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Group identities in Kenyan SMS messages

Short Message Service (SMS) as a new form of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) seems to dissolve interaction and social hierarchies, thus resulting in the emergence of social groups. To determine how SMS has resulted in the emergence of social groups, this article explores the issues of group identities and language use in Kenyan text messages. Group identities and language use are examined in terms of age, social hierarchy and gendered identity. An integration of social structures and linguistic structures is emphasised. The findings reveal that a "new" language which presents the group identity of the users has evolved through SMS. Group identities are determined through the social agents of SMS language.

Groepsidentiteite in Keniaanse SMS boodskappe

As nuwe vorm van rekenaar-bemiddelde kommunikasie blyk kortboodskapdiens (SMS) sosiale interaksie en hiërargieë op te los sodat sosiale groepe hul verskyning maak. Met die oogmerk om die bydrae van SMS tot die vorming van sosiale groepe te bepaal, is groepsidentiteite en taalgebruik in Keniaanse SMS boodskappe verken. Groepsidentiteite en taalgebruik is ondersoek in terme van ouderdom, sosiale hiërargie and geslagtelikheid. Die integrasie van sosiale strukture en linguale strukture is beklemtoon. Daar is bevind dat 'n "nuwe" taal wat die groepsidentiteit van gebruikers verteenwoordig deur middel van SMS ontwikkel het. Groepsidentiteite word bepaal deur die sosiale agente van SMS taal.

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Globalisation has had a profound impact on communities as computers, travel and electronic media dismantle the traditional barriers among groups of people (Jonhs *et al* 2003: 85). Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) begs for a redefinition of the word "group" since CMC is most often limited to text communication (Daft & Lengel 1984). CMC is a type of communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of networked telecommunication systems that facilitate encoding, transmitting and decoding messages (December 1996, Herring 1996 & 2010). Thus, in this article, communication is defined as the process whereby a group of people create, exchange, and perceive text messages through the direct use of SMS communication. A group is a number of people who share certain beliefs and it has a boundary that casts group members as insiders and all others as outsiders (Sumner 1906). Sherif's (1948) definition of group encompasses Sumner's definition and expounds on it by stating that aspects which members in a group may share include interests, values, ethnic/linguistic background, roles and kinship. In addition, Homans (1951) defines a group as a number people who communicate often over a span of time and by means of face-to-face communication. Thus, in sociology, a group is usually defined as a number of people who identify and interact with one another (Hogg 2003). Telephone text messaging (SMS) is a form of CMC that represents an emerging discourse that is used to represent the social group of its users.

Groups of people in sociolinguistics use language to form social identities. Social interaction and dealings with other people enable us to express our identity or to make sense of our experiences. Identity is often characterised in terms of one's interpersonal characteristics, such as self-definition, and the roles and relationships one takes in various interactions (Calvert 2002). To young people identity relates to what it means to be part of a social group. Hall (1997) believes that only language is central to meaning, and maintains that identities are a constructed form of closure, a meeting point between discourses and practices which hail us into place as social subjects of particular discourses. Within the social interactive perspective internet users

take on the roles of others through playful stances in order to express their identity. For social interactions, language is a key means through which those roles are explored and constructed (Harter 1998). Therefore, the sense of identity is governed by language and is distributed, and resisted, in discourse.

Interlocutors use language varieties as a system of linguistic expressions whose use is governed by situational factors to form their own individual social identities and online communities (Crystal 2001, Pawelczyk 2001). In fact, language is an irreducible part of social life, dialectically interconnected with other elements of social life (Fairclough 2003). An analysis of group identities in Kenyan text messages is therefore the social construction of social life. In this article text messages are viewed as elements of social events and the interactive process of meaning-making. Once interlocutors are members of a specific user group, new and creative linguistic forms develop which reflect the social identity of the group (Rheingold 1993, Lawley 1994, Baym 1995).

Features of SMS language are important for constructing language identity. However, young people must master skills such as personal economy, strategies for negotiations and how to interact with others. Text messaging is considered attractive mainly to young users because SMS costs are lower as compared to phone conversations (Habluetzel 2007). The composition of the language of text messages shows an expressive facet of mobile telephony, specifically the use of slang or newly manufactured words. The use of new language within a small peer group underpins group membership and excludes those who are not competent in slang (Ling 2000). Therefore, the use of slang language is an aspect of identity among users. A distinctive feature of SMS in various languages is the use of non-standard language and abbreviated typography (Doring 2002, Ong'onda 2009). Doring (2002) believes that abbreviations and acronyms fulfil a collective identity function whereby users require a special shared knowledge to be able to understand the language and use it. SMS language also entails the removal of paralinguistic communication such as facial expression (Aitchison & Lewis 2003).

The use of non-standard orthography is evidently a powerful and playful means for young people to affirm their identities. However, some scholars insist that texting has a negative influence on Standard English (Siraj & Ullah 2007, Shortis 2007). Nonetheless, text language should not be feared or discouraged since texters recognise that language is context-specific (Chilulwa 2008) and does not interfere with standard literacy (Tagliamonte & Dennis 2008). Moreover, SMS is growing rapidly as a creative way of communicating (Nadler-Nir 2008). However, students have to learn about the importance of Standard English as a medium of educated communication (Crystal 2005). Therefore, teachers of English should not view SMS language as detrimental but as an opportunity to raise students' awareness of different linguistic conventions that operate in different situations and contexts (for instance, formal and informal letters).

The youths view mobile phones as supplying mechanisms of expressing both their individuality and group identities. Current research in SMS has revealed how social identity is presented by teenagers.[1] Nevertheless, as the growth of SMS proliferates, the domain of language and identity is open to investigation. It is against this background that this article attempts to determine the relations between linguistic meaning and social meaning, thus revealing the social groups manifested in Kenyan text messages.

1.   The present study

This article falls under the scope of aputative internet linguistics (Crystal 2005), specifically on the use of the medium itself (SMS). The research therefore deals with the lingual aspect of sociolinguistics (Weideman 2010). A sociolinguistic aspect in CMC examines the way in which language evolves new varieties, and especially increasing its expressive range at the informal end of the stylistic spectrum (Crystal 2005). However, sociolinguistics is specifically concerned with the lingual aspect of experience, lingual identity (cf Weideman 2010) which helps to relate our study to sociology and psycholinguistics. Therefore, this article examines group identities

1   Cf Ling 1998 & 2000, Glinter & Eldridge 2001, Herring 2004, Good 2007.

in Kenyan text messages among SMS users. Using content analysis of text messages, the article examines the type of information that is revealed in SMS discourse and its role. The following aspects are of particular interest: what group/social identities are manifested in SMS discourse; how are group identities represented, and what role do they play in the user's social life.

2.　Methodology

This article aims to examine group/social identities in Kenyan text messages. The data collected was limited to interlocutors aged 17 years and above. The gender composition consisted of 16 males and 16 females. All participants were SMS users. Data was gathered from three sources: 15 questionnaires were completed by university students, thus generating 75 messages. These students were requested to transcribe five messages from their inbox. Conversely, log forms were given to 12 interlocutors who were considered adults, and these log forms generated 60 messages. Communication diaries were given to 5 teenagers who were requested to fill their communication diaries for five days. The participants were assured of anonymity and privacy of their messages and hence gave us the consent to analyse their messages.

3.　Discussion

A social theory approach was adopted to analyse group identities in SMS, thus allowing the text from the data collected to be classified based on three social variables: age, gender and social hierarchy. The analysis engages sociolinguistics with a social theory (Coupland 1998). The social theory centres on language within social life and pushes directions of theorisation itself (Fairclough 2000: 4). The turn to language in recent social theory references a turn to language in recent social life (Fairclough 2000 & 2003). A linguistic turn is the view of language as structuring human cognition and performing human activities (Fox 2007). Social theory carries implication for how language in social life might be researched or shows the

relationships between language and other elements, in particular social life (Halliday 1978, Halliday & Hassan 1976).

In this article the analysis of language involved the identification of social discourses, styles, genres and dialects as reflected in SMS language. Social dialects are varieties associated with speakers belonging to a given demographic group such as age groups, women versus men, or different social classes (Biber 1998, Chambers 2003). Therefore, in order to determine the relationship between social meaning and linguistic meaning, the following group identities were identified: age identities, social hierarchy and educational identities, and gendered identities.

4. Age identities

Age-based variation is a stable variation which varies within a population based on age. Speakers of a particular age group use specific linguistic forms in successive generations to form a speech/language community. A speech community is a group of people who do not necessarily share the same language, but share a set of norms and rules for use of language (Romaine 1994: 22). Conversely, a language community is a group of people who, in their implicit sense of regularities of linguistic usage, are united in adherence to the idea that there exists a functionality-differentiated norm for using their language denotationally (Silverstein 1996: 285). One example of a sub-group dialect is the speech of street youth who intend to express social identity. Social theory was used in the analysis to point out age identities since speakers use language to make statements about who they are. Social theory is substantially attributed to understandings of modernity which in one way or another centres upon language or implies an enhanced role for language in modern social life (Fairclough 2000).

In an analysis of age identities the data was grouped into two: the youth and adults. The youths ranged from the ages of 17 to -35 while adults ranged from the age of 35 and above. It was easy to inevitably identify the participants' age from a fragment of their text. The data reflected that speakers expressed different choices in the way

they used language (linguistic cases). This finding reflects Smith's (1996: 434) observation that contemporary social life is "textually-mediated"; people live their practices and their identities through such texts. Therefore, as users communicate via text messaging they use language to express their age groups.

The youths used a secret code to communicate. A code is a social norm used to communicate in accordance with the situation at hand (Hall 1997). The youths demonstrated the freedom to use a wide range of linguistic forms available in any setting and at any time, hence creating an age identity in SMS community. The youths modulated both the content and created new linguistic forms in order to meet their communicative needs. This then implies that the youths use creative language as a means to identify with each other or to exclude others. The language specific to SMS users often does not relate to standard language and thus SMS communication is labelled as a secret code of the big SMS action against long sentences (Doring 2002). The following typical examples illustrate the ideas discussed above.

> M.1 U r al I av n u alwyz b tha bst blsng
> (YOU are all I love and you will always be the best blessing.)

> M.2 Useizd from sending me SMS SRSLY Y? Gnt
> (YOU ceased from sending me an SMS SERIOUSLY WHY? Good night.)

> M.3 Hi. are U stil mad. Ukicome kesho dont disappear like u did 2day. I want 2 ax u smethin. Goodnite
> (Hi. Are YOU still pissed off. When you come tomorrow don't disappear like you did today. I   want to ask you something. Goodnight.)

The above examples illustrate that the youth demonstrate the use of their knowledge of language combined with their innate creative abilities to manufacture new words. For instance, in M.1, the interlocutor uses capitalisation of the word "YOU" as a means of capturing tonal variation that lacks in CMC. In addition, M.1 also has homophonic graphemes (a technique used to change words so that they appear as phonetically transcribed) such as *u, r* and *n* that shorten the words *you, and, are,* and phonological approximation of the word *best* which was written as *bst.* M.2 also illustrates the youths'

ability to emulate prosodic features as a compensatory strategy for the lack of the parallel communicative channel provided in face-to-face interaction. Thus capitalisation of the words *SMS SERIOUSLY WHY* in M.2 indicates the speaker's need to create emphatic stress in a sentence. Therefore, each style is fulfilling particular communicative needs. The use of short forms of the words is due to the technical restrictions of text messaging, the limited space (160 characters). Moreover, the social relationship between interlocutors may be influencing the relationship between speakers. Therefore communications with close friends, partners and family members allows the youths to organise messages pragmatically as a common background exists.

Adults, on the other hand, present a variety of formal language which indicates that their SMS language is less variable (lacks electronic discourse). The sentence construction of the adults is complex and conforms to the standard rules of English language as shown in M.4 below. M.4 upholds the traditional/standard way of salutary remarks such as the opening annotations (good morning) of a greeting message that occurs in face-to-face communication. In addition, the sentence structure of M.4 is formal. The sentence structure of M.4 is not sophisticated by the use of stylish strategies employed by young users.

> M.4 Good morning. How are you today? Just a quick word to say may the
> sun rise upon you good day and nice weekend. Best regards.

The language of M.5 below conforms to the standard norms of punctuation marks which are intact. Moreover, the themes/content (greetings/informatory) in adults' messages differ slightly from the younger users (friendly/intimate). In M.5 the user sends a greeting message as a means of staying in touch while M.6 is an exchange between users with an intention of arousing critical dialogue among them. M.7 and M.8 conforms to the standard norms of spoken language as shown by the use of first person *I* and *our* that often occurs in face-to-face interaction.

> M.5 A morning is a wonderful blessing either sunny or stormy. It stands
> for hope giving another start of what we call life. Good morning.
> Have joyful hours.

M.6 The biggest room in the world is the room for improvement. Have a good day.

M.7 If u have diskette enda hapo they save our work, then come with it.
(If you have a diskette go there, they save our work, then come with it.)

M.8 As I retire for the night I pray that God keep those I love like you safe, and those in pain, sick, to sleep with his graces. Good night

SMS language exhibited in texts sent by adults is formal. This may be due to the availability of resources such as money, traditional communication methods, emphasis on standard forms and technological freaks. The above discussion confirms Ling's (2000: 102) findings that the rapid development of technique and technology means that the experience of the older generation is only applicable to the situations of their children. The child is in this way active in his/her own socialisation (Ling 2000: 103). Moreover, young people are the innovators of SMS written language, hence the slaves of the growing text messaging culture (Thurlow 2003: 11). The discourse of the youth in Kenyan text messages is highly variable (a language with features of electronic discourse) as compared to the other group (adults). The results are presented in Figure 1.

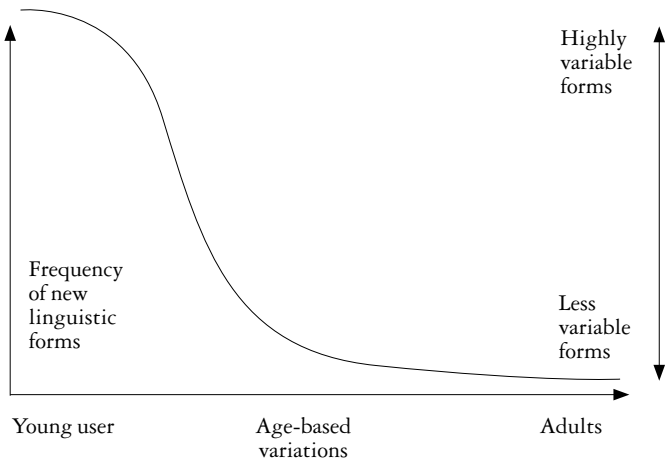Figure 1: Model of an inverted s-curve in age-based variation in Kenyan text messages

Figure 1 has implications on several different levels. The figure indicates that the younger the age, the higher the variation since young users innovate new linguistic forms to meet their communication needs. For instance, young users created various techniques such as mixing numbers and letters, for instance *2day* for *today,* to shorten their text messages as shown in M.3, forming what Jansen (2005) calls a rapid-fire conversation style or weird language. Androutsopolous (2006: 419) considers the strategy of mixing numbers and letters as a jumble of digits and letters.

Figure 1 also conveys that adults present a variety of language that is more formal, thus their SMS language is less variable. The results observed from the quantitative analysis of Figure 1 show a lapse in use of language in Kenyan text messages as compared to earlier studies that were done on language change by Labov (1966). The reason for this is that the prestigious variety, in this case, is the electronic/technological discourse that is spoken by the youth who demonstrate creativity by inventing new linguistic forms. The messages serve to tie the group together through the development of a common history (Ling 2000: 106). Thus young users view mobile phone text messaging not only as utilitarian but also as meaningful in terms of social grouping and identity.

5.   Social hierarchy and educational identity

A social theory encompasses the multiple relations between linguistic meaning and social meaning. Therefore, an intersection of social status (education) and stylistic continua was used in the analysis of social hierarchy and educational identity. Style means how texts figure in the identification of people involved in the practice; the construction of identities (Fairclough 2000 & 2003). Nearly 90% of the messages collected from university students and teenagers were stylish. The majority of the users created their text messages using words, phrases and sentences that were truncated or fragmented as illustrated in M.9 and M.10. The users combined various strategies to invent a new lexicon. In addition, the user of M.9 used numerical numbers such as *2, 4,* and *10* to replace homophones. The number *2*

replaced the word /*too*/, the number *4* replaced the sound /*for*/ while the number *10* replaced the word /*ten*/. Both users of M.9 and M.10 used homophonic single graphemes such as *u*, *r*, *n*, *b* and *c* to replace *you, are, and, be* and *see.* In addition, the user of M.9 used clipping as a strategy to shorten language by dropping the last grapheme <*g*> of the word *wrong*, in the process developing a new spelling *wron.*

M.9   U'r 2swit 2b 4go10 4 ua lav cs no wron n kno no evil. Av a kul nait
     ful of tots abt me
     (You're too sweet to be forgotten for your love sees no wrong and
     knows no evil. Have a cool night full of thoughts about me.)

M.10 Hi gal r u @ colle? Al b dea on su en op 2cu.gnt
     (Hi girl are you at college? I will be there on Sunday and I hope to
     see you. Good night.)

The degree of diversity of stylised varieties indexes the level of education of its users (Labov 2001: 505). SMS language gives the youth the ability to arrange knowledge in ways that can lead to innovation, which, in turn, puts demands on language (Ong'onda 2009: 156). An analysis of messages collected from university students and teenagers (ages 17-19) show that the more diversified one's language is, the higher his/her education level. For instance, the educated users take the best features from certain aspects of written language and combine them to create a new variety of language best suited in SMS electronic environments.

Educated users created "emoticons", more commonly known as smileys (orthographically rendered iconographic representations of facial expressions, serving as indexical signs of the "smiles" they emulate). Crystal (2001) suggests that emoticons are used to fill a void in online communication because online interaction cannot rely on facial and body gestures to express thoughts and feelings. Emoticons are used for several reasons. First, they help to accentuate or emphasise a tone or meaning during message creation. Secondly, they help to establish a current mood or impression of the author (Constantin *et al* 2002). Lastly, emoticons are a creative and visually salient way to add expression to an otherwise completely textual form (Crystal 2001). However, smileys are used very creatively and independently by different users, hence defining their group boundaries. Thus, through the new written conventions of SMS, texters have developed a written

form of sounds that replace the ability to hear spoken utterances. M.11 indicates the user's need of expressing silence so as to avoid disturbance.

M.11 ÖÖ ÖÖÖ

> Ö ÖÖ … shhh … I'm walking slowly bcoz u might be sleeping … I'll just leave my message 4 u: :GDNYT!
> (I'm walking slowly because you might be sleeping … I'll just leave my message for you. GOODNIGHT!)

M.12, on the other hand, shows the users need to emit the facial expression on the face, which is a smile (☺). The sender of M.12 sends this message as a form of either appreciating the receiver or with an intention of maintaining friendship.

M.12 A gd friend is like a gd bra … hard to find, very comfortable, supportive, and always close to the heart … HELLO MY GD BRA
> (A good friend is like a good brazier … hard to find, very comfortable, supportive, and always close to the heart … HELLO MY GOOD BRAZIER☺)

Educated users also make use of emoted asterisks (*) or angle brackets ([]) as semantic equivalents to the emotions. In M.13 the user creates emphasis by using the angle brackets ([]) to place stress on the word *today* which means that the receiver of the message will only be paid that day and not tomorrow or in future. Moreover, the use of asterisks (*) on the word *identification card* implies that it is one of the requirements one needs before payment.

M.13 Guys are being paid [today]. Carry your *id*.
> (Guys are being paid [today]. Carry your *identification card*).

Users utilise stylized forms (emoticons) since interlocutors are at distance terminals and are unable to hear each other's voice. This has led to creativity since people are forming useful ways to process emotions. Therefore, communication via SMS is a new order of discourse, a new articulation of genres, discourses and styles.

The correlation between social hierarchy and linguistic forms can further be discussed in quantitative analysis as shown in Figure 2.

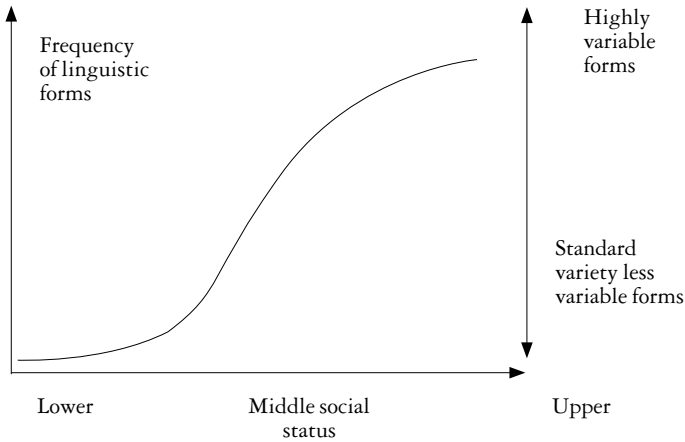Figure 2: Model of an S curve in social hierarchy variation

Figure 2 indicates that the level of social status in terms of education determines the linguistic variation. Figure 2 therefore shows that highly educated individuals manipulate the varieties used in SMS language and freely choose any variety they like. A good illustration of an educational identity is M.14 below.

> M.14 Hi baibe misn u so much. Wot ar u dointhis Friday afternoon. Come we go out please. I have some 411.
> (Hi babe missing you so much. What are you doing this Friday afternoon? Come we go out please. I have some news.)

The user of M.14 resorted to using alphanumeric ellipsis. According to Bush (2005) alphanumeric ellipses are stylised numbers that were popular when people began using pagers as a way to communicate with each other and used numeric systems to represent text. For example, the use of *555* denoted pretended sorrow. M.14 demonstrates the issue of language beyond text by using the alphanumeric ellipsis of number *411*. In Kenyan context, the SMS community of the youth has adopted number *411* as slang word meaning news/gossip. The use of numbers is creative in the sense that the user transfers

number initials to SMS language probably due to the convenient use of stylised numbers rather than the text. Therefore this analysis is specifying genres of SMS, that is, how texts figure in relation to others within the production of social life.

The linguistic variants as signals of social hierarchy in SMS language show an ambiguous situation. The reason for this is that the pattern of correlation between social hierarchy and linguistic variables in SMS language contradicts what has been reported in previous studies conducted by linguists such as Labov. Labov (1966: 222) notes that the higher the social class, the less the variation. Highly variable language in SMS indicates one as having knowledge on how to counter for the shortcomings of the technological device, as demonstrated by the above messages collected from university students. In SMS language Labov's assumption is therefore rendered null and void in the sense that the high-prestige language is the most variable language hence non-standard. We therefore conclude that language with features of electronic discourse create the prestige language. Therefore the most stylised messages are regarded as having a prestige dialect.

In trying to unravel the different identities that exist in SMS discourse, students were also asked, in a questionnaire, why they mix the use of language in SMS. From the responses, several identities such as a fashionable identity, an unconventional identity or a rebellious identity and a knowledgeable or a technologically advanced identity emerged, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: The construction of social and educational identity in SMS

Categories	Responses
A fashionable identity	It is a culture among users, it is fashionable, you look trendy.
Unconventional identity or a rebellious identity	It makes you easy to identify the type of person communicating to you, youth have a trend of talking in Sheng, it comes naturally and for social identity and conforming to correct trends, it helps me communicate with my friends in a language that is only known and understood by us.

Categories	Responses
Knowledgeable or a techno-logically advanced identity	For modernity, it is exciting and illustrates creativity; it gives us an element of confidentiality, to soup the message up, it is instant, location independent and personal

In our own interpretation Table 1 shows that the young and educated people are using language to express what Gao & Yuan (2005: 76) call a linguistic construction of modernity. In this sense it is noted that among members of highly developed online community the use of particular group specific tokens not only identifies members but also leads other members to concentrate on in-group speech. Young users are decoding text to express identity.

The twentieth century has elicited an exciting growth in communication technology, as a result, forming an information society or a technologically advanced society which has become a 'global village'. The youth and the educated therefore demonstrate a modern identity as conveyed by innovations. It is clear that the more one knows about SMS language, the higher one will be in the hierarchy. Young and educated people are the driving force behind linguistic change in Kenyan text messages. The youths are producing different genres, styles and discourses to convey different identities in their new contemporary social life. The young users demonstrate a technological identity (use of language that is technologically determined by what is peculiar to technology). A technological identity appears to be motivated by a lack of resources and due to the knowledge of technology.

The frequency of the new forms, however, grows in progression, hence causing change as demonstrated in Figure 3.
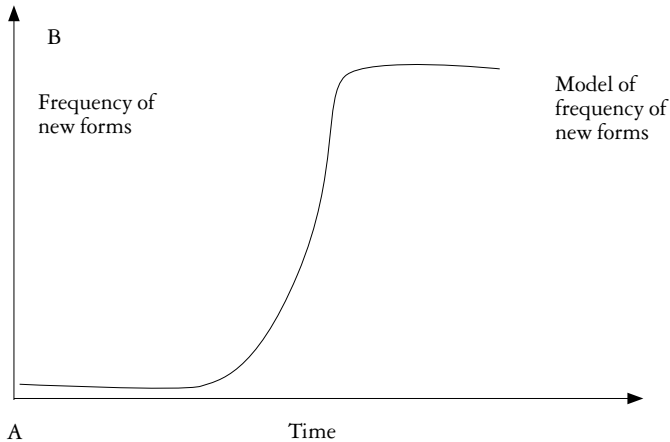
Figure 3: Model of frequency of a new form

Figure 3 neatly dovetails Bailey's (1973: 83) and Labov's (2001: 505) figure on model of frequency on language change. Figure 3 shows that there is a prototypical progression slope for variation in time. The adaptation to a new form in SMS language follows that of language change. The replacement of form A with B occurs slowly at the beginning of a change, accelerates rapidly during the mid course, and tails off slowly in the final stages of the change. Figure 3 also shows that it is predictable that many forms that identify group identity in Kenyan text messages may disappear as time elapses, but many new forms will also appear. However, it is true that participants in Kenyan text messaging communication do not have a uniform status.

6.   Gendered identities

Gender is one of the most obvious factors that affect perception of what people do. In the world of text-based CMC such as text messaging and electronic mail there are no visual or auditory cues to indicate

a speaker's gender. However, as people use language they present themselves as gendered beings. Social theory therefore was used in analysing gendered identities since men and women on average tend to use slightly different language styles. Traditional gender roles embody the male role as agentive where action, self-expansion, and individuality are the rule. By contrast, traditional gender roles define the female role as communal, embodying emotions, expressiveness and focus on others (Bakan 1966: 10). Moreover, these differences tend to be quantitative rather than qualitative (Lakoff 1975: 58). Tannen's (1995: 507) work shows that males and females often differ, with males using direct and forceful style while females use a more indirect and intimate style of interaction. Gendered language use in CMC contexts is not very different from that of face-to-face interaction and includes similar features of verbosity, assertiveness, use of profanity, politeness (and rudeness), typed representation of smiling and laughter, and degree of engagement (Herring 2000: 2).

The concept of gender is treated as a salient sociolinguistic variable (Chambers 2003: 144). Ochs maintains that knowledge of how language relates to gender is not a catalogue of correlations between particular forms and sex of the speaker, referents, addresses and the like (Pawelczyk 2001: 89). Such knowledge rather entails tacit understanding of how particular functions can be used to perform particular pragmatic functions/speech functions and social meanings. In the analysis of gendered identities in Kenyan text messages this article was concerned with pragmatic devices (language as doing things). Pragmatic analysis methods were used to express particular speech functions or social meanings, such as tentativeness or aggression as well as meanings which take gendered significance as masculine and feminine. The corpus of data collected was therefore grouped into two individual groups: males and females. Language tones and semantic features were also used in the analysis of gendered identities. The analysis of Kenyan text messages revealed that women and men have different communicative styles. Communicative style is defined generally as gender-related differences in the use of language. Males and females formulated particular discursive

choices that they made. The analysis concentrated on the relevance of politeness and interpretation of speakers' intentions.

Two gendered styles were identified in the analysis and include female-gendered style and male-gendered style. In keeping with traditional gender roles, females will use language that is more passive, cooperative, and accommodating than males. In the analysis, supportiveness and attenuation characterised the female-gendered style. Supportiveness is characterised by expressions of appreciation, thanking and community-building activities that make other participants accepted and welcomed (Herring 1996 & 2000). The analysis revealed that some messages expressed supportiveness, for instance M.15 expresses the pragmatic function of appreciation.

> M.15 Tym haznt killda sprt. Wish u tha best 4 rmmain'g time,
>   (Time hasn't killed the spirit. Wish you the best for the remaining
>   time.)

M.16 expresses appeals to group while M.17, expresses the pragmatic function of thanking as shown by the polite words such as *thanks* and *appreciation*. Moreover the user embraces the virtue of etiquette that is paramount in spoken language.

> M.16 What a splendid day it has been! You are such a sweet companion.

> M.17 Thanks 4 evertn. I appreciate gd afternoon,
>   (Thanks for everything. I appreciate. Good afternoon.)

Attenuation, on the other hand, includes hedging and expressing doubts, apologising, asking questions, and contributing ideas in the form of suggestions (Herring 1996: 120). In context we realise that women use questions as a rhetorical means of engaging others in a conversation, as shown in the second part of M.18 *(I have a lot to tell you).* Comparatively M.19 also appeals to the receiver to respond to the message as indicated by a pleading tone denoted by the words *please call.*

> M.18 Are you taking me out this weekend? I have a lot to tell you.

> M.19 Av tried 2 kal but all in vain pliz cal. Slip tight ma swit hat,
>   (I have tried to call you but all in vain, please call. Sleep tight my
>   sweetheart.)

Women also contribute ideas and suggestions to the issue being discussed as shown in M.20. Women therefore are more concerned with building and maintaining relationships.

> M.20 Hi Mike, dis is 2 tel u de form 3 paper is out of 85 so adjust marks on poetry. qtn 1n2 1mrk ich Qtn 3 2mrks en 4 1mrk tel wambs. Thks. Flash if u agr. Gd aftann.
> (Hi Mike, this is to tell you that the form three paper is out of 85 marks so adjust the marks on poetry. Question1 and 2 is 1mark each while Question 3 is 2 marks and Question 4 is 1mark. Tell Wambs. Thanks, flash if you agree. Good afternoon.)

Women in essence made questions of a statement, hence offering suggestions. Their messages also revealed thoughts and feelings (M.21 below), as expressed by the use of multiple punctuation marks (!!??).

> M.21 Hi Matt watzup so silence!!?? Wats ckng? I guez I missed u. gdeve
> (Hii Matt what's up you are so silent!?? what's cooking? I guess I missed you, good evening.)

Unlike the female style, the male style is characterised by adversarial putdowns. In other words, males will use language that is more aggressive, resolute, and active language than females. In Kenyan text messages the researchers found that men expressed strong assertions, authoritative tone and their messages had the aspect of verbal aggression. The male style is different from the women style that expresses attenuation. M.22 for instance reveals the prosodic features of the sender. The language tone for instance is bitter as shown by phases such as "of the many days, not a single did you so much miss me that you thought I could do with a simple hallo? Not even one of them did you hurt from missing till you could not no more take it." The words "many days", "not a single day", "you thought I could do" indicate that the sender of the message is bitter and authoritative.

> M.22 Of The many days, nt a single did you so much mis me tht u thought I cld do with a simple hallo? Nt even one of em did u hurt frm missin me til u cldnt no mo take it?
> (Of the many days, not a single day did you miss me so much that you thought I could do with a simple hallo? Not even one of them did you hurt from missing me till you could take it no more.)

M.23 Quite a long silence that is. Do we have to wait till we get to school to say a simple hallo?I hope you had a nice weekend. Good evening.

M.24 What does it actually costs you JUZT to say hi,
(What does it actually cost you just to say hi.)

M.23 demonstrates that men use authoritative tone while text messaging as shown by the modal auxiliary verb (*do*) and their messages reflect the aspect of verbal aggression. Moreover, M.23 and 24 indicate that men and women differ in their use of questions in text messaging. For instance, while women use questions as a rhetorical means of engaging others in a conversation, for men a question is abstract and it does need an answer as shown by M.24. Moreover, as Labov (1972) asserts, men tend to be more verbally aggressive in conversing and they frequently use threats as shown in M.23 ("Do we have to wait till we get to school to say a simple hallo?"). Labov also observes that men use profanities and yell while conversing, as demonstrated by M.25 below. The repetition of the exclamation marks shows the tone of the sender (rising tone) which is actually doubled. The phrase "you can go to hell", on the other hand, is rude and is demeaning to the receiver of the message.

M.25 You can go to hell if you feel we can't cope!!!

Therefore men are ruder than women due to the coarse language they use; for instance, the phrase "you can go to hell" in M.25 is both rude and crude. Our findings concur with those of Savicki (1996) who found that in discussion groups males tend to use impersonal and fact-oriented language, and seem less concerned with politeness and sometimes violate online conduct (Herring 2000). Generally, women and men belong to different sociolinguistic subcultures, with men's internalised linguistic style more competitive and results-oriented and women's more relational and rapport-oriented (Herman 2007). However, there are straightforward (but not very outstanding) differences in gender manifestation in the language of Kenyan text messages.

Another indicator of gender identity is attested in communication ethics. Anonymity and flexibility are inherent in the internet arena.

Freedom from physical constraints and the ability to design one's persona create an experiment with online identity (Turkle 1995). Human beings have different communicative behaviour that reveals their gender, as indicated in the corpus of data collected. Communication ethics was therefore considered a variable of gender identity. This stratagem was more striking compared to the other strategies. In CMC there is the notion of "flaming" a term used by various scholars such as Lawley (1994), Herring (1996), Crystal (2001) and Thurlow (2003) to refer to "the expression of strong negative emotion", use of derogatory, obscene or "inappropriate language" and "personal insults". Once interlocutors flame in CMC they violate Netiquette. Netiquette is a term used by Lawley (1994) to refer to the often unwritten but communally enforced rules governing appropriate behaviour in a hostile or highly critical way to a user who has been perceived as violating the norms of CMC behaviour.

The researchers found that in Kenyan text messages men flamed more than women. This indicates that women and men have different communication ethics. SMS language is a private language. It was therefore observed that men used language that is erotic/indecent/vulgar and filthy. The following messages illustrate this point:

M.24 I need a fxxx
       (I need a fuck)

M.25 I'm hot … I'm horny … I've been masturbating since two … Save me from this hell.

In M.24 the word "fuck" is vulgar while in M.25 the words "horny", "hot" and "masturbating" make the language indecent. Men also sent messages that comparatively revealed highest intimacy between users. Intimacy may be as a result of the media itself. In the questionnaire the participants were asked to give some reasons why they prefer text messaging as a form of communication instead of making a phone call. Users gave varying answers such as "it is fun", "it is confidential", and "we would tell each other things that we cannot openly talk about during face to face interaction", "it is used to express much". However, some cited economical reasons such as it is cheap and durable (for future reference).

CMC fosters intimacy among users, including self-disclosure and sentimental feelings, because it cultivates social connectedness (Hu *et al* 2003). Several implications arise from the responses such as SMS users have the freedom to discuss linguistic taboo issues. In addition, users could communicate taboo issues freely which they cannot in face-to-face communication. The messages below illustrate this point. In M.26, for instance, the user compares the subject of love to the phrases "open legs", "closed eyes" and "wet lips". SMS/text messaging therefore seems to offer a safe environment for users compared to face-to-face communication.

> M.26 Is it TRU/FAL. LOV'S NT measured by HUGNG, KISNG nn SEX. It's ol abt TRSTNG, RESPECTNG n accptng a pason with open LEGS, closd EYES N WET LIPS.
> (Is it TRUE/FALSE that LOVE IS not measured by HUGGING, KISSING and SEX. It's all about TRUSTING, RESPECTING and accepting a person with open LEGS, closed EYES AND WET LIPS.)

> M.27 Wassup! You are the last motherfuxxer breathn. Hw cld u leave bila telling me?
> (What's up! you are the last mother fucker breathing. How could you leave without telling me?)

Hongladarom & Hongladarom (1999) note that one of the netiquette rules is: do not post messages that contain foul language and sexually explicit content. Therefore, when interlocutors violate this rule, they are considered to be less polite online. This article concludes that men flame because of the medium itself and the anonymous nature of the mobile phone device. Since males flame more than women they are considered to be ruder than women. Moreover, SMS is a virtual world, where flexibility and anonymity are possible. Thus, SMS users may feel more comfortable expressing themselves beyond social prescriptions. However, this study does not ascertain that Kenyan women do not flame through text messaging. It can therefore be concluded that men and women have different ways of communicating through Kenyan text messages and that men formulate particular discursive choices from a culturally inventory masculine behaviour, as suggested by Herrmann (2007: 18), while

women, on the other hand, communicate with the undertone of rapport, compassion and empathy.

7. Conclusion

The identification of social groups in CMC is normally not clear cut. However, this article has shown that the discourse of Kenyan text messages reflects group identities within the SMS community. Language on the internet represents a new type of discourse that is shaped by creativity and innovation of its communities (Crystal 2001). This emerging discourse can then be used to express the social identities of its users. The analysis shows how social groups use language to create social life through the SMS medium. Therefore, SMS represents a CMC environment where both identity and language play important roles. Social groups in Kenyan text messages differ significantly in the way in which they use SMS discourse. The analysis also displays differences with regard to reference groups and norms, hence manifesting age, education and gender as group identities. The analysis also reveals a lapse in Labov's (1966: 122) findings since the prestigious variety was the electronic/technological discourse that is spoken by the youth who demonstrate a technological identity. Moreover, Labov's assumption that the higher the social class, the less the variation is rendered null and void as far as SMS language is concerned since this article has shown that the high-prestige language is the most variable language, hence non-standard. It is therefore concluded that language with features of electronic discourse create the prestige language.

The group in SMS defines when to use and how to abbreviate language. From these observations it is logical to conclude that the way Kenyans compress language is different to the way in which other users elsewhere do and this may be due to the influence of the Kenyan variety of English. Therefore it is clear that social variables have an influence on linguistic forms found in Kenyan text messages.

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