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Language in the Age of Brevity: An Analysis of the Semantics of Slangy Expressions and SMS Language Within Twitter Posts

Dr. Tokachi Awujo

Department of English and Literary Studies
Imo State University Owerri, Nigeria

Abstract

With the ever-increasing use of social media platforms, such as Twitter, language has rapidly evolved to include various forms of informal expressions, especially among the youth. This study therefore sets out to analyze the semantics of slangy expressions and SMS language within selected Twitter posts, seeking to understand the underlying meanings and nuances inherent in slang expressions and SMS language. Using Leech's theory of meaning propounded in 1974, as the theoretical framework, the study utilizes the semantics analysis technique to extract and examine data from a curated sample of Twitter posts, identifying and categorizing slang expressions and SMS language. Over Twenty (20) Twitter posts were analyzed to uncover the motivation behind using slang expressions, explore the impact of social context on their interpretation, and determine their effectiveness in conveying intended messages. Findings revealed the use of various derivations, substitutions, portmanteau, and abbreviations of words from the English language. This paper contributes to understanding the evolving language dynamics within online communication platforms and recommends that light be shed on the role of slang and SMS language in contemporary linguistics.

Keywords: Semantics, Slangs, Twitter, Social media, Emoticons, SMSing, Textism

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1.1 Introduction

The introduction of social media and internet communication tools have completely changed how we communicate and express ourselves, particularly on Twitter, where a distinct language environment is fostered by its fast-paced and 280-character constraint. Slang and SMS language

have become commonplace in this context, with users using inventive and condensed word forms to express themselves and transmit meaning. Studying and comprehending the dynamics of language use in these digital places is crucial as online communication plays an ever-more-important part in our social and personal lives. The way we communicate, connect and express ourselves have changed significantly due to the emergence of social media and online communication tools. Gao, Yang, & Li (2012:33) have observed that Twitter has emerged as a distinctive venue for language innovation and originality because of its real-time nature and character restriction. Due to the limitations of the platform, users have evolved a unique linguistic style that is typified by the usage of slang, acronyms, and inventive spellings. Kaplan and Haenlein, (2010:102) add that the linguistic environment of Twitter now includes a significant amount of slang and SMS lingo in particular. These linguistic structures have developed over time to fulfill a variety of purposes, including expressing feelings, creating a sense of community, and promoting effective communication, as postulated by Crystal, (2011:54). Important concerns regarding the nature of language, communication, and social interaction in online environments have also been brought up by the usage of slang and SMS language on Twitter as observed by Barton & Lee (2013: 107).

The origin of slang can be traced to 1600 England when a type of language called “Thieves Can’t” was used by a certain group of people. The “thieves can’t” was invented by criminals, thieves, and vagabonds as a secret language for communication so as not to be understood by the authorities. It was later transformed into the term *slang* by an English lexicographer, Francis Grose in 1785. He defined slang as “vulgar language” and also published *The Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* in the same year. Slangs were first seen as a language used by people of low and poor status, but in the present generation, it is used by educated people in the society and even the working class. It is also seen as a language exclusive to members of certain groups and is used by people all over the world: the rich, poor, educated and uneducated. Slangy expressions are mostly used by teenagers and young adults. They are also used among students, athletes, musicians and so on.

Slangy expressions and short message services (SMS) have been popular in the past decade and is still in full use in the present generation. It is used in many places and situations by young adults and older youths despite that it is seen as an informal language. The definition of the word “Slang” has been a topic on the minds and mouths of professors, poets, lexicographers, most of whom have

contributed in the attempt to define the word, “slang” among them, include Walt Whitman, who, in the *North American Review* defines slangs as “A wholesome fermentation or eructation of those processes eternally active in language by which froth and specks are thrown up mostly to pass away; though occasionally to settle and permanently crystallize”. Hayakawa (1941:194-195) submits that “slang is the poetry of everyday life which vividly expresses people’s feelings about life and the things that they encounter”. Dumas and Lighter (1998) opine that the word ‘slang’ cannot have a formal meaning as it is a type of informal language that is used by people who belong to the same group; an age group or a social group. These words are considered informal, sometimes vulgar and offensive depending on the word and situation. They are inappropriate for formal occasions. Dumas and Lighter (1998:53) further gave four criteria for identifying a word or a phrase as a slang. This and other contributions made by various scholars have created a better understanding of the context of slangs. In recent years, further research has been made on the subject, for instance, Julie Coleman (2012:41) highlights the growth of English slangs from the earliest records to what it is today. She also examines the reason why people use slangs and how they are incorporated into speech. Going further, in his *The Vulgar Tongue*, Jonathan Green (2014) examines British vulgar slangs and traces their root to the *Beggar’s books* and its spread to America, Australia and other parts of the world. Some of these British vulgar slangs have made their way into Nigeria through cultural contact via the medium of trade, colonialism, education, immigration travelling social media and entertainment. Some of these pejoratives and vulgar languages include words like ‘bastard’, ‘rubbish’, ‘damn’, ‘bloody’ ‘pissed off’ and many more. As this new language paradigm continues to evolve, it is increasingly influencing the way individuals communicate, interact and even think. Yet, despite its growing significance, the semantics of slangy expressions and SMS language remain poorly understood. This knowledge gap has far-reaching implications, as it hinders our ability to fully grasp the nuances of digital communication and its impact on human behaviour, social relationships and cultural identity.

This research aims to bridge this gap by conducting an in-depth analysis of the semantics of slangy expressions and SMS language on Twitter. By exploring the meaning –making processes underlying this novel language phenomenon, we seek to uncover the hidden dynamics that shape online discourse and shed light on the intricate interplay between language, culture and identity in the digital age. Through these investigations, we hope to contribute to a deeper understanding of

the complex ways in which language is adapting to the demands of the digital world and the profound implications this has for our understanding of human communication.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

There is a communication gap between people who use slang and SMS language and those who do not, as a result of the widespread use of these language types in Twitter posts. Despite being widely used, little is known about the expressive dynamics and semantic significance of these language forms in online communication. This gap in understanding makes it difficult to communicate effectively and makes it difficult to completely understand the subtleties of online interactions. The advent of social media applications like 2go, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, Viber, Skype, Snapchat, Twitch, Myspace, Reddit, etc, have brought out a new variation of English that is in contrast to the standard versions. The variety of English called ‘internet language’, has a complicated formation which is in contrast with the standard version of English language. Its use of acronyms, letter and number homophones, abbreviations, etc, makes the lexical meaning difficult to comprehend. When in contact with these vast arrays of slangy expressions and SMS languages, a person who is not well acquainted with them may wonder what they actually imply. What is the contextual meaning of these internet words? What other meanings can they have? There is a need for an in-depth semantic analysis of these colloquial and digital expressions and a look into the reason why they are used in certain sentences and the manner of usage. Knowledge on the research topic is indeed of great importance in the recent generation and needs more attention and explanation which this research will provide.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the semantics of SMS and slang language on Twitter, looking at how these linguistic forms are employed to negotiate identity, establish social ties, and transmit meaning. We want to learn more about how users modify and change language to meet the needs of online communication by examining the expressive dynamics of slang and SMS language. Using an extensive examination of Twitter tweets, the following research inquiries will be investigated:

1. How do Twitter users employ slangy expressions and SMS language to convey meaning, negotiate relationships and construct identities in online communication?

2. What are the implications of slangy expressions and SMS language on communication effectiveness, misunderstandings and conflict in online interaction?
3. How do slangy expressions and SMS language evolve over time and what factors influence their diffusion, adaptation and transformation in online contexts?

1.4 Theoretical Framework

Geoffrey N. Leech's theory of meaning, which he presented in *Semantic: The Study of Meaning* (1974, 1981), serves as the foundation for the analysis conducted in this study. The seven forms of meaning that Leech developed are conceptual meaning, connotative meaning, social meaning, emotive meaning, reflected meaning, collective meaning, and thematic meaning. Leech seeks to give a systematic account of the nature of language making his theory very appropriate for the study. To clarify the meaning that the terms in the posts may communicate, the researcher employs conceptual, connotative, and emotive meaning out of the seven prescribed by Leech (1974) in the data analysis process. The study aims to investigate the surface, hidden, and related meaning of English online slang and texting language used in social media, especially Twitter. The study also draws from Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) Speech Acts Theory (SAT) which posits that language is used to perform actions, such as making statements, giving commands, or making promises. SAT will help the researcher analyse how slang and SMS language is used to perform social actions, like expressing humour, irony, or solidarity. Grice's (1975) theory of Pragmatics which focuses on how language is used in context to communicate effectively is also of great importance to the study. This perspective helps to examine how slang and SMS language are used to convey meaning beyond literal interpretation, considering factors like implicate, inference, and context. The Social Identity Theory (SIT) propounded by Tajfel and Turner (1979) which explains how individuals derive group membership and identity from language is also adopted for the study. The theory will help the researcher investigate how slang and SMS language are used to signal group affiliation, create social bonds, and negotiate identity in online communities. By combining these theories, the study will analyse the speech acts performed through slang and SMS language in Twitter posts, examine the pragmatic functions of these language forms in conveying meaning and negotiating social relationships. It will also investigate how slang and SMS language are used to construct and negotiate social identity in online communities.

1.5 Forms of SMS/Text Language/Internet Language

Slangy expressions and internet language go hand in gloves and are found in almost every text sent by an adolescent and youth. The use of SMS/text language over the past decade has risen greatly with several modifications to text language and the use of emoticons to communicate. It has its origin in radiotelegraphy. It has become a common medium of communication in the present times and students and most individuals these days text much more than they call, it has been found that 2.4 billion out of 3.3 billion phone subscribers at the end of 2007 are active users of the Short Message Service (SMS). According to the data gotten from [statista.com](https://www.statista.com). “As of January 2022, Nigeria had 32.9 million active social media users.” With text messages being significantly cheaper than calls in many parts of the world it has drawn a large number of phone subscribers. David Crystal, in his book, *Texting: the Gr8 Db8* notes that “short messaging, short mail, SMSing, person to person messaging, mobile messaging, wireless messaging, text messaging, texting, txtng... whatever we call it, is evidently here to stay.”

SMS/text language which is also known as textese, txt-speak, chatspeak, txttalk, txtslang, txt, texting language, txt lingo, SMSish, cyber-slang, netspeak, digispeak, etc is a term for the abbreviations, acronyms and slangs used by mobile phone users due to space and convenience in SMS communication. Internet slangs are constantly changing and it makes it difficult to give a standard definition of what some slangs may mean. Textism is used for a faster and more convenient method of typing. It is not that easy to read when many text lingos are combined in a single sentence. A study carried out by Kemp (2010) discovered that messages using textism were faster to write than those in Standard English but they took nearly twice as long to read and were associated with more reading errors.

The various forms in which these SMS words and phrases exist include: Homophonic single grapheme abbreviation, Numeric characters replacing homophones, abbreviations, dropping vowels acronyms etc. For want of space, a few examples are given below:

Numbers Replacing Phonemes

Some numbers are abbreviated by replacing part of the word with a number that sounds like the word: Gr8-Great, Db8-Debate, B4-Before, 4u-Foryou, In2-Into, F8-Fate,

L8r- Later, W8 –Wait, 9t –Night.

Abbreviations and Shortenings Eg.

Nite-Tonight, Caz/Cuz-Because, Info-Information, B-Day-Birthday, Yea-Yeah,
Sry-Sorry, Sis-Sister, Bro-Brother, Ur-Your.

Punctuation Omission Eg.

Wont -Will not, Dont- Do not, Cant-Cannot, Didnt- Did not.

Homophonic digraph and single grapheme abbreviation

Here, abbreviations are made by replacing entire words with alphabetic letters that are pronounced the same way. Eg.

K-Okay, Y-Why, U-You, B-Bye, N-And/No, C-See, Cu-See You, P- Problem, BN-Being/been.

Accent Stylization

This is when the pronunciation of words in informal speech has great effect on the spelling of the word.eg.

Wanna-Want to, Gonna -Going to, Gotta -Got to, Shoulda-Should have, Cuz- Because G-Clipping

This occurs when the letter ‘g’ is omitted from the end of a word in spelling: Eg.

Takin- Taking, Shapin-Shaping, Goin –Going, Drivin- Driving

Other Clippings, Eg.

I’v- I have, Hav- Have, Som, Some, Wit-With

Dropping Vowels

Here, vowels are left out in spelling to shorten the words. Eg.

Msg-

Message, Ppl-People, Thx-Thanks, Pls- Please, Txt-Text, Bby – Baby, Wknd-Weekend, Rgrds-
Regards, Mtng-Meeting, Dnt-Don’t.

Acronyms

Phrases, clauses and words are abbreviated by taking only the first letter of each word and placing them together. These acronyms are usually not capitalized. Eg.

AFAIK-As far as I know, TMI Too much information. IDK -I don't know, FYI - For your information, Qt-cutie, TC-Take care, LOL-Laugh out loud, LMK-Let me know, TTYL-Talk to you later, BRB-Be right Back, OMG-oh my God, NP- No problem, PC- Personal computer, BTW- By the way, JK -Just Kidding, IRL- In Real Life, IKR -I know, Right, BFF-Best Friends Best friends forever, YOLO- You only live once, NVM-Never mind, RN-Right now and so on.

Heterography

Words with different spellings and even different meanings are used to replace certain words that have same pronunciation and are given the same meaning. Eg.

Phat-Fat, Sauce –Source, Nite -Night

Phonetic Respelling

It is the respelling of a word which has a standard spelling according to the way it is pronounced in order to confuse the more advanced public, parents, authorities, online and offline. It is an attempt to sensor a word or disguise it in order to protect the younger under aged generation or to maneuver internet restriction and banning, Eg.

Seggs-Sex, Kneeger-Negger, Bish-Bitch

Onomatopoeic spelling

These are invented to express some sounds.

Hahahaha- Laughing, Ugh-Disgust, Uwu-Blushing/ acting cute, Mtc Chew- Sighing/hissing , Tch-Annoyance, Yay!- Excitement

Capitalization and Punctuation

Words are often capitalized to show emphasis and punctuation marks like the exclamation mark and question mark are used in repeated manner to convey strong emotions. The tilde (~) is used to show sarcasm, teasing and to identify a word or sentence as part of a song. The full stop is not used in the text as often as in writing when a short sentence is typed. The full stop most often signifies anger. Some grammatical punctuation rules are also dropped when texting for example E-mail becomes email. Eg.

DON'T YOU DARE ME

He asked me to marry him!!!!

Excuse me???

I wont tell you~

Fine.

Non-Standard Spelling

The standard spelling of some words is altered on the internet. Eg.

Sorry- SoweY, Hello- Hullo, Friends- Friendz,

A letter of a word is sometimes repeated to show emphasis. Example

Girlllll, Byeeeee, I love youuuuuuu.

Other forms include the use of emojis and emoticons to communicate emotions, reactions and to pass messages. The use of emojis, emoticons and stickers is the latest form of text/internet language. John McWhorter (2022) explains that emoticons are a way of injecting feelings into text and they are an addition to the emotional arsenal of our languages. With emojis, a texter can create; communicate not just words but also a whole idea or sentence by combining different emojis together. New emojis, emoticons and even stickers are created every year so there is an abundance of these small images that one could use to communicate.

1.6 Data Presentation, Analysis and Findings

The Twitter posts selected from the internet are analysed below: a Twitter user with the username @IsabellaMozelak tweeted: “the one job I work at that I get reminded I’m too pretty to work”.

Among the many replies to the tweet above, these few were selected:

1. “A job is a job and it’s an honest dollar u r doing great hon and u r gorg”
2. “Yea, u are very beautiful frl but get this money”
3. “Money don’t care about pretty if that was the case a lot of your fay rappers couldn’t make any because they are all busted”

4. “Omg yes as if das a compliment like chill we all tryna get sum money”
5. “Get it Girl! Perry and paid!”
6. “Look like you real good at yo job too sheesh”
7. “All smart baddies work at HD. I learned a lot and still keep in touch with some coworkers. Good vibes”
8. “Home Depot is lit to work at. I miss my days there”
9. “Head long asl bad asf tho”
10. “I got my first sugar daddy working here”
11. “Ain’t no such thing as too pretty for a job. Stay humble and stack that bread”
12. “So fineeee”
13. “Dayun! Face card!”
14. “You should holla at a playa...”
15. “Lemmie go to home depot rq I wanna see something”
16. “Home depot currently hiring? Cuss I be bored”
17. “I definitely don’t disagree, but chase your bag love”
18. “Not you too pretty to make money like whaaat???”
19. “Finna go buy waterslide lawnmower SOMETHING”
20. “Omg ur gorgeous”

The above tweets are analysed on the table below showing conceptual meaning, connotative meaning and affective meaning on the table below:

Analysis of extracts gathered from individuals’ tweets on twitter

<i>Lexical items</i>	<i>Conceptual Meaning</i>	<i>Connotative Meaning</i>	<i>Affective Meaning</i>
An honest dollar	_____	Money earned from a legal business	_____
Busted	Break, split or burst	Poor, Very ugly	An insult, meant to disrespect
Trynna	_____	Trying to	_____

Perry	<i>A name under conception</i>	<i>A lady that is both beautiful and has tangible qualities</i>	<i>Meant as a complement</i>
Baddie	<i>A villain or criminal in a book. Film</i>	<i>A female who is stylish, confident, cool and attracts attention</i>	<i>Meant as a complement</i>
Vibes	<i>The mood of a place, situation, person etc. and the way they make you feel</i>	<i>Same meaning</i>	_____
Lit	<i>Past and past participle of light</i>	<i>Fun, exciting, cool</i>	_____
Sugar Daddy	<i>A rich older man who has a relationship (usually sexual) with a younger person in exchange for money and presents</i>	<i>Same meaning</i>	_____
Face card	<i>A King, Queen, or Jack in a deck of cards</i>	<i>Refers to a person's (mainly a woman's) facial beauty</i>	<i>Admiration</i>
Stack that bread	<i>to place loafs slices of bread on top of each other</i>	<i>To work hard in order to gain financial stability</i>	_____
Holla	<i>To cry out to get someone's attention</i>	<i>To call or talk to a person for the purpose of expressing interest</i>	_____
Playa	<i>The flat-floored</i>	<i>A person keeping multiple romantic relationships or a person who is famous for attracting the opposite sex and is insincere</i>	_____
Wanna	<i>To want to do something</i>	<i>Same meaning</i>	_____
Bag	<i>A flexible container worn on the or held in the hand that is used to carry items along or used for storing items</i>	<i>Money</i>	_____
Finna	_____	<i>Ought to, should, going to</i>	_____
Boost my head	<i>To elevate one's head</i>	<i>To make one feel proud</i>	_____

Bounce	<i>To make quickly up, away or back from a surface after hitting it</i>	<i>To leave a place or situation</i>	
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Summary of the Findings

The data for this research, gathered from Twitter show that a large number of social media users make use of SMS language/textism with non-standard spelling and short forms of words as their major form of communication. A significant application of slangy expressions was found in the replies made by the Twitter users. Another major finding and perhaps the most obvious is the seeming disregard for correct grammar and punctuation as quite a number of grammatical errors were found in the data gathered. The researcher believes that this is as a result of three factors: *the informality of the social platform, the social group of the Twitter that made the initial post and those that replied including the topic of conversation*. These factors allowed for use of slangy expressions and SMS language that ranged from casually informal to vulgar as well as improper grammar. Making a recall to the research inquiry questions, we affirm that lexical meaning of slangy expressions is mostly overlooked. This is as a result of the growing popularity of these slangs and its crystallization in modern English vocabulary. When people hear these expressions, their minds immediately go to the connotative meaning skipping past the conceptual meaning this is not because the lexical meaning has been forgotten but rather little or no attention has been paid to it.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the researcher recommends that:

1. Slang and SMS language be incorporated into Language Learning Curriculum:
2. Recognizing the prevalence of informal language in digital communication, language educators should incorporate slang and SMS language into teaching materials to enhance students' practical language skills.
3. The use of slangs in creative writing and literary expression should be encouraged:
Slang and SMS language can add flavour and authenticity to creative writing, making it more relatable and engaging for contemporary audiences.
4. Slang be utilized in marketing and advertising strategies:
Businesses can leverage slangs and SMS languages to connect with younger audience and create more effective marketing campaigns.
5. Slangy expressions should be incorporated into academic writing to enhance accessibility:
Using slang and SMS language in academic writing can make complex concepts more accessible and engaging for a broader audience.

6. Slang- based language support tools for individuals with language disabilities should be developed:

Slang and SMS language can be used to create more relatable and engaging language support tools for individuals with language disabilities.

7. Slang-infused language learning apps for marginalized communities be created:

Language learning apps incorporating slangs and SMS language can help marginalized communities develop language skills and enhance social inclusions.

Contribution to Knowledge

The study adds to the existing body of knowledge on linguistics, particularly in the area of pragmatics, semantics and sociolinguistics. It also provides insight into the evolving nature of language in digital context, shedding light on the role of slang and SMS language in online interaction. The research provides valuable information for businesses seeking to connect with younger audience through effective language use. It also sheds light on the dynamic nature of language, demonstrating how slang and SMS language contribute to language evolution in the digital age.

Recommendation for Further Research

The present research could be expanded to explore slang and SMS language usage across different social media platforms, such as Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat.

An investigation of how slang and SMS language usage vary across different demographic groups, such as age, gender and geographic location is also recommended for further research.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research has unveiled the complex semantics of slangy expressions and SMS language on Twitter, revealing a rich tapestry of meaning-making process that defies traditional linguistic norms. By delving into the heart of digital discourse, we have discovered a novel language paradigm that is at once creative, adaptive and resilient. As we navigate the uncharted territories of the digital age, this research offers a beacon of insight into the ways in which language is evolving to meet the demands of a rapidly changing world. By embracing the complexities of slangy expression and SMS language, we may unlock new avenues for communication, connection and understanding in the digital sphere.

Ultimately, this study reminds us that language is not a static entity but a dynamic, ever- changing reflection of our shared human experience. As we continue to push the boundaries of digital communication, we must remain attuned to the creative, adaptive and resilient spirit of language, ever evolving and always on the move.

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