

# Spelling Variations in Written English: A Study of SMS Language

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## ABSTRACT

*This study investigates the impact of SMS language on spelling deviation of written English among university students. The prevalence of SMS communication due to its affordability has led to the adoption of misspelled language in written communication. Through quantitative and qualitative analysis involving 200 undergraduate students from two universities, the study reveals that a significant majority of students engage in misspelling words, omitting functional words in SMS. Additionally, findings suggest that students often incorporate SMS language unconsciously into their written work, resulting in lower grades and marks. While the standard English language has not been directly affected, the pervasive use of SMS language undermines students' spelling and writing skills. Recommendations to mitigate this impact include government intervention to monitor SMS content, increased media campaigns to raise awareness, and integration of awareness programs into educational curricula. Further research is proposed to explore this phenomenon on a larger scale.*

**Keywords:** SMS language, university students, misspelling, abbreviations, academic performance

## 1. Introduction

The pervasive integration of cell phones into our daily lives, particularly in Pakistan since the 2000s, has revolutionized communication dynamics. Operating on the Global System for Mobile Communications (GSM) technology, cell phones have become indispensable tools, with Short Message Service (SMS) emerging as a cost-effective and convenient communication medium. Originating in the UK in 1992, SMS usage has soared, offering a discreet means of interaction, especially in scenarios where answering calls is impractical, such as meetings or lectures. However, this widespread adoption has catalyzed the evolution of a distinct written language, diverging from conventional linguistic norms.

SMS language embodies succinctness and informality, often characterized by the omission of vowels and the condensation of words through abbreviations or phonetic spellings. Consequently, punctuation, grammar, and capitalization are frequently disregarded, resembling a simplified version of spoken language. This trend is further reinforced by advertising agencies, leveraging SMS language's brevity and colloquialism to promote products effectively.

Despite its convenience, the infiltration of SMS language into formal written communication, notably among learners, poses significant challenges. Students often unknowingly integrate SMS conventions into academic writing, compromising language proficiency and adherence to grammatical standards. This blurring of linguistic boundaries is evident in official written assignments, where deviations from standard English syntax and spelling are prevalent, impacting academic performance.

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In light of these observations, this study underscores the imperative of understanding the impact of SMS language on spelling deviation within the English language. By delving into the unconscious errors perpetuated by SMS conventions in formal contexts, educators, curriculum developers, and learners can navigate these linguistic nuances more adeptly, fostering a more robust command of written English. Through targeted research, this study aims to elucidate the nuanced interplay between SMS language and spelling deviation, shedding light on its implications for language education and proficiency.

### **1.1. Research Questions**

- i. How does the use of SMS language influence the spelling deviations observed in university students' written English?
- ii. What specific abbreviations and linguistic contractions prevalent in SMS language are most commonly transferred to formal written English by students?

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Standard English**

Standard English is characterized by its grammatical correctness and standardized spelling, which are essential for formal communication. The concept of correctness varies between laypeople and linguists; while the former view it as adherence to grammatical and spelling norms, the latter see it as different varieties of language. According to Hudson (1980), the development of a standard language involves four key processes: selection, codification, elaboration of function, and acceptance. This standardization process ensures that a particular variety of language is chosen, codified through dictionaries and grammar books, elaborated for diverse functions, and accepted by the population, ultimately serving as a unifying force for the state. These are as follows : 1. Selection : A specific variety must be chosen to develop into the standard language. This variety could be an existing one or a blend of different varieties. The selected variety gains prestige, benefiting its current speakers. The selection carries significant political and social weight.

2. Codification: Dictionaries and grammar books are created to establish the rules for the chosen variety, ensuring a consensus on correct usage. Typically, an agency or academy undertakes this task. After codification, ambitious individuals aim to learn the correct forms, which can occupy several years of a child's schooling (Hudson, 1980).

3. Elaboration of Function: For the chosen variety to fulfill roles in writing and central government, it may need additional linguistic elements or norms. This could include technical terms or new conventions for existing forms, such as writing formal letters or creating exam questions (Hudson, 1980).

4. Acceptance: The chosen variety must be embraced by the relevant population, often becoming the national language. Once accepted, the standard language acts as a unifying force for the state, distinguishes it from others, and symbolizes its independence (Hudson, 1980).

### **2.2. Use of SMS**

The 1990s marked a significant development in mobile communication with the advent of SMS, providing a cost-effective and private means of communication. Crystal (2001) notes that by 2000, 81% of SMS users in the UK were aged 15-24, a demographic that has since expanded to include all age groups. SMS allows for discreet communication in situations where phone calls are impractical. However, the widespread use of SMS has introduced a new form of written language that often disregards traditional spelling and grammatical rules, leading to deviations in standard written English.

### **2.3. Sociocultural Influence of SMS**

Research by Kasesniemi and Rautianen (2002), Ling and Yttri (2002), and others highlights how SMS has integrated into social practices, particularly among young people. Texting

facilitates quick and informal communication, often using abbreviations and contractions that differ from standard language norms. This informal style, characterized by its speed and intimacy, encourages linguistic creativity but also contributes to spelling deviations. Studies show that SMS language often mirrors spoken language, which can lead to the erosion of standard spelling conventions in written English.

#### **2.4. More popular medium**

The integration of texting with other communication forms, including electronic and face-to-face interactions, is a common theme in studies (Madell & Muncer, 2004; Oksman & Turtiainen, 2004; Faulkner & Culwin, 2005; Ling, 2008). Madell and Muncer (2004, p.366) found that, as mobile phones become more significant, the internet is becoming less crucial for young people, with mobile phones taking over functions once performed online. Texting offers the same advantages as online communication—like managing self-presentation, reducing geographic distance, and creating a personal space—with participants typically having established close personal relationships through other communication means (Madell & Muncer, 2004). According to Oksman and Turtiainen (2004, p.332), the main difference between texting and computer-mediated communication is that mobile communication is more deeply embedded in social contexts compared to the virtual interactions of the internet. The choice of communication method depends on what is deemed suitable for the situation and purpose, as well as what is available (Grinter & Eldridge, 2001; Oksman & Turtiainen, 2004, p.328). Communication methods are often combined: mobile and face-to-face interactions might occur simultaneously (Ling, 2008), or text messages may be used to arrange in-person or phone conversations (Grinter & Eldridge, 2001). Grinter and Eldridge note that following a text conversation with a planned meeting serves to conclude the interaction (Oksman & Turtiainen, 2004, p.328). These findings underscore how texting is intertwined with other communication forms, both electronic and face-to-face, and is more deeply integrated into everyday practices compared to computer-mediated communication (CMC), which is less embedded in daily life.

#### **2.4. Effects on Written English**

The pervasive use of SMS language impacts written English by introducing abbreviations, unconventional capitalization, and altered punctuation. Common practices include using 'u' for 'you', 'bcoz' for 'because', and omitting capitalization entirely. Döring (2002) and other researchers have observed that students often transfer these SMS conventions to their formal writing, leading to errors and deviations from standard spelling. Critics like John Humphrys argue that SMS language undermines users' ability to write correctly, as it favors brevity and simplicity over complex vocabulary and traditional grammatical structures. This shift poses challenges for maintaining the integrity of standard written English in educational and professional contexts.

#### **2.5. Spelling Deviation and Abbreviation in SMS**

Most research on text messaging has focused on spelling variations. These studies often categorize and analyze different types of abbreviations found in text message data, revealing that abbreviation is a common feature (Döring, 2002; Grinter & Eldridge, 2001; Thurlow & Brown, 2003; Faulkner & Culwin, 2005). The findings suggest that abbreviations are used creatively and appropriately within the context of social communication (Hard af Segersteg, 2002; Thurlow & Brown, 2003).

#### **2.6. Communicative Functions**

Several studies have also explored the communicative roles of texting, demonstrating that most text messaging serves highly social purposes. Döring (2002) identified that SMS is used for greetings, emotional support, information exchange, requests, and obligations. Grinter and

Eldridge (2001; 2003) classified text message conversations into four types: coordinating communication (24%), planning activities (25%), casual chatting (39%), and others (including jokes and greetings) (12%). Faulkner and Culwin (2005) further categorized the communicative functions of messages into groups such as questions, planning immediate and future meetings, discussing events, giving instructions, reminders, jokes, gossip, arranging dates, and sharing personal and commercial information.

While significant research has explored the general effects of SMS language on communication and spelling practices, there is a notable gap in studies specifically examining its impact on the spelling deviation of written English among university students in Lahore. Existing literature predominantly focuses on broader sociolinguistic trends or investigates SMS language in contexts outside Pakistan, often neglecting regional variations and educational impacts within local settings. This research aims to fill this gap by analyzing how SMS language affects spelling accuracy in written English among students at two universities in Lahore, and how this impact extends to their formal academic writing. Understanding these effects is crucial, as deviations in spelling can adversely affect students' grades and overall academic performance, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to mitigate these challenges.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a mixed-methods approach to investigate the impact of SMS language on spelling deviations in university students' written English. The target population included undergraduate students from both government and private universities in Lahore, specifically the University of the Punjab and Minhaj University, comprising a total of 11,700 students. A purposive sampling technique was used to select these universities due to their accessibility. Convenience sampling was then employed to select 105 students from each university, ensuring a higher proportion of female participants, who are generally more active in texting. Data collection involved a close-ended questionnaire based on a four-point Likert scale and focused group discussions. The instruments were developed and validated through continuous feedback from a research supervisor, colleagues, and pilot testing, achieving a reliability score of 0.712. The researcher personally administered the instruments, providing clear instructions and encouraging honest responses to ensure the accuracy of the collected data.

### 4. Data analysis and interpretation

#### 4.1. Qualitative data analysis

The primary aim of this study was to examine the impact of SMS language on spelling deviation. Data was gathered from two universities in Lahore, comprising 65 male and 135 female undergraduate students. A questionnaire served as the data collection tool. Utilizing SPSS 16.0, the data underwent analysis, encompassing the calculation of means, standard deviations, and frequencies. The ensuing results, elucidated below, offer insights into the impact of SMS language on spelling deviation.

##### 4.1.1 Misspell the words in SMS

Table 4.1.1. indicates that a significant proportion of students, approximately 85% of respondents, misspell words when composing an SMS. Conversely, a small fraction, around 15% of respondents, reported that they do not misspell words in their SMS messages.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	169	84.5
No	31	15.5
Total	200	100.0

#### 4.1.2. Use of abbreviations and acronyms

Table 4.1.2. reveals that nearly all students use abbreviations and acronyms in their SMS messages. Only a small percentage, around 5% of respondents, do not engage in this practice.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	191	95.5
No	9	4.5
Total	200	100.0

#### 4.1.3. Use of letters or numbers

Table 4.1.3. shows that while writing a SMS almost all the students used letters or numbers to express the way a word or letter sounds. There were just a few students who were not involved in this activity otherwise about 92% of the students used letters or numbers to write a word.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	183	91.5
No	17	8.5
Total	200	100.0

#### 4.1.4. Understanding the shortened word in SMS

Table 4.1.4. indicates that the majority of students, approximately 92% of respondents, understand the complete meanings of shortened words used in SMS. Only a few respondents reported facing some difficulty in understanding these shortened words, and about 2% of students stated that they cannot understand the meanings of shortened words in SMS. The mean value of 1.08, which aligns with the option "Mostly people understand the complete meanings of shortened words of SMS," further supports this finding.

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent	Mean
Mostly	184	92.0	92.0	1.08
Sometimes	7	3.5	95.5	
Little	5	2.5	98.0	
Can't understand	4	2.0	100.0	
Total	200	100.0		

#### 4.1.5. Reason of using shortened words in SMS

Table 4.1.5 indicates a significant portion of students began using abbreviated language in text messages as a time-saving measure. Approximately 13% of participants cited alternative reasons, while the vast majority, around 87%, attributed their use of shortened words in SMS to efficiency. The mean value of 2.83, aligning closely with the option "People started to use shortened words in SMS to save their time," further supports this assertion.



Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent	Mean
Many letters	6	3.0	3.0	2.83
It's in fashion	21	10.5	13.5	
To save time	173	86.5	100.0	
Don't use	0	0.0	100.0	
Total	200	100.0		

#### 4.1.6. Use of SMS language in exam or professional document

Table 4.1.6. reveals that nearly two-thirds of the students use shortened words in their exams or professional documents. About 10% reported frequent usage of such language in exams, while around 25% stated they have never used shortened words in these contexts. The mean value of 2.17, closer to the option "sometimes," further indicates that the majority of students occasionally incorporate SMS language in their exams or professional writing.

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent	Mean
Many Times	20	10.0	10.0	2.17
	127	63.5	73.5	
Sometimes	51	25.5	99.0	
Never	2	1.0	100.0	
Never Noticed				
Total	200	100.0		

#### 4.1.7. Shortened words and complete meanings

Table 4.1.7. illustrates that a significant portion of students believe that the shortened words in SMS language effectively convey the intended meanings. Only 15% of students disagreed with this perspective. The mean value of 2.03, aligning closely with the "Agree" option, further underscores the widespread agreement among respondents on this matter.

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent	Mean
SA	24	12.0	12.0	2.03
A	146	73.0	85.0	
D	30	15.0	100.0	
SD	0	0.0	100.0	
Total	200	100.0		

#### 4.1.8. Damage of spellings

Table 4.1.8. indicates that over half of the respondents agreed that SMS language has had a detrimental effect on their spelling skills. Approximately 41% of respondents disagreed with this assertion. The mean value of 2.37 further supports the consensus among the majority of students regarding the adverse impact of SMS language on their spelling abilities.

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent	Mean
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SA	22	11.0	11.0	
A	92	46.0	57.0	
D	75	37.5	94.5	2.37
SD	11	5.5	100.0	
Total	200	100.0		

## 4.2. Qualitative Data Analysis

### 4.2.1. Coding Procedure

Before conducting discussions with participants, the researcher assigned numeric values to each variable for analysis. The coding system used is as follows:

- University: 1 = Punjab University, 2 = Minhaj University
- Gender: 1 = Male, 2 = Female
- Groups: 1 = Group No.1, 2 = Group No.2
- Group Members: 1 = First Group Member, 2 = Second Group Member, etc.
- Discussion Questions: 01 = First Question, 02 = Second Question, etc.

The sequence of numbering/coding for a participant is: Uni Code-Gender Code-Group Code-Group Member ID. For example, "1224" means the participant is from Punjab University, female, in Group No.2, and her Group Member ID is 4.

### 4.2.2. Data Analysis

Students reported using SMS primarily to communicate with friends, often misspelling or shortening words to save time and effort. One participant mentioned, "We short or misspell the words to save our time" (All cases, Focused Group Discussion), highlighting a common practice among students. This frequent use of abbreviations and incorrect spellings in SMS messages appears to influence their written work, with many students unconsciously incorporating these errors into academic assignments and exams.

The impact of SMS language on spelling deviation is evident as students admitted to using shortened forms in their written work. For instance, one participant shared, "Sometimes we are busy in writing SMS almost throughout the lecture... that's why we use short words in SMS" (02; 2225; Focused Group Discussion). This habit of shortening words in SMS to save time and fit within character limits often translates to their academic writing, leading to spelling errors and deviations from standard English spelling conventions.

Students also discussed the negative consequences of these habits on their academic performance. A participant recounted, "Once, there was a test of Biology at college, I write 'ezn' for 'enzyme'. My teacher rebuked me and reduced my marks" (03; 2224; Focused Group Discussion). Such instances demonstrate that the pervasive use of SMS language can lead to decreased academic performance due to spelling mistakes, indicating a significant impact on the spelling accuracy of written English.

Another dimension of the impact of SMS language on spelling deviation was highlighted when students discussed their writing habits. One participant noted, "I sometimes write such words unconsciously, and then I correct them immediately" (03; Page3; Focused Group Discussion). This indicates that despite being aware of the issue, students often find themselves defaulting to SMS language. The pervasive nature of these habits shows how deeply ingrained SMS language can become, influencing not only casual communication but also more formal written

tasks. This unconscious integration of SMS shorthand into academic writing underscores the challenge students face in maintaining standard spelling conventions.

Furthermore, the discussion revealed that SMS language is not only a matter of convenience but also a social and cultural phenomenon among students. As one participant put it, "When we move towards higher education, we become more stylish, and in SMS writing, we also try to be stylish" (02; 2225; Focused Group Discussion). This drive to appear stylish and fit in with peers contributes to the use of unconventional spellings and abbreviations. However, while this might enhance social interactions, it poses a risk to academic integrity, as these habits can spill over into formal writing tasks, leading to spelling deviations and potentially lower grades. The interplay between social behavior and academic performance highlights the broader implications of SMS language on students' written English proficiency.

### **5.1 Summary**

The present study aims at finding the impact of SMS language on the spelling deviation in written English. Today's modern and fast life has made people so much busy that to save time people started to use short words, misspell words, and leave out functional words (i.e., a/an/the) while writing an SMS. People, especially students, have become so accustomed to these features of SMS language that they unconsciously use SMS language in their written work, including exams, assignments, and project reports. This impact of SMS language on written English has affected a significant number of students, resulting in suffering grades and marks. To examine this impact on students' written work, this study was conducted at the university level.

The data was analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences), revealing that a majority of students tend to use shortened words in their written work and often omit functional words, leading to many misspellings. The study found that students are incorporating features of SMS language into their academic writing. Due to the economy packages of SMS, students are very much inclined to use SMS over phone calls. The excessive use of SMS by students has led to the inadvertent inclusion of SMS language in their written work, impacting their academic performance with lower grades and marks in written assignments.

### **5.2. Findings of the Study**

#### **5.2.1. Findings of the Quantitative Data**

In this section, key findings have been summarized and conclusions drawn from the data analysis are presented. The following points highlight the significant findings related to the impact of SMS language on spelling deviation:

- i. A notable 85% of the respondents admitted to misspelling words while writing SMS, whereas only 15% reported that they do not misspell words.
- ii. Almost all students (95%) reported using abbreviations and acronyms in their SMS, with only 5% not engaging in this habit.
- iii. Approximately 92% of the students used letters or numbers to mimic the sound of words or letters while writing SMS.
- iv. A majority of 92% of students understood the complete meanings of shortened words used in SMS, with only a small percentage facing difficulties or unable to understand these shortened forms.



- v. About 87% of the respondents used shortened words in SMS to save time, with only 13% citing other reasons for this practice.
- vi. Nearly two-thirds of the students reported using shortened words in exams or professional documents. Approximately 10% admitted to frequently using shortened words in such contexts, while around 25% claimed they never did.
- vii. A large number of students agreed that shortened words in SMS convey the complete intended meanings, with only 15% disagreeing with this view.
- viii. More than half of the respondents believed that SMS language has damaged their spelling, while about 41% disagreed with this viewpoint.

### 5.2.2 Findings of the Qualitative Data

In this section, key findings from the qualitative data have been summarized with efforts to draw relevant conclusions. The following points highlight the significant findings related to the impact of SMS language on spelling deviation:

- i. Participants revealed that SMS is a preferred mode of communication due to its cost-effectiveness compared to phone calls. The convenience of SMS, including its use in business for advertising to multiple recipients simultaneously, was also highlighted.
- ii. Students commonly shorten and misspell words in SMS to save time and due to the character limit of 160 per message. Additionally, participants mentioned that abbreviating words has become a fashion trend among students, adding a "stylish" touch to their messages.
- iii. It was found that the pervasive use of SMS language has negatively affected students' written English work. Many students unconsciously use SMS abbreviations and misspellings in exams and assignments, leading to lower grades. Despite awareness and teacher feedback, students often struggle to avoid these mistakes.
- iv. According to most participants, English language standards, with their own literature, grammar, and terms, are not influenced by SMS language. The effect of SMS language is primarily on students' written work rather than on the standard language.

### 5.3. Discussion and Conclusions

SMS usage is prevalent among students, primarily due to affordable messaging packages. This widespread use has led students to adopt habits such as misspelling words, shortening words, omitting functional words like "a," "an," and "the," and committing various grammatical errors. These practices are intended to save time and space when texting but have inadvertently infiltrated students' written academic work.

As a result, students have become so accustomed to SMS language that they unconsciously incorporate these features into their papers, assignments, and project reports, leading to a loss of marks and grades. While Standard English has not been directly affected by SMS language, students' written work suffers significantly. The use of contractions and self-made abbreviations can confuse examiners, potentially resulting in lower grades. Despite David Crystal's assertion that the impact of SMS language on students' academic writing is overstated and largely a media creation, this study in Pakistan reveals otherwise. Contrary to Crystal's

findings in the UK, Pakistani students do not entirely separate SMS language from their formal written work, indicating a tangible influence of texting habits on their academic performance.

#### 5.4. Recommendations

To address the impact of SMS language on spelling deviation, specific recommendations can be tailored:

- Encourage students to use spell checkers or predictive text features on their mobile devices to minimize spelling errors in SMS communication.
- Incorporate spelling and grammar exercises in educational curricula that specifically target common mistakes associated with SMS language, thereby reinforcing standard English writing conventions.
- Promote awareness campaigns among students, educators, and parents about the detrimental effects of habitual SMS language usage on spelling accuracy and written communication skills.

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