# Is SMS Communication Destroying Language? Surveying Attitudes towards SMS Language in Algeria Among Young Users

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**ABSTRACT**

The present study on young Algerians' texters living in Oran aims at investigating SMS communication in Algeria and discovering the various attitudes towards the impact of SMS language on the standards of traditional written language.

The research challenges popular assumptions that SMS language is deteriorating traditional written media and tries to survey texters' attitudes towards the effect SMS language is having on standard written language.

The study's results end with the overall suggestion that a number of young texters demonstrate negative attitudes towards SMS language, but a more important category shows a laissez-faire approach to the concern of language deterioration accelerated by SMS communication. These attitudes may be seen as a key element in the study of the future of both written and oral language in Algeria.

**KEY WORDS:**
Short Message Service (SMS); Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC); Linguistic Analysis; Spoken Versus Written Language; Language Deterioration; Language Constraints, Language Attitudes.

## 1. Introduction

Although all of us can speak at least one language, not everyone is able to write. Many would agree that written language is a limited competence because it demands special competences and skills. However, with the explosion use of the Internet and mobile telephone written language in the twenty-first century the picture is reversed: The number of people involved in written communication has skyrocketed.

In fact, the turn from page to screen has given rise to novel linguistic phenomena which have distinguished its users from other significant-groups. Many scholars have expressed concern about language undergirded by technology and were interested in studying the synergy between them. This study shares much of this interest and aims at examining how this language is seen by its users.

As a major means of global communication, just like the Internet, SMS communication is having a great impact on language use. It is a boom not only to the English language usage (Baron, 1998, 2001; Herring, 1996, 2001) but potentially to many languages.

It is the intention of this work to examine SMS communication in Algeria. A central question in this concern will focus on surveying attitudes of young texters living in Oran towards this 'new' language and the effect SMS language is having on traditional written media.

## 2. Literature Review

Language is a human behaviour over which people historically paid particular and often excessive attention. For more than a century, practically all linguistic theorists have shared the assumption that human language is governed by laws or rules. Languages facilitate communication precisely because they can be described in terms of principles shared by members of a speech community. The fact that people agree-upon interpretations of words or phrases make it possible for them to use language in order to get their meanings across.

Linguistic communication is generally successful because we understand one another's pronunciation or handwriting, agree what words are referring to, and share our comprehension of grammatical relationships in the sentences we speak and write.

In talking about how rules define language, linguists sharply distinguish between descriptive rules (what people in a speech community "know" about their language by virtue of growing up within that milieu) and prescriptive rules (what is conceived as being linguistically right or wrong). The world of written language is overwhelmingly the domain of prescriptivism, which dictates how words are spelled, how punctuation is distributed, and what special formalities someone need to follow, including proper salutations in letters and clear transitions between paragraphs.

However, much of current research in linguistics concerns itself with the descriptive rules, dismissing prescriptivism because the former is more concerned with speakers "natural" knowledge of language. Baron (2008:168) supports the idea that

*"Since the majority of linguists study spoken language, the state of prescriptivism judgments in writing hasn't been on the radar screens of most practitioners in the profession."*

This is not true for CMC language: a new written medium which has received many claims about its negative impact on the standards of traditional written language.

## 2.1 Breaking the Rules

The general response of most CMC linguists and even politicians[1] to the prospects of language decline is characterized by active disquietude about language standards in CMC language. SMS language is no exception. There is an

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[1] See Jacques Chirac, the ancient French president, comment on the effect of the internet on language, (The Economist 21/12/1996:37)

international perception that young users SMS are using degraded language. The new linguistic features of text messaging are often interpreted as being signs of "language deterioration". In fact, most SMS users break or ignore the rules of orthography. For example, they can omit letters or spaces between words, and can use abbreviations and acronyms. They know that breaking rules of written communication will be interpreted by their partners to be due to rapid typing and the limited numbers of characters in text messaging.

To investigate the point (language decline of the English language in CMC) Crispin Thurlow (2006) analyzed more than 100 articles from the international English-language press, written between 2001 and 2005, on computer-mediated communication language. Scores of journalists are proclaiming that email, instant messaging, and text messaging are bleak. A number proclaim that email, instant messaging, and text messaging have created a whole new language, apart from standard English.

*"A new language of the airwaves has been born"*
(Guardian, June26, 2003)

*"Not since man uttered his first word and clumsily held a primitive pencil nearly 10,000 years ago has there been such a revolution in language"*
(Daily Post, September 26, 2001)

That new language is degraded:
*"Texting is penmanship for illiterates"*
(Sunday Telegraph, July 11, 2004)

*"The English language is being beaten up, civilization is in danger of crumbling"*

Is SMS Communication Destroying Language?
Surveying Attitudes towards SMS Language in Algeria
Among Young Users

(Observer, March7, 2004)

But worst of all, computer-mediated communication is contagious, polluting traditional writing:

*"Text chats are starting to bleed over into other aspects of life"*
(National Post, January 4, 2005)

*"Appalled teachers are now presented with essays written not in Standard English but in the compressed, minimalist language of mobile phone text messaging"*
(Scotsman, March 4, 2003)

*"The changes we see taking place today in the language will be a prelude to the dying use of good English"*
(Sun, April 24, 2001)[2]

In France, for instance, Jackes Chirac, the ancient French president, commenting on the effect of CMC modes on language - French in particular- bluntly called them
*'A major risk to humanity'*
(The Economist, December 21, 1996)

SMS spellings are controversial or prohibited in some French newsgroups. There is even a *Comité de Lutte Contre le Langage SMS et les Fautes Volontaires* (Committee Fighting Against SMS Language and Deliberate Errors), which claims to have more than 2,000 members. The French-language purist website displays the following text:
*"IT'S A FORUM/NOT A MOBILE: Here we speak a language*

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[2]These quotations correspond to article numbers 45, 24, 29,20,57,40, and 79 in Thurlow, 2006.

*humans can understand...if you want your question to be*
*answered, try to make yourself understandable too"*
(Source: http://sms.informatiquefrance.com/, retrieved December, 2006)

The use of SMS and its influence on the language and written expression of teenagers seems to have been also discussed in Finish media. kasesriemi & Rantianen (2002) report that the exportation of SMS-like neographies to formal written documents raises educational concerns. Teachers are naturally worried about acquisition of orthography. They presume that these elements will be transferred from text messages to more formal texts and worry about the consequences. However, opinions about this concern are not shared. Veith (2005) maintains that SMS spelling is too recent to be responsible for the problem and that SMS spellings are not typically found in school papers. Marty (2001), on the other hand, notes the positive linguistic skills stimulated by SMS neography but worries about its negative influence on primary-level pupils. She suggests writing class activities inspired by SMS processes that could make mastering orthography easier.

In fact, many linguists are anxious that sort of "Netspeak"-as labelled by Crystal (2001)-will take over and that standards and norms of traditional written language will be lost, and creativity and expressiveness will be diminished (Baron, 1984; Hale,1996),). However, Herring (2002) argues that

*"Social meanings appear to be conveyed effectively*
*through CMC. Users achieve this in part through*
*creative uses of language, such as novel spellings, repeated*
*punctuation,...designed to convey attitude, non-speech*
*sounds and facial expressions."*

Crystal (2001) stipulates that children who spend their days sending messages on one of CMC modes are in no danger of becoming illiterates, he points out that people are sure of

RML7, 2011

Is SMS Communication Destroying Language?
Surveying Attitudes towards SMS Language in Algeria
Among Young Users

stylistic differences in language use. Language use differs according to purpose and activity. People looking for a job will construct their e- mail quite differently than they would if emailing with friends. En rapport with SMS language, Schlobinski et al. (2001) point out that there is no degradation of language, which conservative language users always seem to believe, but rather writing adequately has become an art.

Is the matter of "the supposedly" bad influence of text messaging on the standards of written language prevalent in Algeria? A question to be tackled within the frame of my investigation.

## 3. Methodology

The study will be investigated through interviews where young texters will be asked to describe on the one hand their attitudes as being either positive or negative about the influence of SMS language on their traditional writings and on the other hand state the reasons for such attitudes.

### 3.1 The Follow-up Interview

In order to obtain a more in-depth understanding of young Algerians' goal for use of SMSs and attitudes towards the language in text messaging, 10 face-to-face individual interviews were directed for this research. Four main points of the on-going of the interviews have to be specified:

1) The duration of these interviews is an important factor. In most cases, the interviews lasted for about 15 to 20 minutes maximum.

2) The interview started after collection of the language diaries and that have been distributed to 60 young Algerians[3].

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[3] The sample was composed of 60 young Algerian users of SMS communication. The participants were asked to fill in the language diaries with 5 SMSs they wrote

Is SMS Communication Destroying Language?
Surveying Attitudes towards SMS Language in Algeria
Among Young Users

| Age | 18 | | 19 | | 20 | | 21 | | 22 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Out of 60 informants | 10 | | 9 | | 19 | | 15 | | 7 | |
| **Gender** | **M** | **F** | **M** | **F** | **M** | **F** | **M** | **F** | **M** | **F** |
| | 5 | 5 | 3 | 6 | 9 | 10 | 8 | 7 | 2 | 5 |
| | **F** | | | | | | **M** | | | |
| Out of 60 informants | 33 | | | | | | 27 | | | |

**NB: M**: male; **F**: female

**Table 1:** Demographic Matters

3) In fact, the 10 Young Algerian texters who participated in the interviews were very productive texters. These students were chosen on the basis of their abundant use of neography in their SMSs. ( The data sources that comprise the interviews are summarized in Table 2 )

4) The interviews were conducted in an informal setting. In this relaxing atmosphere, it was hoped that the interviewees would be more willing to share their thoughts and opinions about the use of SMS language by referring to their own experiences.

5) The language medium of the group interview is determinant in the responses and the behaviour of the informants; this is why the interviews were conducted in the local variety: Oran Spoken Arabic (ORSA)[4]. Moreover, I tried not to impose any specific rules on their language choice. Instead, the subjects

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during the last 24 hours. I discussed the aim of the follow-up interview and students gave their consent to provide their full names and phone numbers in case of need. Among the 60 language diaries, we chose to take 10 of them (i.e. 10 participants) in which there were the highest number of words: the ten participants were considered to be the most active users of SMS communication; the last step was to contact them for the interview.

[4] I feared the use of French during interviews because I judged that the results would be mistaken with factors such as formality that might be of a devastating impact on the informal setting chosen for the interviews.

Is SMS Communication Destroying Language?
Surveying Attitudes towards SMS Language in Algeria
Among Young Users

could choose whatever code they preferred, so that the reality of the problem could be reflected.

| Interviewees | Demographic Information | | SMS data |
|---|---|---|---|
| Interviewee 1 | 21 | Male | 28 |
| Interviewee 2 | 21 | Male | 26 |
| Interviewee 3 | 20 | Male | 29 |
| Interviewee 4 | 18 | Female | 48 |
| Interviewee 5 | 20 | Male | 27 |
| Interviewee 6 | 18 | Female | 32 |
| Interviewee 7 | 19 | Female | 39 |
| Interviewee 8 | 20 | Male | 41 |
| Interviewee 9 | 20 | Male | 24 |
| Interviewee 10 | 21 | Male | 34 |

**NB**: During data analysis, the identities of the interviewees will be coded according to gender (M/F) followed by a number. For example, *F1* refers to "Female Student No.1", M2 refers to "Male Student No.2", and so forth.

**Table 2:** Demographic Data and SMS Linguistic Habits of the Interviewees

(Source: Interviews Data)

Themes of interests and simple guiding questions were designed in relation to what the interview aimed at. The interviewees were supposed to talk about their attitudes towards mobile mediated language and goals for the use SMSs. I first asked each participant  to give comments on his/her neography practices ( such as abbreviations, emoticons, punctuation, …etc ) just to enhance conversation , and after that I asked each candidate a series of questions (see Appendix one ).During the interviews, I took handwritten notes of key

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Is SMS Communication Destroying Language?
Surveying Attitudes towards SMS Language in Algeria
Among Young Users

points. In addition to that I tried to tape record[5] the interviews to avoid missing relevant information. The draft notes of the interviews were then typed and summarized according to different topics.

## 4. The Analysis of the Interview Results

The interview for this study aimed to answer two questions. The results are summarized below.

**Interview's Question 1**: **Constraints of language usage in SMS communication**

What are the constraints that shape language in SMSs?

In general terms, any goal, functionality, or limit of a communication system can be seen as a constraint. In natural vocal communication, the vocal apparatus, sounds, and so forth, are part of the constraints that shape output; in written communication, technical and economic constraints become relevant. In CMC, the technologies involved are very sophisticated; for this reason, their role has often been overestimated and conceived deterministic. Nevertheless, it is time for further research on the different constraints shaping language in CMC.

According to the interviews' results of question one, there are other constraints which can help to show that technical constraints do not mechanically influence linguistic content and expression. Instead they interact with other economic, communicative, and psychological constraints. I summarized the interview's findings of question one according to different themes. Here are the results:

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[5] As solution to the observer's paradox, participants did not know they were being recorded. This was done to obtain spontaneity and originality of data.

→ **Technical Constraints** ( shared by : M1,M2, M3, F4, M5, F6, F7, M8, M9, M10)

Text messaging is an asynchronous communication mode. Therefore, no interaction is possible while the sender is writing the message. Once sent, however, the message can be read almost immediately, given that the mobile phone of the recipient is receiving. The sender must know the mobile number of the recipient, which requires a preexisting social link. Messages are limited to 160 characters; longer messages are possible by concatenating several individual messages but entail a proportionally higher cost.

There is also pressure for brevity generated by the nature of the medium. The screen of a standard device displays only a few lines of text at a time.

→ **Economic Constraints** ( shared by : M1,M2, M3, F4, M5, F6, F7, M8, M9, M10)

In Algeria, the cost of an SMS message hardly varied[6]. In 2005, some SMS plans offered by several companies reduced the price to 10DA. Prices were lowered further after an active consumer movement, which exposed the huge profits of the telecom operators. Even at the higher price, however, an SMS was cheaper than a voice call, and the expressive power of written language was doing its job within the SMS culture.

→ **Communicative Constraints** (shared by : M1, M3, F4, M5, F6, F7, M8, M10)

Text messaging is typically dedicated to satisfying immediate or short-term communicative aims-maintaining a link with friends and loved ones and coordinating physical interaction,

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[6] The cost of an SMS message hardly varied When SMS technology first appeared.

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Is SMS Communication Destroying Language?
Surveying Attitudes towards SMS Language in Algeria
Among Young Users

such as making an appointment or planning a meeting or a shared variety. In contrast with vocal mobile communication, the discretion and non-invasiveness of an asynchronous written medium allows for quite intimate content (see Riviére, 2002, on SMS messages as a new form of love correspondence)

→ **Psychological Constraints** (shared by :  M1,M2, M3,  M5, F6, F7, M8, M9, M10)

Most SMS messages are sent within a narrow circle of friends and relatives. The partners are peers, most often intimate. A certain complicity originates in their affective and social links. They share knowledge, references, and values, as in the following example in which a shared memory (associated with a Rai popular song) is recalled:

E.g. :  Slm rani ent1 découté *Drigue Elici* sa te rappel rien bisous

(Salut je suis en train d'écouter *Drigue Elici* ça ne te rappelle rien. Bisous )

"Hello, I am listening to *Drigue Elici* do you remember it kisses"

→ **Linguistic Constraints** ( shared by : M1,M2, M3, F4, M5, F6, F7, M8, M9, M10)

Linguistic constraints themselves interact in complex ways. The features can be summarized, explained and exemplified with respect to SMS as follows.

∗ *Written form* : ( shared by : M1,M2, M3, F6, F7, M8, M9, M10)

That SMS is a written medium is self-evident, but it is nevertheless important to stress the feeling of 'spokenness' , that is, according to the interviewees, the result of written

RML7, 2011

Is SMS Communication Destroying Language?
Surveying Attitudes towards SMS Language in Algeria
Among Young Users

language for linguistic interactions that are typically conveyed by spoken language.

∗ *Conciseness* : ( shared by : M1,M2, M3, F4, M5, F6, F7, M8, M9)
Conciseness is another obvious feature of SMS messages, one that in some respects recalls traditional telegraphy. The motivation for being concise seems to lie mainly in the limited length of messages and the urgency of the communicative aims. Short spellings are the core of this variety of written language.

∗ *Dialogism* : ( shared by : M3, F4, M5, F6, F7, M8, )
Most SMS are components of regular exchanges. The example above regarding the shared memory of a Rai song reflects. This interactive dimension, which can be expressed implicitly. Dialogism partially explains interferences with spoken language, since the SMS communication situation recalls face-to-face conversation; it is also linked to the use of colloquial lexicon.

∗ *Speed* : ( shared by : M1, M3, F4, M5, M8, M9, )
speed fosters short spellings (which save time), simplifications of expressions and also the negligence of standard rules.

From the Findings of question one, the following model is proposed for mobile-mediated language:

Is SMS Communication Destroying Language?
Surveying Attitudes towards SMS Language in Algeria
Among Young Users
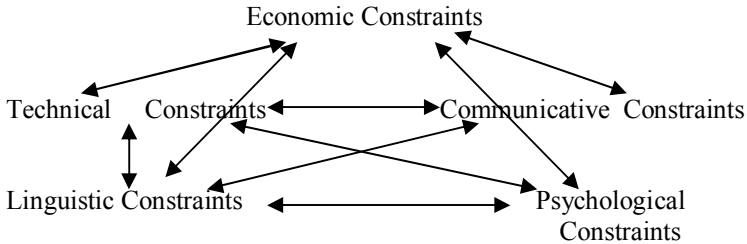


**Figure 1:** A Constraint-Based Model of Mobile-Mediated Written Communication

**Interview's Question 2**: **Is SMS destroying language?**
Do you think that written language used in SMS communication is influencing offline writing? If yes, how do you see this influence, negative or positive?
(The results from this question are destined to either corroborate or reject the hypothesis of RQ2).
Answers to this question are summarized into two views

∗ First view: Yes. SMS language influences offline writing, however this influence is negative.

Arguments 1: **"I think that SMS language influences offline writing negatively. I am really annoyed about the fact that I am making more and more mistakes. I am afraid and I feel that I am losing my French"**
(Shared by:  F4, F6, F7)
Arguments 2: ***I think that SMS language influences offline writing negatively but the negative impact of this new language  is not threatening Classical Arabic in Algeria because most users write Algerian Arabic –not Classical***

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Is SMS Communication Destroying Language?
Surveying Attitudes towards SMS Language in Algeria
Among Young Users

**Arabic- using Roman alphabet not the Arabic alphabet. What will be in risk is Algerians' mastery of the French language."**
(By: M9)


∗ Second view: Yes .SMS language does influence offline writing. This influence is not important.

**Argument:** *"I do not think that the influence of SMS language on traditional writing is a problem. Making mistakes when formulating language in offline writing is not that bad. Just take the example of answers that we write on our exam sheets, I can bring you the exam sheets of students who took the best marks during examination. Their exam papers will be, for sure, full of mistakes. I suppose we are no more punished on our* **ungrammatical structures as** *we make a lot of them in our writings and because our teachers make some of them also!!!. Furthermore, I feel confident on the fact that if one day I find a job and I am asked to write a report I will rely automatically on the dictionary of the computer to correct my mistakes."*
(Shared by: M1, M2, M3, M5, M8, M10)


Not surprisingly, all interviewees supported the idea that SMS language is influencing traditional writing. There were those who worried about their French written competences, others expressed a relaxed attitude towards the negative consequences of the medium which was supposedly not harming their 'dear' language: Classical Arabic. However, the most interesting finding, according to me, was a laissez-faire approach (see the second view) to the negative influence text messaging is having on Algerians' written competences. Language users simply do not attribute significance to standard

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Is SMS Communication Destroying Language?
Surveying Attitudes towards SMS Language in Algeria
Among Young Users

rules of written language. We are here raising questions about a generation of SMS users that genuinely does not care about a whole range of language rules. Whether the issue is spelling or punctuation, there seems to be a growing sense of laissez-faire, when it comes to linguistic consistency. It used to be that when our teachers, at the university, asked us (I and my classmates) to write something on a given topic. I remember that each one of us used to try"watch his/her grammar". Those days are long over. Instead, students increasingly look askance when teachers painstakingly correct their linguistic faux pas. They ask, "What's the big deal?"

**What is going on?**
The "Whatever" Generation is the here. There is a new attitude toward both speech and writing. I might call this attitude "*Linguistic Whateverism*". Its primary manifestation is a marked indifference to the need for respecting rules of usage. But what are the potential results of this attitude for the shape of languages in Algeria in the coming decades? Some expectations:

∗ Writing will increasingly become an instrument for recording informal speech (as it began manifesting itself with Romanized Algerian Arabic).

∗ As a literate society, we will confine to write, but with less anxiety about our mistakes of punctuation and spelling conventions as they become redolent.

∗ We will see a diminution in the role of writing as a medium for clarifying thought.

**5.  Concluding Discussion of the Findings**
   This section summarises and concludes this investigation. It first re-visits the research question and addresses it according

to the findings reported in this work. The following research question was raised in this research:

**RQ** : Does SMS language have negative effects on traditional writing among young Algerians ?

**5.1     Findings**

 Fifth, surveying language attitudes towards SMS language in Algeria. In fact, linguistic features generated under the impact of SMS communication have drawn the public's attention to the negative effect of this new form of language. However, as to language attitudes towards SMS language that the results of the interviews led to, I can say that young texters tend to show both negative attitudes and a laissez -faire attitude towards the effect of SMS language.

    The main objective of the research question was to survey Algerian texters' attitudes towards the impact of SMS language on standards of traditional writing.

It is interesting to note that the 40% of the interviewees think the use of SMS language deteriorates language standards and the other 60% represents the 'whatever' generation who think that SMS language has nothing of bad on language standards. The negative attitudes were expected but a laissez –faire approach has made me reconsider the present state of languages in Algeria. Being unconcerned about the 'profound' effect of SMS communication on the standards of written language seems to raise fear and anxiety about the future of individuals themselves. I believe that, as an important new communication medium, SMS communication is bound to have other important long-term effect on language use and language users. It is too early to tell what that impact will be.

    However, to put things into perspectives, I think also that it is worth noting to stress that popular fears which have derived

negative attitudes towards SMS language have blinded many eyes about the very nature of this process. In fact, distinguishing between language change and language decline is very tricky business. Since yesterday's change is often today's norm, we may simply need to acknowledge that language changes, it is just not necessarily something bad.

In my point of view, the use of SMS language is indispensable because of the rapid changing world of technological development. Abbreviations, acronyms, phonetic spelling, and also graphical means serves the purpose for effective communication because they convey meaning and ideas successfully just like the others.

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RML7, 2011

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Surveying Attitudes towards SMS Language in Algeria
Among Young Users

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Surveying Attitudes towards SMS Language in Algeria
Among Young Users

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**Appendix One**
**Interview Questions**

The following is a list of questions used in the interviews. The method of the interviews was the same for all interviews, that is, it consisted principally in an interaction interviewer-interviewee and interviewee-interviewer under the form of discussions that lasted 15 to 20 minutes.

**Q1**: What are the constraints that shape language in SMS communication? (The aim of the question: Investigating language constraints of language usage in SMS communication)

**Q2**: Do you think that written language used in SMS communication is influencing offline writing? If yes, how do you see this influence, negative or positive? (The aim of the question: Investigating attitudes towards the language of SMS)