

Linguistic Features in SMS Apologies by Malay Native Speakers

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of communication channels such as the Short Message Service (SMS) gives rise to a different variety of language use, also known as textism. Textism is viewed as a hybrid form of communication as it merges the forms of both spoken and written language. Textism features are arguably part of the pragmalinguistic domain, which looks at the selection of strategies which can be applied in conveying illocutions. This study sheds some light on the pragmalinguistic conventions reflected in apologies conducted via SMS or text messages. Twenty six Malay native speakers responded to Written Discourse Completion Tasks (WDCT) via SMS. The WDCTs were categorised into two levels of offence which required the participants to apologise by texting their apologies. Data were categorised and coded based on adapted versions of coding schemes by Supyan (2006) and Crystal (2008). The results indicated that there were three significant variations in the SMS linguistic features used by the Malay Native Speakers (Malay NS) when apologising via SMS in their first language, Malay, and their second language, English. Differences were also identified when the apologies were sent because of more serious transgressions compared to when they were sent because of less serious offences. The findings suggests that the first language contribute to these differences in the selection of textual features when the participants texted their apologies.

Keywords: SMS/text messages; linguistic features; Malay NS; apology; pragmalinguistic

INTRODUCTION

Mobile texting or SMS (Short Message Service) is arguably one of the most prominent means of electronic communication nowadays. In September 2007 alone, it was reported that around 4,000 SMS were sent per second in Britain (Plester, Wood & Joshi, 2009). In a study on mobile phone text messaging overuse in a university in Mauritius, Perry and Lee (2007) found that the highest number of SMS sent per day by one person could reach 60. In Malaysia, the use of SMS has also been on the rise (Badrul Redzuan, 2006). Ramayah, Yulihisri, Amlus and Norzaliza (2006) estimated that in 2003, there were 10 million mobile phone subscribers in Malaysia, with 97% of users familiar with SMS (the terms *SMS* and *texting* will be interspersed herein).

The emergence of this electronic means of communication signals a new variety of language, or at least, a hybrid medium. Crystal (2008a, 2008b) terms this as *Textspeak* or *textism*. Unlike conventional writings, textism is a written variety which retains many features of the spoken language (Baron, 2004; Plester, Wood, & Bell, 2008). For instance, textism includes colloquial spellings which mimic how particular words are pronounced in everyday life. As a result, the degree of formality in electronic communications such as text messages may differ compared to conventional writings, even when compared to e-mails. Some support for this hypothesis is provided by Baron (2004, p. 84) who found that US American university students considered that emails (in contrast with instant messages like SMS) should be “edited, punctuated, spellchecked, and more formal”. A study by Najeeb, Maros,