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The Impact of Texting/SMS Language on Academic Writing of Students- What do we need to panic about?

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ABSTRACT

The growing concern about the profuse use of texting endangering the standard forms in language prompted the present research to determine the presence or absence of SMS features in the academic writing of the participants. Triangulation was used for data collection i.e. questionnaires for learners and educators and samples of the learners' English written work were examined for SMS features. Suppliance in Obligatory Context was used for data recording. Simple average and ratio were used for descriptive analysis of the data. Contrary to the expectation, there were no significant evidences of these features in the sample. It seems being proficient in standard forms, these learners are context conscious and can switch to the appropriate register or style when writing formally. Thus the present study has de mystified the popular belief about texting adversely affecting writing and thus destroying Standard English. Moreover, the evidences of one punctuation mark used in place of another indicate there can be other factors like carelessness or lack of knowledge of students and the lack of training, feedback or emphasis by educators or the system. So the matter of concern should be the general neglect of punctuation even out of the context of texting.

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Introduction

With the ever increasing use of text messaging among students, especially teenagers, there has been a growing concern among educators, parents, researchers and general public that this practice is damaging the use of language in speaking and writing and will affect the standard forms in the long run. The focus of this study is to find out if there is an impact of SMS on the formal writing of university students as most of our exams, assignments, reports and assessments are based on written work of students, and if it exists, how strong this impact is on the spelling and punctuation the students use in such writing. This study has also tried to investigate whether SMS is to be blamed for poor spelling and punctuation habits of learners or there is a possibility of the involvement of other factors.

The following research questions were developed in line with the objectives of the study:

1. Is there any impact of SMS language on the spelling and punctuation habits of undergraduate students in formal writing?
2. Is the habit of frequent texting only to be blamed if there are evidences of features of SMS language in students' writing?

Literature Review

SMS language is a term for the abbreviations and rebus-like slang most commonly used due to the essential pithiness of mobile phone text messaging etiquette.

Context helps when interpreting SMS Language. The objective of SMS language is to use the least number of characters needed to convey an intelligible message as many telecommunication companies have an SMS character limit, allowing about 160 characters.

In the Hallidayan (1975) sense, the act of texting has both an interpersonal and textual function. Mobile phones are also fashion accessories themselves. According to Crystal (2008), the introduction of printing, telegraph, telephone, and broadcasting caused similar threats but the curiosity, suspicion, fear, uncertainty, opposition, charm, excitement and enthusiasm all at once that texting has aroused in such a short span of time is surpassed by no linguistic phenomenon. Crystal (2008) contends that numerous distinguishing features give novelty to written texts, but none of them is linguistically novel. Many of them were being used in chat room interactions much before the arrival of mobile phones. All communication is context bound and messages are sent between people who know each others' texting abbreviations and versions well. Texting involves immediate turn taking. So texters opt for abbreviated forms and omit punctuations and ignore capitalization which requires pressing extra keys and consumes more time and effort and costs the recipient extra patience in taking his/her turn and slows down the process of communication. According to Sutherland (2002), it would be possible to text the whole of Hamlet. It may be unpoetic but quick reading. Sociologically, texting consolidates sub-communities like those of homebound women. Ling, R. (2010) suggests that SMS is a life phase and not a cohort phenomenon. That is, its use is more concentrated among teens and more temperate among older age groups. British Broadcasting Company (March 4, 2003) reports that text messaging has long been blamed for declining standards of spelling and grammar, particularly in paper and pencil writing.

According to Thurlow (2001), much popular and public discourse attends to the perceived communicative scarcity of

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young people (Thurlow, 2001a) and both 'teen-talk' and 'netlingo' (or 'webspeak') are often blamed for negative impacts on standard or 'traditional' ways of communicating. Moreover there are other linguistic concerns (see Niedzielski and Preston, 1999; Cameron, 1995) about threats to standard varieties and conventional communication practices and young people and modern technologies are held responsible for these threats. Actually, students sometimes confuse the lines between formal English and the very informal SMS language. This is thought to be causing them to make a lot of spelling and grammatical errors in their assignments and tests, and makes it hard for teachers to distinguish what they are trying to say.

According to Mphahlele and Mashamaite (2005), SMS service has overcome the requirement in language versatility and it is being increasingly used in social communication, business transactions and even in advertisements. Technology plays an important role in communication today and SMS is popular especially among the young generation because it provides economy of money and time. Learners have a tendency to use it as an officially accepted and standard language and thus make different errors from incorrect spelling to even ungrammatical sentence constructions. The English language educators are facing a great challenge due to this situation. The language of texting does not observe grammatical and syntactic rules. So it is neither formal nor standard. Words are spelled as they are spoken. As a result, educators penalize the learners for nonstandard spelling which causes loss to the students if this language is used in academic writing.

One of the major goals of a second language educator is to inculcate and enhance the language proficiency of learners. According to most language researchers, including the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) (1992), language proficiency consists of the ability to listen, speak, read and write with comprehension, observing grammatical, syntactic as well as semantic rules governing that language. Mostly, the SMS language affects two aspects of learners' language proficiency i.e. skills to express oneself eloquently through writing and skills and ability to use words appropriately in context. Texters tend to write the spelling of some words as they are spoken and omit punctuation and overuse it in their tests, assignments and reports which sometimes hampers comprehension of the sense they want to convey. They are thus unable to differentiate the context and situation for the use of SMS language. They don't only mix these with Standard English but are blamed to consider them as correct since they are surrounded by this language in the form of text messages, television, billboards, comics, books, newspapers and sometimes circulars from their institutions. At the same time, texting has been considered as a sign of creativity and proficiency by some researchers. Thurlow (2011) calls young people's use of their mobile phones as a 'novel, creative' way of improving close relationships and existing social circles and claims that 'popular discourses about the linguistic uniqueness and incomprehensibility of this particular technologically-mediated discourse appear greatly exaggerated'. Keeping to the sociolinguistic 'maxims' of (a) brevity and speed, (b) paralinguistic restitution and (c) phonological approximation, young people's messages are linguistically unremarkable and communicatively adept.' According to research done by Dr. Nanagh Kemp of University of Tasmania, the evolution of 'textese' is essentially associated with a strong grasp of grammar and phonetics.

Baron (2008) contends that the use of SMS language manifests creative use of letters, punctuation and numbers and it increases phonetic awareness in children. It is also observed that different people have their own unique texting styles. Moreover, different messages use different patterns and styles due to their communicative function. Some are relational and some, informational which requires a change in register. Recipients usually recognize the 'visual signature' (cf. Jaffe, 2002:509) of incoming messages based on cues such as abbreviations and emoticons or/ and message length, in addition to common discursive style markers like topic and lexicon.

Thurlow (2011) opines that on the one hand, the orthographic or typographic choices made by young people in their messages are sociolinguistically and communicatively intelligible. At the same time, text-messages are not without character or interest. According to Thurlow (2011), pragmatics proposes that form and function are mutually dependent and text-messages have a distinctive (not unique) generic feel due to the combination of:

- (a) their comparatively short length;
- (b) the relative concentration of non-standard typographic markers; and
- (c) their regularly 'small-talk' content and solidary orientation all at the same time.

According to Coupland (2000), young text-messengers maneuver conventional discursive practices with linguistic creativity and communicative competence in order to be intimate and social. Therefore, earlier concerns about the impact of SMS language appear exaggerated. Its graphic uniqueness is not a new phenomenon and its use is not limited to the young. There is evidence that it helps rather than hinders literacy. And only a very small part of it uses a distinct orthography. A trillion text messages seem a lot, but in comparison to the multi-trillion instances of standard orthography in everyday life, they are a negligible proportion of the language in use. According to Crystal (2008), texting has added a new dimension to language use, but its long-term impact is negligible. It is not a disaster and it will not harm the standards of language. At a personal level Text Messaging has greatly improved instant communication. According to Crystal (2008), even in text messages, only less than 10 percent of words are abbreviated. Crystal (2008) opines that all the popular beliefs about texting, i.e. texting as a twenty first century phenomenon, having a distinctive graphic style, full of abbreviations and deviant spelling and uses of language, used by the youth who do not care about standards, causing a decline in literacy and harming language as a whole, 'are wrong, or at least debatable'. Baron (2008) argues that students' writings suffer little impact from SMS texting. She refers to a recent study published by the British Journal of Developmental Psychology that found that regularly texting students displayed a wider range of vocabulary and this may lead to a positive impact on their reading development. According to Baron (2008), as soon as children can distinguish between formal and informal language, SMS language does not affect their literacy.

Thurlow (2006) claims that the growing body of scholarly research deals with two types of public observations: 'first the general influence of texting on the standard languages and on popular notions of good communication; second, concerns about the specific influence of text messaging language on conventional literacy'. These metalinguistic issues are addressed by researchers working in different languages. (e.g. in German: Androutsopoulos and Schmidt 2002; Durscheid 2002; in French:

Anis 2007; in Nigerian English: Chilwa 2008). While a few scholars insist that texting has a negative influence on standard writing, spelling and grammar (Siraj and Ullah 2007), most experimental studies maintain that texting does not pose a threat to Standard English learning and teaching. These scholars point out that despite diffusing texting style into 'formal' writing occasionally (e.g., school work), senders of text messages almost always recognize that language is context specific (Durscheid 2002; Chi luwa 2008), though they do not necessarily view computer-mediated communication as 'writing' (Lenhart, et al. 2008).

Androutsopoulos and Schmidt (2002) propose that the loosening of perspective norms for texting may be made understandable. They note the following features and their implications: (1) 'Orthographic negligence reflects the reduction of cognitive resources allocated to spelling; (2) transgression of orthography implies deliberate discrepancies; (3) neography is an alternative orthography' (p.95). Other research (Shortis 2007 a) suggests that the linguistic creativity of texting poses little threat to standard spelling. Some of the research on the issue of standard illiteracies from Plester and her colleagues shows a positive relation between texting and literacy (Plester, et al.2009 b, Plester, et al.2008; Plester, et al.2009 a). One instant messaging study also suggests that new media language does not interfere with standard literacy (Taglamonte and Denis 2008). Plester's research confirms that young people as well as older texters are inherently aware of main pragmatic factors such as context, relationship and communicative purpose which is in line with the findings of Durscheid (2002) and Chi luwa (2008). According to Thurlow (2007), very few of text messages are systematically 'unrecoverable', even when read out of their original, discursive context and even to outsiders. Thurlow (2011) opines that what texters type in their messages would not be mostly very different from a note scribbled on the fridge door, the dining-room table or next to the telephone-where the same brevity and speed would be required. Like the fridge-door note-maker, texters certainly are aware of the need for intelligibility i.e. the Gricean maxims of quantity and manner (Grice 1975; cf also Lenhart et al., 2008; Pletter, et al.2008; Tagg 2007b). An example of this is the use of consonant clusters (e.g., THX), following the rule and metapragmatic awareness of consonants in English having more semantic value than vowels. Moreover, many of the non-conventional spellings found in texting are already prevalent and pre-date the mobile phone (Crystal, 2008; Shorts 2007a). The notion of standardness in written language is itself a convention and always an abstraction from spoken language (Cameron 1995; and Shorts 2007). In this sense, therefore, like the fridge-door note and the phonetic transcriptions of expert linguists, many of the typographic practices of texting offer more 'correct', more 'authentic' representations of speech. As Jaffe puts it: 'The use of non standard orthography is a powerful expressive resource.... graphically having some of the immediacy, the 'authenticity', and 'flavor' of the spoken word in all its diversity'.

Umberto Eco (2002) points out that we live in an age where the tiny, the concise and the simple are greatly appreciated in communication and texting has them all and like many earlier communication technologies, it evokes certain fears and hope. As Mey(2001:5) suggests, the field of pragmatics is interested in the process of using language and its procedures, not just its product, language, the everyday, meta pragmatic commentary about texting is definitely pragmatic since it mostly focuses on

the structures, forms and grammars of language, its supposedly distinctive lexical and typographic style, not the product and its function. As Sutherland (2002) puts it, human beings will use any medium to communicate and to make records and texting is just a medium to communicate. According to Thurlow (2002), even though many 'linguistic puritans' nowadays exaggerate the 'death' of punctuation, the use of question marks(?) and full stops(.) is persistently observed despite the extra effort and time it takes. Crystal (2006) opines that despite many texters' enjoying flouting linguistic rules, they also realize they should be understood. When messages are longer, containing more information, they use more of standard orthography.

According to Crystal (2008), creative potential of texting has been almost ignored. Research shows that texting does not eat into children's ability to read and write. It rather improves literacy. The latest studies (from a team at Coventry University) have found great positive relations between the use of text language and the skills required for success in Standard English in pre-teenage children. The more abbreviations in their messages, the higher were their scores on tests of reading and vocabulary. The children better at spelling and writing used the most textisms and the younger they received their first phone, the higher their scores which implies that they could not be good at texting if they had not already developed significant literacy awareness. Texting also helps children become more aware of rhyme. Texting can benefit weaker readers and spellers who would generally avoid books. Before one can write and play with abbreviated forms, one needs to have a sense of how the sounds of a language are associated with the letters of that language. One needs to have a knowhow of the possibility of alternative spellings. If one is aware that one's texting behavior is different, one must have an idea that there is such a thing as a standard. If one is using such abbreviations as lol and brb ("be right back"), one must have developed sensitivity to the communicative needs of one's SMS language. One needs to have a good visual memory and good motor skills.

The educational perspective of internet linguistics proposed by Crystal (2011) suggests that we need to know how to build on the strengths of SMS language and its creative potentials. Cell phones have a lot of expressive potential apart from their basic communicative functions. The world has seen texting poetry competitions and text novels as new evolving genres exploring the possibilities of word play within the 160 character constraint. Why can't we use it to improve students' proficiency in standard language? Just as internet and emails are being increasingly used in education and instruction, Crystal (2011) proposes ways of using text-messaging into the classroom so as to facilitate learning about language.

Methodology

Essays written by 50 students for assessment purpose in a natural setting, following the one shot design, were analyzed for incidences of SMS features i.e. omission of punctuation and abbreviations, for the present study so that the learners perform in the most natural and realistic way possible. The use of emoticons or smileys was nonexistent in the scripts of the population under study so this was not recorded as a variable. The students' ages ranged from 19 to 25 years. All of them were from two intact, undergraduate classes: Bachelor of Computer Engineering and Bachelor of Telecommunication Engineering in COMSATS Institute of Information Technology, Lahore, Pakistan. As SMS language is characterized by omission of punctuation marks, the places where a punctuation mark should

be used were counted and shown as obligatory contexts in Table 1. The ratio of the number of omitted punctuation marks to obligatory contexts was recorded for the purpose of analysis. As for the lexical items, the number of spelling peculiar to texting language or abbreviated spelling to the total number of words written was recorded for analysis. Using triangulation, educators teaching English at the same level and the same 50 students were given two different types of questionnaires to complete so that the results can be as true a representation of the population as possible. The purpose of the questionnaires was to collect data related to their background and to have an idea about their opinions regarding the effects or otherwise of SMS language on the academic writing of the students. The participating students had almost matching level of English proficiency, having studied English as a Second Language for 10-12 years before getting admission in these engineering programs with the exception of 8 students who had studied English for 6-10 years. 42 of them were male and 8 were females. 14 had a background of studying in the O' Level stream, 27 in Matriculation stream with English as a medium of instruction and 9 in the Matriculation stream with Urdu as the medium of instruction.

Methodological triangulation was used to collect data for the purpose of this study because of the potential drawback of interviews or questionnaires alone. According to Hall and Rist (1999), interview may involve 'selective recall, self-delusion, perceptual distortions, memory loss from the respondent, and subjectivity in the researcher's recording and interpreting of the data (pp. 297-298). According to Gass and Mackay, (2005) "Given that participants' attitudes towards other people can impact what they say, there is also the danger of the so-called halo effect.' Students were asked to write a paragraph on one of the three topics given within a word limit of 150-200 words in an hour during class. For analyzing data, the concept of Suppliance in Obligatory Contexts was used. This is a quantitative research. As statistical tools, percentage and average methods were used to analyze the data. Experiment was also conducted through a comprehensive assessment and evaluation by researchers for the essays written by students for this research. Then a quantitative data was derived from qualitative assessment. The surveys gathered from the respondents (students and educators) were considered for further analysis and findings of the said study.

Findings and conclusions

The students were from two intact classes, BTE and BCE, aged 19-25. 42 of them were males and 8 were females. The participating students had almost matching level of English proficiency, having studied English as a Second Language for 10-12 year before getting admission in these engineering programmes with the exception of 8 students who had studied English for 6-10 years.

In response to the question regarding how long they have been using mobile phone, 4 responded they had been using it for 8-10 years, 10 have been using it for 6-10 years, 28 students for 4-5 years and 8 students for 1-3 years. 31 of them started using mobile at 13-16 years of age, 10 at 11-12 years of age, 1 at 8-10 and 8 at 6-7 years. As for the frequency of texting for communication purpose (excluding forwarded messages), 21 text more than 50 SMSes, 13 text almost 50, and 16 students text between 5 to 20 messages per day.

9 of the 15 educators teaching English at the same level had 0-5 years experience of teaching at this level, 5 had 6-10 years

and 1 had 11-15 year of such experience. As for the frequency of assessing formal writing in a semester, 3 assess it 7 or more times, 11 assess it between 4 to 6 times and 1 assesses it 1-3 times. All 15 of them were of the opinion that their students' writing is affected by SMS language. As for the area of language most affected, 12 of the educators think spelling is the most affected area, 2 think that punctuation is the most affected area and 1 thinks grammar and tenses are mostly affected. 14 claim that they point out error caused by SMS language in their students' academic writing and 1 says he points them out sometimes. As for the mode of correcting or pointing out these errors, 8 say they point them out and diagnose the problem in writing on the script and/or in class orally for the benefit of all students in the group/class, 5 correct it in the student's script and 2 just underline such errors. Patterns of occurrence of punctuation marks present or missing in the written work of 50 students in obligatory contexts and in inappropriate contexts have been illustrated in Table 1. Moreover, the table shows the number of spelling typical of SMS language or abbreviated spelling and its ratio per student.

Table 2 shows the ratio of patterns of occurrence of SMS features (namely omission of punctuation or spelling specific to SMS) to obligatory contexts in percentages. The use of these in inappropriate context has also been recorded but the data relevant to the present study i.e. features that can be considered typical of SMS language have been boldfaced for convenience.

The findings of questionnaires meant for students reveal that a great majority of them i.e., 72% thinks their writing is affected by SMS language and 28% think it's not. While the same question answered by 15 educators teaching English at the same level in the same university reveal that 100% of them opine that their students' academic writing is affected by SMS language.

Out of the 36 students who think it is affected, 30 students i.e. 83% think spelling is the most affected area of language, 5 students i.e. 14% think punctuation is mostly affected and 1 i.e. 3% think there are other effects mostly. Among the educators, 80% think spelling is the most affected area, 13% think punctuation is the most affected area and 7% of the educators think grammar and tenses are mostly affected. In this way, both the participating groups' opinions coincide and spelling can be considered the most affected area according to the opinion of the majority of educators and students. However, the data collected through the actual scripts of students' academic writing shows a totally different situation. The number of spelling affected by SMS writing is 0.04 per student, as shown in Table 1, which is negligible keeping in view the total number of words written by 50 students i.e., 7092 which means each student wrote 141.84 words on an average out of which 0.04 are affected by SMS language as shown in Table 1. Similarly, Table 2 shows out of every 100 words written, only 0.03 were found to be affected by SMS language. 2 words in a corpus of 7092 is not a matter of deep concern as Crystal (2008) points out, even very huge corpuses of SMSes display only a negligible proportion of abbreviated spelling. The two words they used were 'moto' instead of 'motto' and 'excesive' instead of 'excessive' which display omission of a double letter, not omission of vowels which is more specific to SMS Language. Omission of double letter can also be considered just an error in spelling. Omission of punctuation is another feature considered specific to SMS language or texting.

Table 1: Patterns of Occurrence of Features of SMS Language in Students' Formal writing

Sr. No.	Features	Total	Average per student
1	LEXICAL- No. of words written	7092	141.84
2	No. of words affected by SMS language	2	0.04
3	Punctuation- No. of full stops obligatory	440	8.8
4	No. of full stops missed	16	0.32
5	No. of full stops overused/misused	7	0.14
6	No. of commas obligatory	206	4.12
7	No. of commas missed	111	2.22
8	No. of commas overused/misused	30	0.6
9	No. of apostrophes obligatory	27	0.54
10	No. of apostrophes missed	1	0.02
11	No. of apostrophes overused/misused	13	0.26
12	No. of question marks obligatory	2	0.04
13	No. of question marks missed	0	0
14	No. of question marks overused/misused	0	0
15	No. of quotation marks obligatory	3	0.06
16	No. of quotation marks missed	2	0.04
17	No. of quotation marks overused/misused	0	0
18	No. of semi colons obligatory	1	0.02
19	No. of semi colons missed	1	0.02
20	No. of semi colons overused/misused	0	0
21	No. of capital letters obligatory	390	7.8
22	No. of capital letters missed	3	0.06
23	No. of capital letters overused/misused	5	0.1
24	No. of commas used in place of full stops	8	0.16
25	No. of full stops used in place of comma	2	0.04

Table 2: Ratio of Patterns of Occurrence of Features of SMS Language/Texting to Obligatory contexts in percentage

Sr. No.	Features	Total	Ratio in Percentage
1	Lexical- No. of words written	7092	-
2	No. of words affected by SMS language	2	0.03%
3	Punctuation- No. of full stops obligatory	440	-
4	No. of full stops missed	16	3.64%
5	No. of full stops overused/misused	7	-
6	No. of commas obligatory	206	-
7	No. of commas missed	111	53.88%
8	No. of commas overused/misused	30	-
9	No. of apostrophes obligatory	27	-
10	No. of apostrophes missed	1	3.70%
11	No. of apostrophes overused/misused	13	-
12	No. of question marks obligatory	2	-
13	No. of question marks missed	0	0%
14	No. of question marks overused/misused	0	-
15	No. of quotation marks obligatory	3	-
16	No. of quotation marks missed	2	66.67%
17	No. of quotation marks overused/misused	0	-
18	No. of semi colons obligatory	1	-
19	No. of semi colons missed	1	100%
20	No. of semi colons overused/misused	0	-
21	No. of capital letters obligatory	390	-
22	No. of capital letters missed	3	0.77%
23	No. of capital letters overused/misused	5	-
24	No. of commas used in place of full stops	8	-
25	No. of full stops used in place of comma	2	-

Out of the 440 full stops obligatory, 16 were missing which means on average, every student missed about 0.04 full stops as Table 1 shows and the ratio of missed full stops to the number of obligatory contexts is 3.64%. Moreover, it was also noticed that there were full stops at places where they were not required and they were recorded as the number of full stops misused/overused. They were 7 in number which means on an average, each student misused or overused 0.04 full stops.

As for the number of obligatory contexts for commas, they were 260 out of which 111 commas were found missing which means on an average, each student missed about 2.22 commas out of 4 obligatory commas. This means almost 50% commas were missed by students in their academic writing. The ratio of missed to obligatory contexts for commas is 53.88%. But along with missing commas, there were many places where commas were not obligatory but students used them. These overused or misused commas were found to be 30 in number which means on average, each student used 0.6 extra commas. This draws attention to another assumption that this use, misuse, overuse or underuse of commas may be the result of lack of knowledge or training of obligatory contexts for commas. Moreover, as the students' majority pointed out their teachers have not been providing feedback about the use of SMS language in their academic writing, the educators, and not only the habit of texting, can also be held responsible for that to a great extent. If it were only the habit of texting to be blamed, students would not be using commas or full stops in inappropriate contexts or using them in place of full stops.

The number of obligatory contexts for apostrophe was 27 out of which only 1 was missing i.e. on an average, each student missed 0.02 apostrophes. Thus the ratio of the number of apostrophes missing to obligatory contexts is 3.70% as is obvious in Table 2. At the same time, Table 2 shows apostrophes were misused or overused 13 times in the whole corpus. This again shows the lack of knowledge, training or awareness of obligatory contexts for apostrophes on the part of the learners. The number of question marks obligatory was 2 and no question mark was missing as shown in Table 1 and hence, the ratio of missing to obligatory contexts is 0% as shown in Table 2. This means students are well aware of the context for the use of question mark and hence no impact of SMS language was found here. This is in keeping with Thurlow's finding that the use of full stop and question mark is generally consistent even in text messages. This is also perhaps due to the fact that these are the most basic punctuation marks and due to consistent reinforcement in education, learners and even texters use them automatically in both contexts. The need of the purpose of the statement to be understood as a question may also be a contributing factor.

The contexts obligatory for a quotation mark were 3 in the whole corpus out of which 2 were missing i.e. every student missed about 0.04 quotation marks and none of them misused or overused a quotation mark as is evident from Table 1. As far as apostrophe is concerned, texting done for communicating hardly requires quoting someone else's words so it cannot be counted as solely an effect caused by the use of frequent texting. The number of semi colons obligatory was 1 and it was not used which means on an average, each student missed 0.02 semi colons as shown in Table 1. The ratio of missed to obligatory semi colons is thus 100% as shown in Table 2. As for its use in texting, there is hardly any need of the use of semi colons. Therefore, it cannot be considered solely an impact of frequent

texting. Other factors might also be accounted for that. Semi colon is one of the least commonly used punctuation marks so it's not usually noticed carefully by people while reading anything and its instruction is hardly done in schools or colleges hence this neglect. The number of obligatory contexts for capital letters was 390 and the number of capital letters missing was 3 i.e. on an average each student missed about 0.06 capital letters as shown in Table 1. The ratio of missing to obligatory context was 0.77% as shown in Table 2. The number of capital letters misused or overused was 5 which shows a ratio of 0.1 per student as depicted in Table 1. This tendency to misuse, underuse or overuse the full stop again depicts that factors other than frequent texting can also be responsible for this as it is not only a case of missing full stops which is considered a feature of texting. At 8 places in the whole corpus, a comma was used instead of a full stop which means on average, each student made this mistake 0.16 times and at 2 places, a full stop was used instead of a comma meaning each student did this error 0.04 times as shown in Table 1. This mis-punctuation is not a feature of SMS language so it cannot be attributed to the effects of texting by students. It can either be caused due to carelessness, lack of training of punctuation or lack of feedback by teachers as far as punctuation is concerned, or the students' lack of knowledge of the context for each punctuation mark or a combination of some of these factors.

The results of the present study indicate that people's concerns about the impact of SMS language on the academic writing of students and about standard language being in danger of destruction are exaggerated or misplaced. This is in line with what Crystal (2008) points out in suggesting that language is in the process of revitalization, not destruction due to technology and texting; Professor Eleanor Johnson who suspects the blame on texting for the widespread mistakes in writing; Baron's (2008) claim that texting helps develop vocabulary and reading skills instead of damaging language and Thurlow (2007) according to whom very few text messages are 'unrecoverable'. As has been observed in the systems of education followed in Pakistan, assessing the knowledge of punctuation is not part of any examination and it is a fact that what you measure is what you get from students and the lack of training on punctuation and lack of feedback on the part of teachers comes as an automatic consequence of punctuation not being part of assessment because most of the instruction in Pakistan is assessment oriented i.e., educators train students in the skills to be tested in assessments or exams.

The discussion indicates that the present study has demystified the popular belief or misconception that the students' writing is adversely affected by the features specific to texting and thus the future of Standard English is in danger. At least at the level of students participating in this study i.e. undergraduate level at a university, it can be said that the students are generally aware of the context in which they are writing and they can switch to the appropriate register or style when writing formally for academic purposes despite the fact that texting is their common way of communication and they do use abbreviated forms and miss punctuation while texting whose context and limitations demand that they do so because the urgency of turn taking and the ease of typing and the urge to save time and space are the underlying motives while texting. A similar study conducted with younger students might yield different results. Moreover, the evidences of one punctuation mark used in place of another indicate one more thing i.e., the errors related to

punctuation are not the result of the habit of frequent texting alone. There can be other factors like carelessness or lack of knowledge on the part of students and the lack of training, feedback or emphasis on the part of educators or the system. What educators and systems can do in this situation is place more emphasis on the instruction and assessment of punctuation. Educators need to think that focus needs to be given to this aspect also while teaching a language. So the use of texting is not a factor to panic about. The matter of concern should be the general neglect of punctuation even out of the context of texting and the instruction and assessment of punctuation should be given importance.

As for the effects of texting on academic writing, there is also marked evidence in the findings of the present study that spelling is not generally affected at this level because of the students' being conscious of the context in which they are writing and as pointed by Crystal and Baron, youth abbreviate words for texting once they have learned standard spelling. A similar study can be conducted with a group of children who start texting very early i.e. much before they have acquired or learned most of the commonly used spelling to see whether their learning spelling is affected by texting. The present study examined the impact of SMS Language on the academic writing of a specific level and age group of students i.e. undergraduate students of COMSATS Institute of Information Technology, Lahore, Pakistan. Thus the result can be considered applicable to this population or age group and hence no great impact was found as they have acquired reasonable amount of proficiency in language by this time and are quite conscious of the context they are writing in. The same study conducted with younger learners might yield different results. However, as far as this population is concerned, the study has demystified the myth that SMS is having disastrous effects on language in general and students' writing proficiency in particular.

To keep the research focused, the present study limited itself to examining the effects of two features of SMS language on students' academic writing i.e., spelling and punctuation, although tenses and grammar are also claimed to be affected by some people. Separate studies can be conducted to examine the impact of other elements like errors in tenses, grammar, use of emoticons, etc. As Crystal (2011) points out texting is there to stay and we need to learn to manage it instead of panicking over its very existence. What the present study has found is in line with what Crystal (2008), Thurlow (2002) and Baron (2008) point out that the increasing concerns about texting are misplaced. The educators in this situation need to build on the strength of SMS Language i.e. it improves rather than hinders literacy. The lexicographers also need to accept it as a language variety in use and add it in dictionaries just as other acronyms and jargons that have been coined are introduced in dictionaries.

As the target population of this study was a group of undergraduate students aged 19-25 i.e. they were in late teens or early twenties, the same study can be conducted with younger students of different age groups to find out whether it yields different results with them as they would have acquired lesser proficiency in standard spelling. Moreover, a comparative study can be conducted with two different groups of learners of the same level to find out whether instruction with focus on the training and assessment of punctuation and instruction without this focus leads to difference in the performance of students in academic writing. Another comparative study can be conducted on two groups with students who started using texting for

communication too early to have acquired reasonable amount of proficiency in spelling and another with those who have started using texting for communication at a later age, after acquiring reasonable amount of proficiency in spelling to find out whether their academic writing shows different results as far as the presence or absence of SMS Specific abbreviations are concerned.

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