Text (SMS) Language and Its Effects on Standard of English:
A Study of Malaysian Senior Generations Perceptions

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has led to the modernization of the methods in which people communicate. Despite the ordinary usage of a mere conversation over the phone, an alternative method of technological advancement in communication is by sending text messages through their mobile communication device, also known as Short Messaging Service or SMS.

SMS, though dominantly used by people of the younger generation (Freudenberg, 2009), has also become prevalent among the senior ones. A research conducted by Tekelec, a mobile messaging company, found that SMS is reaching across all demographics and is now prevalent among senior generations; not just young adults and teenagers (Harnick, 2010). Texting, what was once mainly an activity dictated by the younger generation, has become trendy with adults over 45 years of age. Mobile phones are becoming more integrated into the everyday lives of consumers across continents and age groups.

Proysen (2009) highlighted that in the beginning of the 21$_{st}$ century, television shows that are based on text messages have emerged. These are so-called ssages to the television station, and the text message are televised on the screen nationwide. These shows typically have one or two hosts who are in the studio to read out loud the text messages that appear on the screen, in relation to what is being discussed on the television show. Occasionally, there are competitions such as contests or prize-givings, where the host then asks a question and the viewer has to text his or her answer. These text messages are charged more expensive than the average text message that one sends to another user, and thus, television companies make profits from chat shows that are typically sent during night time.

In recent time, local newspapers in Malaysia have also provided spaces in their publications for their readers to put across opinions through SMS. The Star newspaper for an instance provides two columns for this, one for the readers to send opinion regarding any general issues and the other specifically on sports.

Consequently, these technological advancements have affected the way people use languages in their online communication. English, which is the most widely used language in the Internet, is affected by these advancements. Proysen (2009) said that the language of text messaging and electronic communication resembles speech, with simple syntax, incomplete sentences and informal structure. The spelling conventions used in the text messages are relatively different from Standard English and the use of abbreviations and phonetic spelling frequently occurs. Proysen (2009) discovered that some high school students maintained the language of text messaging instead of the Standard English written texts in their academic writing. He identifies several non -conventional written forms in the students writing such as lack of punctuations, lack of capitalizations and incorrect spelling usage, which has led to the fluctuation of school grades. In relation, this has shown that the prediction of texting inevitably will erode the younger generation's ability to spell, punctuate and capitalize correctly, and the tendency of transferring these new habits into their academic writing.

Crystal (2008) explains that Textspeak (text language) is characterized by its distinctive graphology. Its chief feature is rebus abbreviation. Words are formed in which letters represent syllabus. The clear ideology behind the usage of such abbreviations is directly related to less consumption of time, energy, as well as space.

As one of the features of SMS language, abbreviation is a shortening, specifically, a letter or group of letters, taken from a word or words, and employed to represent them for the sake of brevity (Proysen, 2009). They are shortened in everyday writing for the reason of saving space, less amount of effort, and convenient. At the same time, it still retains the full meaning of words.

Due to the limited message lengths and minuscule user interface of mobile phones, SMS users commonly make extensive use of abbreviations, particularly the use of numbers for words (an instance: *"4"* in place of the word *"for"*), and the omission of vowels, as in the phrase *"txt msg"*.

With the truly instantaneous media (SMS, IRC and IM), there is the desire for one to have a conversation almost as fast as the oral equivalent, thus creating an extra pressure to do away with awkward spelling and grammar. Despite the desire for immediacy, the awkwardness of typing a text message on a cell phone due to the

correlated with the younger generations. Here is a gap in research on how the senior generations use English when sending text messages and whether this group of users has difficulties understanding and deciphering the text messages sent by those of the younger generations.

The following questions are dealt by the study:

1. To analyze the English language used by the senior generations users of mobile phones in their text messages.
2. To identify the abbreviations and/or short forms used in the SMS that are posing problems to the senior generations in understanding text messages.
3. To obtain perception of the senior generation users of mobile phones on the possibility of text language to be part of Standard English in the future.

With the rapid advancement of communication technology, the way people communicate and use languages are also extensively transformed. While some of these changes have been positive in nature, some have negatively impacted their users

study is important in seeing the effect on understanding text messages between two generations of mobile phone users. Moreover, Freudenberg (2009) proposes that the SMS (text) language is not only unique but also dominated and largely utilized by adolescents. As such it will be interesting to investigate whether the senior generations would have difficulties in understanding the language.

The mobile phone is viewed as an important communication tool and has become an integral part of the Malaysian and global society. A study conducted by Sheeren and Rozumah (2009) concludes that Malaysians preferences of using mobile phones for various purposes in comparison to fixed telephones are widely increased. Texting on mobile phones is one of the mentioned preferences of mobile phone usage.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework
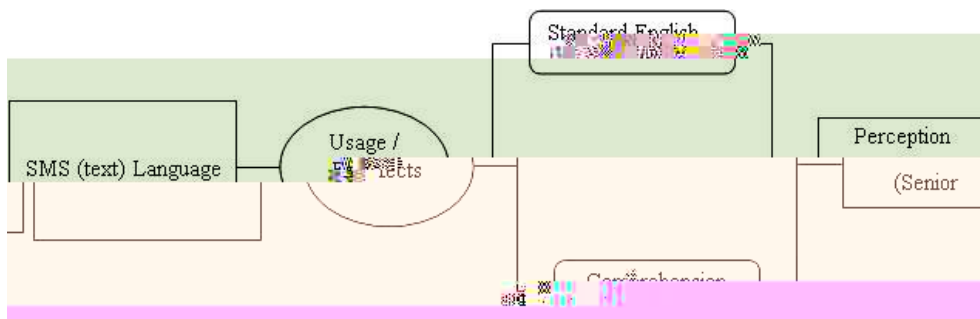
METHODOLOGY

This research deploys the data collection used in Proysen (2009) with modifications in the designated instrument. A self-designed questionnaire was distributed to each respondent through emails. The questionnaire contains of four parts:

Part A: Background Information
Part B: SMS Language Use
Part C: Content of SMS Messages
Part D: Abbreviations

Data collected from items in Part B and C were used to answer research question one. Part B inquired the respondents to notify whether any sort of abbreviations and short forms were applied in their messages to different groups of receivers. In Part C, text messages were collected from the eight respondents. The respondents were requested to record in writing their last five text messages on the questionnaire provided. Additionally, the respondents needed to provide information related to the messages such as to whom the messages were sent to and whether the topic in the messages was formal or informal. Subsequently, the respondents could also forward their messages to the researchers instead of writing them in the questionnaire. Data collected from these two parts were used to support each other during data analysis.

To achieve the answer to research question two, the respondents were asked to answer Part D which was prepared based on Proysen (2009). Basically, they were inquired to make an assumption of the definition of a list of

language. Lastly, as for research question three, the respondents were inquired to respond to the open-ended question in Part B on their perception of the possibility that the abbreviations used in the text language may be accepted as the Standard English.

Respondents for this research were eight ESL lecturers from a number of selected universities: International Islamic University Malaysia, UCSI University and Tun Hussein Onn University of Malaysia. These individuals were selected based on their background in English education and communicating via text messages in English is a norm among them.

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

Part A and B

The research data was collected from a total of eight senior generation participants; five females and three males. A set of questionnaire consisting of four sections were given to the respondents from a selection of higher learning institutions in Malaysia to examine the use of SMS (text) language among senior generations and their perceptions on the usage of SMS language. Each part requires participants response on their experience and understanding of the utilization of SMS language in their communication both in formal and informal settings.

A majority of the participants exhibited that they have experienced with the usage of mobile phones for more than six years. Only two of the participants have less experience in the utilization of SMS with 4-6 years experiences, while the rest of the participants have been exposed to this function of mobile phones for more than 6 years.

Although all participants may be considered as having a significant amount of experience with SMS, two of the eight participants send text messages a few times a week and does not use their mobile phones mainly for messaging purposes in comparison to making phone calls. Nevertheless, the other five senior generation participants used their mobile phones daily, as well as sending messages more than making phone calls.
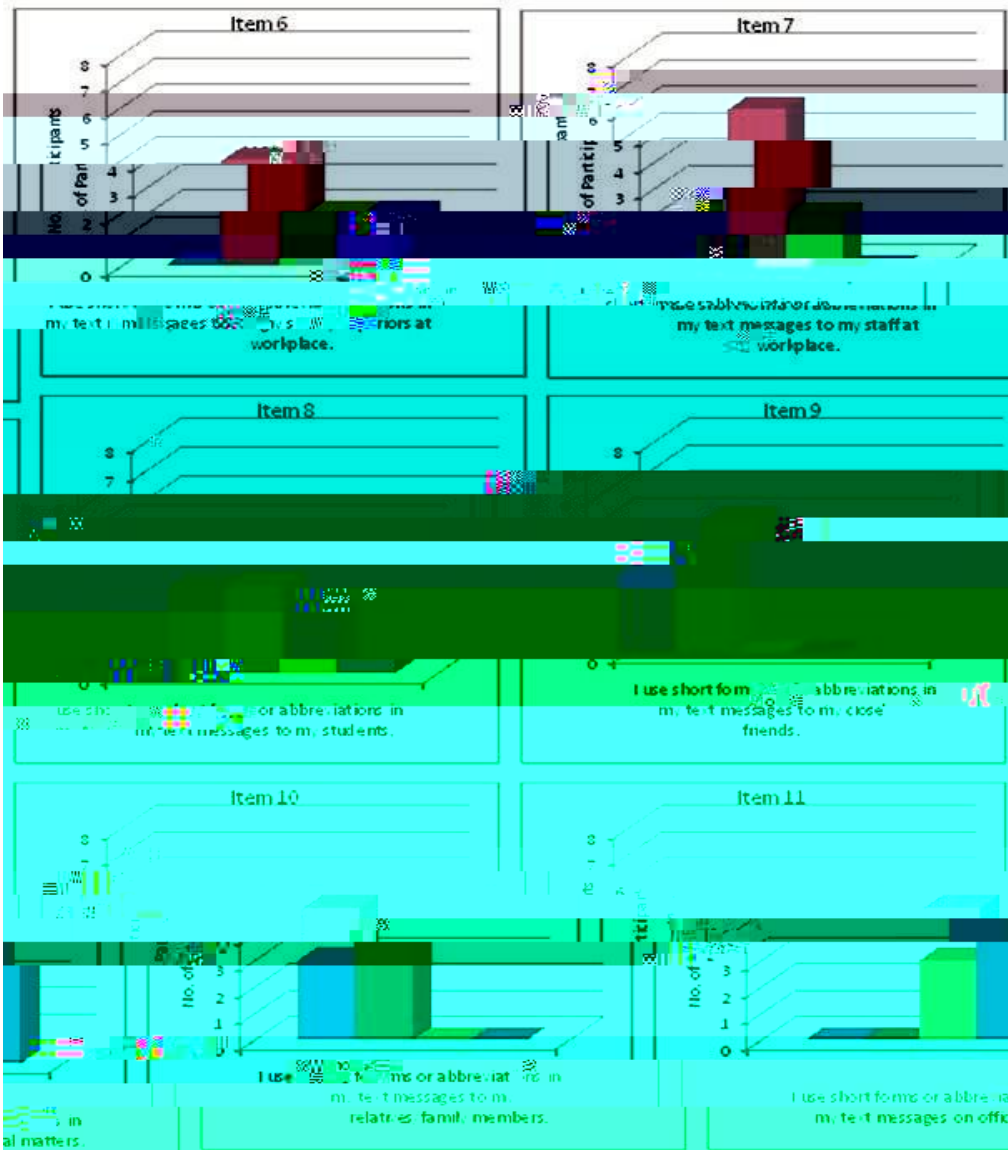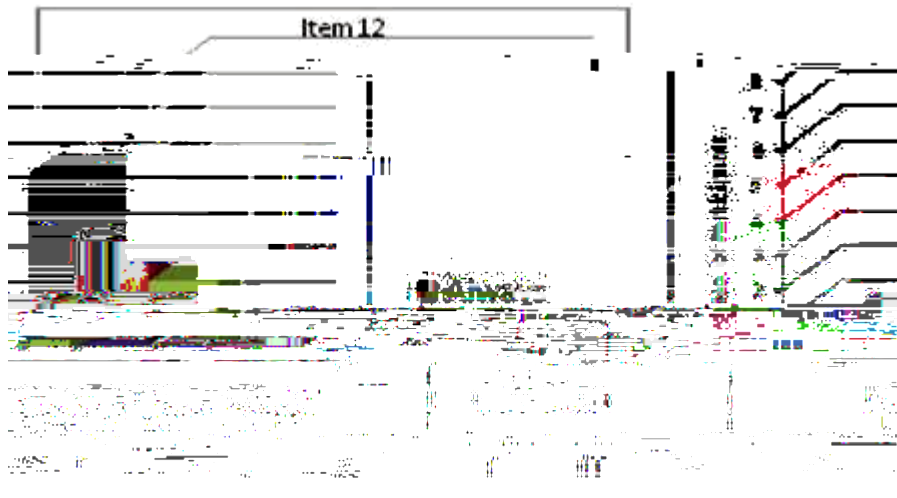
Figure 2: Distributions of Response (Part B)

The above charts display the analysis of differences in the usage of abbreviations in text messages among the eight participants depending on the context or the relationship they have with the receiver of the text message. It is clearly shown that the differences in relationship have various effects to the usage of abbreviations. For example, in item 6, 8, and 11, the level of formality needed is higher compared to other sets of replies, where the usage of short forms or abbreviations are rarely used.

the language of text messages and have even shown it in their formally written messages. Thus it is slowly being accepted and causing a setback when group backgrounds are dissimilar and makes interpretation a problem when it is not properly coordinated.

Part C: The Use of SMS Language

Analysis of Part C of the questionnaire showed that text messages sent by the senior generation users of mobile phones contained a combination of the following styles:

a. Complete sentences written in Standard English
b. Incomplete English sentences
c. Abbreviations or short forms
d. English- Bahasa Malaysia code-switching/mixing

Messages written in full sentence

This is a common style of writing text messages among senior generation users of mobile phone. Clearly shown from samples of text messages collected, many of their messages were written in full sentence. This practice is performed even though when writing messages to close friends.

Hi, how are you? Have you enrolled already? When is the start of the semester?
*(*R1)

In fact, R1 and R3 responded that they   breviations and short forms in their messages to their superior and students respectively. Similarly, R2, R4 and R7 responded that they
students. The following are 5 samples of text messages sent by R3 to her students:

1. *Good morning. What time are your classes today? I need to see you - it's urgent. Dr Elizabeth*

2. *It's ok. I won't be available then. Just to inform that i won't be around tomorrow. Please check edmodo for further instructions. Ask everyone to log on and complete the given task.*

3. *Morning. If you are coming after 8, I will be in the multimedia laboratory 1.*

4. *There will be no meeting on Monday coz I will be away on official matters. Use the time to do independent research & study about brochure and feedback form.*

5. *The meeting will be on Wednesday in BK B3. Please inform everyone!*

When interviewed, R3 claimed that she has never used abbreviations in her messages to her students because she intended to maintain the formal atmosphere between her and the students.

Incomplete/incorrect sentences.

Besides the complete sentences, incomplete and incorrect syntax also appeared in the respondents

1. *Morning called u but no one replied.* (R1 to a family member)

2. *Got the maid. Taking amma to BP tomorrow morning*. (R3 to a family member)

3. *Really mad at this fella*, *nanti I story u.* (R6 to a close friend)

In sample 1, the message was written syntactically unacceptable (fragments). A standard form of sample 1 could be

Abbreviations and short forms

Just like the younger generation users of mobile phones, the elements of

ie	That is (R1) Example (R6,R8), Internet Explorer (R3), such as (R7)
nkotb	-
atm	Automated teller machine (R1,R7), At the moment (R3)
vip	Very important person (R1, R3)
sys	System (R1, R3, R6)

All respondents unanimously gave correct meaning to only two abbreviations which were *fyi* (for your information) and *tnx* (thanks) respectively. Majority of the respondents (except R1) provided correct meaning to *lol* (laugh out loud). Other abbreviations that were given correct meaning by one or two respondents and were not answered by other respondents included *emo* (emotion), *roflmao* (rolling on the floor laughing my ass out loud), *pc* (personal computer), *bgn* (begin), *sms* (short message system / short message service) and *vip* (very important person). The respondents were divided in giving the meaning to majority of the abbreviations. Some did not even answer at all. As an example from Proysen (2009), *bf* could either mean

provided the meaning of the abbreviation. One respondent (R4) however, wrongly defined the meaning of *bf* as

divided in giving the meaning to *atm*. Only two respondents (R1 and R7) defined the abbreviation correctly which is   e

means

or abbreviations of words in the English language. However, it is a growing trend that even the senior generations are learning to utilize this form of text messages.

Older generations have clearly shown that the forms used in their text messages depended on situations as well as the receiver of the message. Messages

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