing due to its insensitivity to gender. From every indication, the unions of this nature, couples of the same sex, either homosexuals or lesbians may exist. This does not create any problem at all in their virtual world, but in reality life unions are not welcomed, especially in our country where there is legalisation against homosexuality and lesbianism. The union between mobile phone users is interesting because it paints a picture of mutual understanding, tolerance, and acceptance. From every indication, polygamy will be accepted in this setting and there are a good number of examples including:

— I bind every spirit of long silence in ur life. May u be given the spirit 2 text if u don't have the annointx 2 call. Receive the power to beep. Stay blessed.
— God created you without a SIM card, sustained you without credit, preserve you without charger, may you never go out of network and may your validity last 4 ever.
— Dis is my prayer 4 u; let every evil against u have network problems, let every eye that monitors ur progress be out of network coverage in Jesus' name.

Other chain text messages used references from prominent and news making figures and events both in the national and the international news. Let us consider the following chain text message.

— My prayer for you: may your dreams come true like that of Barack Obama. May God use his shoe to shut your enemies as was don 2 George Bush in Iraq. May you be firm in the Lord like Tsimi.

The chain text message above refers to President Barrack Obama's move into the White house, George Bush Junior's felony in the Middle East and Tsimi Evouna's firm determination to modernise the city of Yaounde, Cameroon.

Apart from the above instances, reference was also made to our tradition. We all are aware of the battle between our rich tradition and modernity. The texters merged these concepts in order to x-ray the encroaching hazard of modernity on tradition. Modernity here is expressed through fashion – the

mobile phone, “*okada*” (a borrowing from a Nigerian *lingua franca* which refers to a motor cycle) and “*pointinini*” (a jargon that names a design of a relatively expensive predominantly male pair of shoes with a sharp tip):

— traditn don spoil!!! U fit imagin say juju di climb okada. Juju dance with pointini move phone 4 e pocket giv nga say make e store yi numba.

This is not only humorous but also educative. Apart from the laughter that it generates, it also creates awareness on issues plaguing our tradition. It is strange that a masquerade in our modern times climbs on a bike, dances with a modern pair of shoes, and then worst of all gives his phone to a girl to store her number in. This is abominable, given that in the past the masquerade was thought of to be a strange creature that comes from the river or stream.

In conclusion, our stylistic analysis revealed that chain text messages, apart from being a source of humour, harbour a wide range of linguistic signals which culminate in conveying a message with meaning. These chain text messages have a good number of deviant forms both at the graphological and at the grammatical level. The lexical choices of the chain text authors are characterised by a wide use of nouns and verbs. Adjectives and adverbs are almost completely absent but the few that appear in the chain text messages are fore-grounded.

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