Focus on Text Messages: A Review of Studies in French

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INTRODUCTION

The development of information and communications technologies has contributed to the emergence of new forms of written communication such as e-mail, forum and chat. These forms of communication are called computer-mediated communication (CMC) (Danet & Herring, 2007; Herring, Stein, & Virtanen, 2013; Herring, 1996). Some 20 years ago, a new mode of communication appeared: the text message also called SMS (Short Message Service) or the mini-message. Text message is an interpersonal and asynchronous written mode of communication carried out on a mobile phone. It enables messages of up to 160 characters to be sent from a mobile phone, and falls under the category of telephone-mediated communication (TMC) (Liénard, 2013).

Originally, when text-message communication was in its infancy, the texter faced multiple technical constraints in order to write a SMS. First of all, the size of the screen did not allow the texter to see the entire message. Second, the keyboard was not ergonomic: The 26 letters of the alphabet were brought together on only 8 keys (pressing the 3 key once for "d," twice for "e"). Finally, mobile phone packages were limited, allowing only a limited number of text messages to be sent each month. This led users to transmit a maximum amount of information with the smallest number of characters possible. Today, mobile phones have evolved into smartphones: Their screens are much larger, they allow the entire message to be displayed and they show conversation threads. The ergonomics of the keyboard have also changed, since smartphones come with virtual computer keyboards. Furthermore, most mobile phone packages are now unlimited, allowing for unlimited writing.

Text-message use in France has evolved a great deal over the past five years. In 2010, 83% of the population of France was equipped with a mobile phone. In 2013, adolescents and young adults were the most equipped (90%). The portion of those sending text messages has not changed but the volume of exchanged text messages continues to show a strong growth curve (Bigot & Croute, 2010, 2013). More specifically, it is adolescents (12-17 years of age) who send the most (an average of 182 text messages per week). The number of text messages sent per week remains above 100 for young people between 18 and 24 years of age, with the volume of text messages dropping to 30 for the 25-39-year-old (Bigot & Croute, 2010). In 2011, the weekly number of text messages sent by young people between 12 and 17 reached 249 (Bigot & Croute, 2011). The most noticeable

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change appeared in 2012, with 435 text messages sent each week by this age group. Between 2012 and 2013, and for the first time in several years, there was a drop in the number of text messages sent by this age group (the number of text messages fell from 435 to 381 between 2012 and 2013) (Bigot & Croute, 2013).

OVERVIEW

In France, research conducted on electronic communication began with the work done by Jacques Anis, who was the first to investigate communication by *Minitel* (French domestic viewdata service) and then e-mail exchanges. In 2002, he begun to study text-message communication and analyzed the linguistic forms of text messages (Anis, 2002). He was one of France's research pioneers with regard to new written communication tools.

The text-message studies have interested linguists and psychologists, as well as sociologists and specialists in automatic language processing. The authors regard the text message as a new variety of written French that is not proofread, and is informal, emotional and highly social.

CURRENT SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE REGARDING TEXT MESSAGES

The major Francophone researchers in the area of text messages are Josie Bernicot, Cedrick Fairon, Fabien Liénard, Rachel Panckhurst and Elisabeth Stark. These researchers cover different, yet complementary, theoretical viewpoints (psychology, linguistics, sociology, etc.). Josie Bernicot focuses on the sociolinguistic functions of text messages as well as the link between textisms (changes in spelling as compared to the traditional written code) and conventional spelling. Cedrick Fairon is the initiator of the international "sms4science" project and analyzes the transcription of text messages into standard French. Fabien Liénard studies plurilingualism and code switching (alternating between several languages) in text messages. Rachel Panckhurst analyzes text-message writing in the corpus of the "sud4science" project, for which she is responsible. Elisabeth Stark's focus is morphosyntax and negation in text messages.

Text-Message Databases

The study of text messages involves the building up of a corpus. In 2004, the CENTAL of the University of Louvain La Neuve (Belgium) coordinated an international project entitled "sms4science" (see http://www.sms4science.org). The objective of this project is to advance the study of text-message communication and the language that text messages convey. In an effort to meet this objective, researchers from multiple countries have come together to build, in a wide variety of languages, vast corpora of text messages for scientific research (Fairon, Klein, & Paumier, 2006a). Currently, 15 universities are partnering in the project. In Belgium, participants in this project were asked to choose from text messages they had written and then transfer those messages to a toll-free number. They also had to fill in a sociolinguistic questionnaire providing information about their profile (age, gender, native language, etc.) and practice of text messaging (number of text messages sent each week, use of predictive text (T9), etc.). The collection lasted 2 months and resulted in the collection of more than 75,000 text messages from some 3,200 people between the ages of 12 and 73. A database of 30,000 text messages was created and made available to the scientific community (Fairon, Klein, & Paumier, 2006b). This computerized text-message database offers both the raw form of the text message and its transcribed version in conventional French. For example, the raw message from participant no. 12, 16 years of age is "Lol ui ca a éT mci4TONaid:) 2m1STEdi 1ciné oNEWa arlon?" and its transcribed message is "Lol oui ça a été merci for ton aide:) demain ça te dit 1 ciné au New à Arlon? (Lol, yes that was thanks for your help:) tomorrow how about we catch a flick at New in Arlon?).