

Syntactic Aspects in Text Messages of University of Zimbabwe Students

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ABSTRACT

This study is a syntactic analysis of text messages in English language used by University of Zimbabwe students. The study specifically focuses on sentences where there are omissions of pronouns, auxiliary verbs and where contractions occur. The study also analyzes the impact of sociolinguistic variables on the sentence structure of English language in text messages. The fifty respondents' forwarded two messages each from their sent items on their cell phones to the researcher and to understand the factors triggering the syntactic structures the researcher carried out unstructured interviews. The data collected showed that cell phone texting has indeed been affected by the socio-economic factors and these factors trigger omissions of important elements of English language sentence structure such as, pronouns, auxiliary verbs and contraction of phrases.

1. Introduction

Zimbabwe is one of the countries where mobile phones are widely used especially among university students who do not only use mobile phones for communication with parents, relatives and friends but also for learning. The most popular and widely used feature of the cell phone according to Harper et al (2005) is the Short Message Service (SMS) which enables cell phone users to exchange (send or receive) messages through texting. Messages can contain alphanumeric characters and a maximum length of 160 characters for Latin alphabets, including English Language and 70 characters for Non-Latin alphabets such as, Chinese (Mallick:2003).The technical restrictions (such as limited space for characters) of text messaging according to Segestad (2002) have led to the development of new language forms in SMS communication and various changes or deviations from the Standard English, in terms of its grammar because texting does not involve the use of formal grammar (Green and Haddon :2009).

Helve and Holm (2005: 76) point out that, "Texting in itself is an argot, the last cultural element in the notion of style'. Texting is seen to produce a new form of texting lingo which redefines vocabulary, language and spellings altogether. Texting has affected all levels of linguistics, that is, from phonology to pragmatics. At phonological level, some words are now represented with single letters. For example, the word 'why' is now replaced by letter *y* and 'you' is replaced by *u*. At morphological level, text messaging has also resulted in complete different ways of representing words. Some of the words structured at morphological level include, love for 'luv', today for '2dy', before for 'b4', see you for 'cu'. It has been observed that there is often vowel deletion in a bid to save space and more often there is mixture of numerals with alphabetic letters in order to make messages short (Mphahlele and Mashamaite: 2005).Texting according to Helve and Holm (2005) follows the principles of the old telegraphy machine, with limited space for characters which necessitates the abbreviations of words. In text messages, the longer the text, the more expensive it becomes and users therefore try to shorten words so as to save space and money and thereby coming up with a new version of the English language.

The study which falls within relational grammar theory seeks to analyze and describe the syntactic components of academic and learning related text messages of University of Zimbabwe Students and how the process of mobile texting has led to various changes of particular syntactic structures of English language sentences. Academic and learning related messages in the context of this study are messages sent or received by students which have something to do with their studies or academic life.

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The study will focus on three syntactical aspects namely, pronouns, auxiliary verbs and contractions. Syntax according to Saxton (2010) and Radford (2004) is a branch of linguistics that deals with the joining or combining of words to form phrases, clauses and sentences. Baker and Cokely (1991) and Haegeman (1991) define pronouns as words that stand in place of nouns. Words such as **you, me, I, they and me** are pronouns. Auxiliary verbs are words that mark grammatical aspects such as voice, tense and mood and they typically precede the main verbs (Radford: 2010). The primary auxiliaries in English are **will, shall, be** and others (Radford: 2010). Elrich (1987) defines contractions as when large syntactic structures such as large sentences are reduced into smaller units without changing the meaning. Contractions can also be defined as shortened forms of verbs that represent the sounds of speech.

This study also looks at the relationship between language and society and the impact of sociolinguistic variables such as, social class, gender, age and style on syntactic variations in text messages, regarding the use of pronouns and auxiliary verbs. The study is mainly influenced by Finnegan and Rickford (2004) view that language use is dependent on societal factors and therefore the assumption made in this study is that, the way in which syntax is manipulated by other members of the linguistic community is quite different from the way it is manipulated by the University of Zimbabwe students.

2. Background to Study

2.1 Short Messaging Service (SMS) and English Language

Sinclair (2006), has pointed out that technology has changed and so has the text –the structured use of language that can be sent from one mobile phone to another, resulting in a new form of language texts that have developed through this new medium. Two views have emerged regarding the effect of text messages on the English language. On one side is a common belief that text messaging is giving a battering to written English (Lee: 2002), while another view testifies to the fact that texting does not affect English grammar at all since texting can actually be considered as another language which is completely different from English language and learning this new language does not affect a person's ability to master English grammar (Vosloo: 2009). Although viewed as the bane of proper English, texting has much to offer as it can teach students how to write concisely since 'texters' do not waste time with including extra words as they focus on the minimum information necessary to convey the point. Wood and Joshi (2009) point out that texting is some form of phonetic abbreviation and to produce and read such abbreviations, a certain level of phonological and orthographical awareness is required.

Various scholars (Lee: 2002, Thurlow: 2004) have highlighted that text messaging culture has and continues to affect the formal domain of language use. Lee (2002) has described text messaging as the continuing assault of technology on formal written language. Thurlow (2004) has pointed out texting has impacted on the literacy and standard language use, especially that of young people. The effects of texting are evident in academic papers of University of Zimbabwe students who continue to make mistakes of using abbreviations and a texting style in their academic papers.

Although a number of researches have noted that texting has brought in new ways of writing styles, Crystal (2008) has noted that texting has added a new dimension to language use. For Crystal (2008), its long term impact on the already existing varieties of a language is likely to be negligible since it is not a bad thing. Crystal (2008) goes on to argue that the negative views on text messaging are a reflection of people's anxiety over the new generation of 'texters' gaining control of the English language. This means that, the impact of text messages is not of any important consideration since it is not responsible for either bad English or moral decay.

As a lecturer of Communication Skills at the University of Zimbabwe, the researcher has observed that syntactic structures brought up by text messages are influencing the way in which students write up their academic papers. As a direct result of these observations the researcher was particularly interested in looking at how the text messages syntactic structures are influencing the formal domain of the University of Zimbabwe students writing. An understanding of the syntax of mobile messages of the university students will allow the researcher to trace and assess the impact of text messages syntactic structures on formal English. This study will serve as an important tool for the Communication Skills Unit at the University of Zimbabwe as it provides a starting point on how technology can be used to improve English language skills of University of Zimbabwe students.

2.2 Pronouns

Pronouns, as defined earlier by Baker and Cokely (1991), are words that stand in place of nouns. Such words typically act as subject of sentences and clauses and they introduce and increase proficiency as speakers do not have to continually repeat the whole noun or noun phrase, instead they simply replace it with a substitute, which is a pronoun. Examples of pronouns in English are **she, me, I, them, he and them**. Pronouns typically occupy the subject position which is occupied by the noun they replace and in the process they become subjects of sentences they introduce. In Standard English subject pronouns can only be omitted in very few cases such as in imperative sentences, *come here!* Dropping the noun or pronoun according to Sinclair (2006) results in an ungrammatical sentence as shown by the sentence, * *came yesterday morning*.

2.3 Auxiliary Verbs

Auxiliary verbs, according to Radford (2010), are words used in forming tense of other verbs. They typically precede main verbs to mark tense (past, present and future). Turner (1998) notes that auxiliary verbs in both cases give the principle verb or the particular verb a tense that tells us when the action occurred, past, present or future. Just like in sentences introduced by pronouns, where the subject position cannot be empty, it is the same with auxiliary verbs. Auxiliary verbs typically head the phrases they introduce that is, tense phrases. As noted by Turner (1998) it is grammatically incorrect to say, **I seen it* or **I do it*

2.4 The General Sentence Structure of English

Words are not haphazardly joined together but there are principles and rules, particular to a language that should be followed. English language sentences follow a subject (S), Verb (V) and Object (O) word order. In linguistics typology according to Crystal (1997), subject -verb-object (SVO) is a sentence structure where the subject comes first, the verb second and the object third. An example of a sentence in English that highlights the SVO structure is, *John rides a bicycle*. *John* is the subject by means of it being the doer of the action of riding the bicycle and chiefly because the word *John* precedes the verb. The word *rides* is the verb (V) that is, the act of riding a bicycle and the word *bicycle* is the object by virtue of it being the receiver of the act of riding.

Relationships exist between words in a sentence whereby one word, the subject controls the meanings of other words and Rockwitz and Samuel (2004: 207) notes that sentences must all have a subject and a predicate. A subject (S) can be a noun or a pronoun and the subject constitutes the prerequisite element. Another component of the syntactic structure of languages including English is the object which is a word that receives the action and typically comes after the verb of the sentence. When the verb shows action, the subject is the person or thing that does the action.

3. Methodology

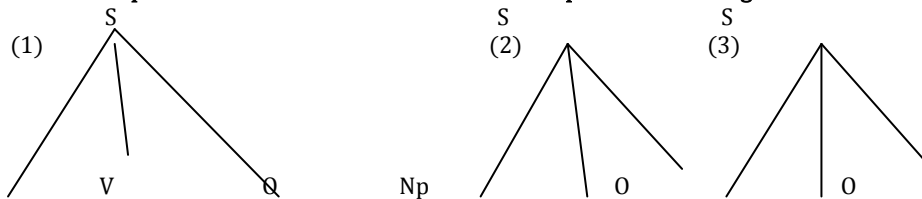
The findings presented in this research are based on the data that was collected from fifty University of Zimbabwe students' academic or learning related text messages. The researcher collected text messages from twenty (20) male students and (30) female students. The researcher was quite aware that he might face problems in accessing student's text messages since most students would not be ready to give out the researcher the permission to read their personal messages as it is interfering with their personal and private life hence; the researcher chose to look at academic and learning related messages. The researcher assured respondents that the data to be collected from them was solely used for academic purposes. Each respondent was asked to forward two academic or learning related text messages from their sent items in their mobile cell phone.

A total of 100 messages were collected by the researcher but only ninety were analysed. The messages obtained were authentic because the method used was unobtrusive and not influenced by any interaction with the researcher. The researcher also used unstructured interviews in an effort to understand the factors which influenced the structure of sentences in the text messages. The unstructured interviews allowed room for further questioning and for more probing to be carried out after the data was collected from the respondents. The data collected was analyzed using a descriptive method.

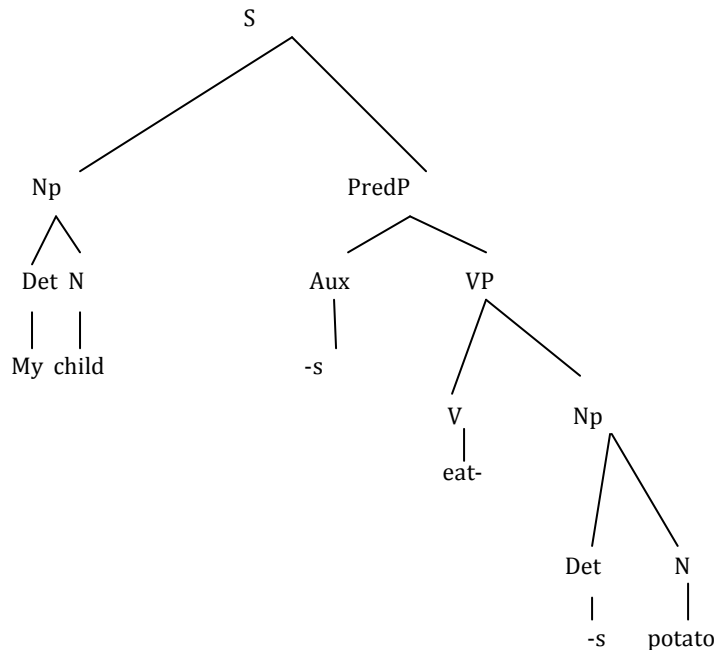
4. Data Presentation and Analysis

The results of this study showed that there is variation in the syntactic structures of English sentences in text messages from formal English. The data collected showed that there are neither rules nor grammar which users adhere to because the text messaging platform is informal. There are a great number of omitted elements of the English sentence structure, that is, subjects, verbs and objects hence it becomes problematic to note down a basic syntactic structure of mobile text messages. The analysis of the corpus of data collected showed that there is a syntactic revolution where there are omissions of pronouns and auxiliary verbs and contraction of phrases, because mobile texting is a constrained channel of communication.

4.1 Structural Representations of SVO structures within cell phone text messages.



The first structure indicates that the S (np) (subject) component is omitted, the second structure also show that the V (verb) element is being omitted and the third structure is indicating that the S (subject) and the V (verb) elements are also omitted .The tree structures above show that there is no systematic pattern when students structure their sentences in text messages and that there are syntactic variations of structural representation of English sentence structure. This is despite the fact that English is basically an SVO sentence structure language, whereby a subject(S), verb (V) Object (O) order is followed (Stewart and Little :2007). For example the sentence, **My child eats potatoes** shown in the syntactic tree below



3.1 Omission of Pronouns

The results indicated that in the syntax of text messages, students omit pronouns. The most frequently omitted subject pronoun is the first person singular pronoun **I** and second person pronoun including **you** and **we**, while the omission of the third person pronoun is rare.

Table 1. Selected sentences in text messages and omitted Pronouns.

Mobile text messages	Standard English Sentences	Omitted Pronouns
1. <i>wil finish @4</i>	I will finish at four	I, we
2. <i>wld have done beta than that</i>	You would have done better than that	you
3. <i>just saw her once</i>	I just saw her once	I
4. <i>can get it back 2gether as a grp</i>	We can get it back together as a group	we

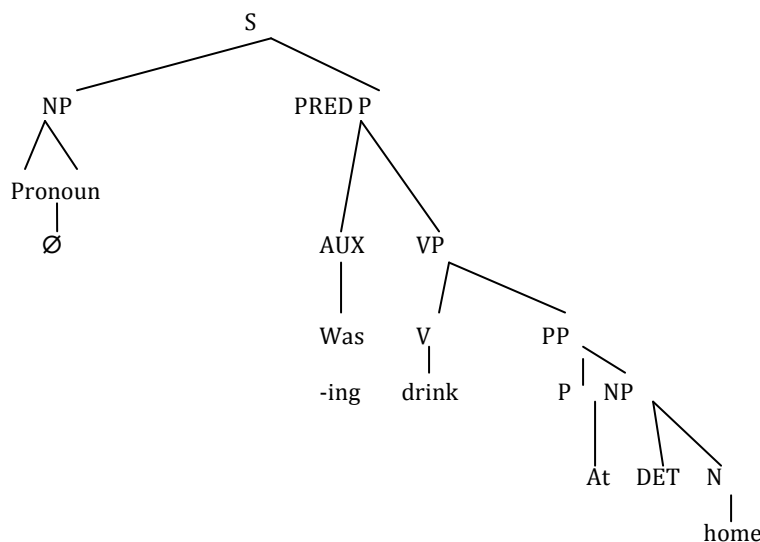
Sentences in the Table 1 show that students omit pronouns in sentences that the formal English cannot omit. In sentence Number 1, students omitted the first person singular *I* or the first person plural pronoun *We*. These pronouns act as subjects of those sentences yet they are omitted. This shows that the Subject component of the SVO structure is omitted. The sentences also show that text messages are subjectless as opposed to formal English where subject position cannot be left blank otherwise it results in an ungrammatical sentence (Haegeman:1991).

One can possibly assume that English is a subject-less language when it comes to mobile texting. This is very different from the Standard English which according to Sinclair (2006) is a non null subject or a non pro drop language as it is clear that pronouns typically occupy subject positions in sentences they introduce. It means therefore that the pronouns are the subjects of those sentences as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Selected text messages showing omitted pronouns.

Messages omitting pronouns in text messages	Messages with pronouns in standard English	Omitted pronouns
5. <i>didn't cme ,juss was home</i>	I did not come, I was home	I
6. <i>thot cld make it here</i>	we thought you could make it here	We, you
7. <i>Hv been praying all nght</i>	we have been praying all night	we
8. <i>comin now</i>	I am coming now	We/ I
9. <i>wz drnking at home</i>	I was drinking beer at home	I

Text messages in Table 2 show that there are no pronouns that act as subjects of these sentences. Message Number 7 shows that there is no pronoun that is reflecting the person or people who were praying all night as also shown in message Number 9 which is represented a phrase structure tree below;



There are null subjects in all sentences since there is no visible subject that shows who or what is doing or has done a thing. Haegeman (1991) has pointed out that, in every sentence in English, if the subject is omitted, the result will be ungrammatical because the subject position must always be filled. However, as

Baron (2002) clearly explains, language that is specific to SMS users often does not relate to the standard language hence the absence of pronouns in text messages does not make them ungrammatical.

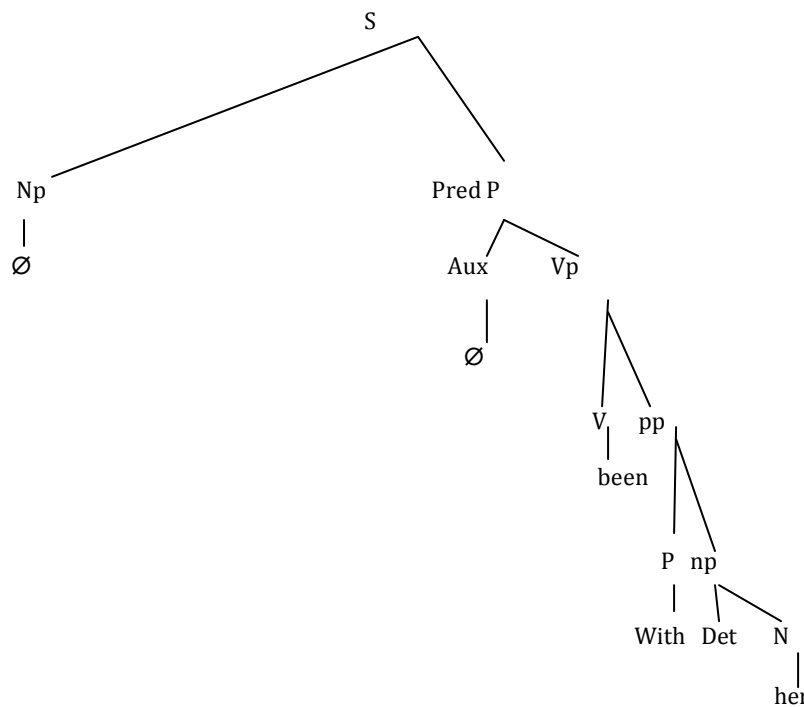
3.2 Omission of Auxiliary Verbs.

The text messages collected also show a great number of students omitting auxiliary verbs which mark grammatical aspects such as tense. Eighty percent of the messages that were collected showed that respondents did not include auxiliary verbs in their sentences as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Selected text messages and omitted auxiliary verbs.

Texts messages with no auxiliaries	Messages with auxiliaries in the standard English	Omitted auxiliaries
10. <i>y u doin ths</i>	Why are you doing this?	are
11. <i>hw u copyin wt clge lfe</i>	How are you copying with college life?	are
12. <i>been wth her</i>	I have been with her	have
13. <i>we ths 2gether</i>	We were in this together	were

In ninety percent of text messages, fifty messages showed students omitting auxiliary verbs. Text messages in Table 3 show that students also omit auxiliary verbs such as **are** in sentence 9, **Y u doin this** (why are you doing this). Auxiliary verb **have** is also omitted in text message in more than seventy percent of the text messages as shown in sentence number 11, **Been with her** (I have been with her). The omission of the verb (V) element of the SVO structure in text messages further complicates the issue of generalizing the SVO structure of English sentences as the structure seems to be haphazard with no particular order. Where there is a subject, the auxiliary verb is omitted so that the tree structure would look like the tree below.

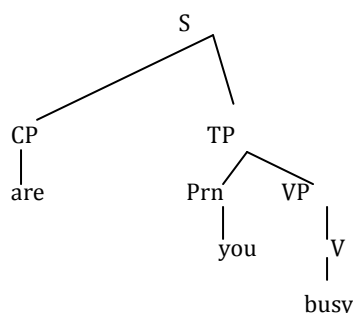


The omission of auxiliary verbs in text messages results in no tense marking within the syntax of text messages. This is because, as Turner(1998) points out, the auxiliary verb gives a particular tense that tells when the action or occasion being talked about and what happened, that is, past, present or future for example in text messages 13,14 and 15 .

- 14. Where u at (where are you at)
- 15. We mde be 2gether (we were/are made to be together)
- 16. missin her lt (I am missing her a lot)

Respondents do not mark tense in their mobile text messages because there is no word that gives a particular tense as when the action being talked about happened. In sentence 15 there is no tense marking that shows when the person being talked about was being missed (whether it was in the future nor in the present). The absence of tense marking is also evident in text messages number 13 and 14 where there are no auxiliary verbs to perform that task.

From the data collected, of the seventy five percent of the text messages that had no auxiliary verbs and of these twenty percent were questions. Auxiliary verbs combine with other verbs to make all the tenses except the present and the past. Auxiliary verbs were absent in all questions the researcher gathered showing that auxiliary verbs are omitted in question formation and this is exemplified by the message Number 17. U busy? (Are you busy?) in the tree below;



From the above tree, the auxiliary verb **are** is omitted in the following question **are you busy?** The auxiliary verbs **are** and **is** are omitted in text messages when they are the heads of those tense phrases. The other examples below also show that auxiliary verbs are omitted in question formation.

18. U called her? (Have you called?) 19. U asking her? (Are you asking her?)
 20. Wen u closing sculls (When are closing schools?)

Seventy eight percent of the text messages collected indicated that respondents omitted pronouns and auxiliary verbs. Of the seventy eight percent, sixty one percent used the character **m** to replace both the subject pronoun and the auxiliary verb once. The character **m** was used to reflect the word **me** as in **u love m** (you love me) or to replace the auxiliary verb **am** and the first person singular pronoun **I** as in text messages 21, 22 and 23.

21. m nw confused (I am now confused) 22. yah m quiet gel (Yes, I am a quiet girl)
 23. m of 2 ma lecture (I am off to my lecture)

The messages analyzed also indicated that the auxiliary verb and the subject pronoun is contracted and replaced by **iv**. The characters, **iv** stands is used to stand for the first person singular **I** and the auxiliary verb **have as** exemplified in text messages 24, 25 and 26 in the table below

Table 3: Selected messages showing contractions

Text Messages	Messages without contractions	Contracted phrase
24. <i>Iv bn gud</i>	I have been good	I have
25. <i>Iv gne out</i>	I have gone out	I have
26. <i>Iv nt yt dn e assingmnt</i>	I have not yet done the assignment	I have

4. Factors Prompting Omissions and Contractions

4.1 Channel Constraints

Students omit pronouns, auxiliaries and contract some sentences because of the limited space for characters or letters. Service providers often have limited space for a single text message of up to 160 characters. That is one of the major factors that trigger omissions of pronouns and auxiliaries and other components of the SVO structure. Students want to minimize expenses and to make sure that their intended messages is delivered in the single message space; students develop a style of omitting words and contracting sentences so as to make them as short as possible. This has been one of the major reasons why new syntactic

structures different from the standard English have come up. Text messages Number 22 and 23 shown below are good examples of new syntactic structures.

27. *nt filin lk eatin* (I am not feeling like eating)

28. *nt in mood 4 lectre 2day* (I am not in the mood for lectures today)

The above sentences show that texters would need more space to say **I am not in the mood for lectures today** than to just type **nt in mood 4 lectre 2day** as reflected in text message 28.

4.2 Linguistic Pragmatic Inference

The intentional omission of words and contracting phrases is also a result of interlocutors having common background knowledge about what they are exchanging and sharing. This confirms Harper and Palen's (2005) study which has shown that most messages are sent between friends who share a considerable amount of background information. This means omissions of pronouns; auxiliaries and contractions of phrase will not affect the communication process or make decoding of information difficult and because of this there seem to be no need to include subjects and auxiliaries in the text messages.

4.3 Time

Interactions among students using text messages are often very fast hence there is need for quick responses to keep interactions moving on, which can be achieved by omission of words. This is also a factor leading to such kind of syntax where pronouns and auxiliary verbs are omitted and phrases are contracted to make it fast to chat as shown in text messages 29 and 30.

29. *At xul now* as compared to (Are you at school now?)

30. *callin her .nt anserin* as compared to (I have been calling her and she is not answering.)

Text messages 29 indicate that it is faster to just say **at xul now?** than to use all words hence students omit words so as to save time because of various chats at that particular time.

4.4 Gender

The text messages analyzed in this study indicate that female students seem to be the main driving force behind all the creation of new syntactic structures because eighty percent of the messages that had omissions and contractions were from female respondents. Seventy percent of the messages that omitted pronouns were obtained from female respondents and thirty percent of the messages which had no pronouns were collected from male students. Sixty percent of the messages which had no auxiliaries were collected from female respondents and forty percent were from male respondents. Ten percent of all the text messages analyzed had no contracted phrases.

The results show that female students omit pronouns, auxiliaries more than male students probably because they are the ones with more friends whom they usually text. It is assumable that female students' communicative needs are quite higher than those of male students. It can be assumed henceforth, that female students' rate and need for communication is higher than that of male students.

5. Conclusion

The study showed that the syntax of text messages does not have a generalized SVO structure of English sentence. This is because a lot of variation occurs where the subject(S) component is omitted whilst the verb (V) is not. In other structures it is the verb component that is omitted whilst the subject(S) and the object is not omitted. Sometimes it is the subject(S) and the verb (V) is also omitted and the Object (O) component present.

The study also showed that text messages in cell phones are subjectless as a result of the omission of subject pronouns. Auxiliary verbs are also omitted whilst in larger sentences phrases are contracted. This is a result of mobile texting being a constrained channel of communication where there is limited space for one to express all words in a sentence. The need to reply messages faster has resulted in such sentence structure where subjects and auxiliaries are omitted.

The study also found sociolinguistic factors playing a major role in shaping the syntactic structures of text messages in the form of gender, background knowledge and economic constraints. Economically, students are omitting pronouns and auxiliary verbs and contracting phrases as a means to shorten messages especially in message space provided by SMS providers. Shortening of text messages allow messages to fit

into the limited space and not to have two messages which are sent separately. This is because, after the particular space has been used up, the following space will constitute a second message, which will also mean an extra expense. The study also concluded that syntactic variation within text messages does not result in communication breakdown. The omission and contractions do not have any effect when students decode messages since they will be having common background information about what they are discussing.

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