

## Gender Differences in the Typographical Features Used in the Text Messaging of Young Jordanian Undergraduates

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**Abstract.** This paper explores gender differences in the typographical features used in the text messaging of young Jordanian undergraduates. Lakoff's (1975) and Tannen's (1990) ideas in face-to-face communication, and Herring's (1994) ideas in computer-mediated communication were taken into consideration. The data were collected from 160 first-year Jordanian undergraduates. Open-ended questionnaires, user diaries, and semi-structured face-to-face interviews were used to collect data. A total of 2,054 text messages were analyzed qualitatively. The data were classified under four typographical features : punctuation, letter and number homophones, phonetic spelling, and emoticons. The analysis reveals that there are gender differences in the text messaging of young Jordanian undergraduates with respect to the use of typographical features. The findings from this study support previous findings about gender differences in the use of language in face-to-face communication and in computer-mediated communication.

**Keywords:** Gender Differences, Text Messaging, Typographical Features, Jordanian Undergraduates

### 1. Introduction

The mobile phone service and text messaging have spread overwhelmingly over the past few years. Even though the idea of mobile phones emerged as early as 1947, the actual use of mobile phones was first documented in 1982 (Al-Khateeb & Sabbah, 2008). Ten years later in 1992, the first text message in the world was sent by Neil Papworth in the United Kingdom (Deumart & Masinyana, 2008). It was a "Merry Christmas" message. Text messaging, popularly known as Short Messages Service (SMS), is an asynchronous mode of computer-mediated communication (henceforth CMC) which does not require communicators to be present online simultaneously (Hård af Segerstad, 2002).

Text messaging is a very popular technology, particularly used by young generations for a variety of purposes such as trading messages with friends and keeping in touch with them, or staying in contact with family (Ling, 2005; and Thurlow, 2003). In their text messages, young people use a specific language which has a set of features that make it different from the language of standard writing. It has features from both the written and spoken forms. It also has a distinct pattern in terms of lexical, syntactic and typographical forms (Doring, 2002) that fulfil young peoples' needs as well as providing new technology. The language of SMS has its own style. It saves time, space and effort. Texters use their own language conventions, so SMS communication is viewed as a code for youth (Doring, 2002). Texters make sure that their messages are as economical as possible by using SMS acronyms, abbreviations or a combination of letters and numbers. For example, they use *LOL* instead of lots of laugh/love; *clas* instead of class; *every1* instead of everyone; *gud* instead of good; *2moro* instead of tomorrow; *luv* instead of love; *u* instead of you; *r* instead of are; *wk* instead of week. Another important aspect is that texters (young males and females) use emoticons such as :-), ( :-, and (-: ) (similar to body language) to modify the text.

### 2. Review of Related Literature

The popularity of text messaging has evoked a lot of public discussions about the social, psychological and linguistic impacts this medium of communication may have. Research has been published on the

linguistic aspects of text messaging which has investigated SMS communicative functions as well as the language used in this medium of CMC.

Baron (2004) reported some significant gender differences in relation to contracted forms and emoticons. Baron mentioned that male texters use more contracted forms than their female counterparts, and that females employ more emoticons than males. The same results were found in Finland where girls tend to send longer and more complex sentences (containing more than one clause) than male teens (Kasesniemi and Rautiainen, 2002). Similarly, Norwegian teenage girls sent far more complex and longer messages than their male counterparts. Ling (2005) pointed out that Norwegian teen males and females use text messages differently. He added that females tend to send more “grooming” messages, compared with males. Ling (2005) also reported that teenage girls tend to text more, write longer texts, employ more sophisticated syntax, use less abbreviations, salute and close more, and use more punctuation than males do. However, males use more text messages for mid-future planning activities, whereas females use them for immediate future planning activities. He concluded that males are less smart and less sophisticated users of text messaging.

Igarashi, Tajai & Yoshida (2005) discovered that first-year undergraduate Japanese females use their text messaging more actively than males in social networks. They mentioned that the content of female text messaging is different from those of males. Female teens send more text messages, send longer text messages, and get involved in more text messaging discussions than males do. In South Africa, female participants write longer messages than male participants (Deumart & Masinyana, 2008).

Gender differences relating to code-switching were evident in the text messages of Jordanian students. According to Al-Khateeb and Sabbah (2008), males tend to code-switch between English and Arabic less frequently than females. In his investigation of the lexical and morpho-syntactic choices of male and female Pakistani students, Rafi's (2008) results showed that a “novice intelligible” language influencing media language has surfaced. He also found significant gender differences between male and female students. For example, males and females differ in the complexity of their text messages. Text messages of females were more complex, long and lexically dense than those of males. With regard to emoticons, females used fewer signs while texting with other females and more signs when texting with males. Likewise, males used fewer emoticons when texting with females, and more emoticons when texting with male friends.

### **3. Objectives of the study**

Even though previous research has discussed different linguistic aspects of text messaging, the idea of gender differences in the use of text messaging has received very little attention from researchers. This study attempts to explore one aspect of gender differences in text messaging. In particular, it studies gender differences in the text messaging of young Jordanian students with respect to typographical features, specifically punctuation, letter and number homophones, phonetic spelling, and emoticons. The following research question is the basis for this study: How do young Jordanian male students and young Jordanian female students differ in the use of typographical features in their text messaging?

### **4. Methodology**

The data for this study were collected using three techniques of data collection. The first was an open-ended questionnaire, which was used to collect demographic information, as well as real text messages. The second technique was user diaries, which were used to collect natural data pertaining to the study. The third was semi-structured interviews conducted to elicit information directly from the participants. 80 male and 80 female students from three different Jordanian universities participated in the study. They were all between the ages of 18 and 20 and were in the first year of their undergraduate studies. All the participants signed consent forms agreeing to participate in the research.

50 male and 50 female students participated in the questionnaire from which 442 text messages were successfully obtained. As for the user diaries, 60 students (30 males and 30 females) agreed to provide the researcher with text messages they sent from their phones to their peers and friends after keeping them in a personal log for over a period of one week. These participants were selected from the group of students who

answered the questionnaires. The researcher received a total of 1,612 messages (780 messages from males and 832 messages from females) from the user diaries which were sent by the participants to the researcher's phone. Out of those who took part in the user diaries, ten male and ten female students agreed to be interviewed. Each interview lasted about twenty minutes.

Data analysis was carried out qualitatively. All the messages were separated by gender. The data were classified into two categories: messages written by male students and messages written by female students. Each message was then analyzed manually for the occurrence of linguistic features. The researcher utilized percentages to show the frequent occurrence of each typographical feature.

## 5. Findings

Table 1 presents the findings on gender differences in the text messaging of the young Jordanian undergraduates based on the typographical features used.

Table 1. Typographical Features in Text Messages of Young Jordanian Undergraduates

Typographical Features	Males		Females	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Punctuation	281	28.3%	387	36.5%
Letter and Number Homophones	206	20.7%	197	18.6%
Phonetic Spelling	439	44.2%	425	40.1%
Emoticons	286	28.8%	402	37.9%

### 5.1. Punctuation

The data show that there is a clear gender difference among the students with respect to punctuation. While punctuation is found in 36.5% of the text messages of females, it is found in 28.3% of the text messages of males. The data also indicate lack of punctuation use by both males and females. Texters tend to omit full stops, commas, question marks and others. The most frequently used punctuation is the question mark, and the least common of all is the exclamation mark .

### 5.2. Letter and number homophones

Letter and number homophones can be renamed as written numbers and letters which sound identical to some words, for example, *some1* for "someone"; *2* for "to" or "two", *4u* for "for you", and *ru* for "are you". The data show that there is a trend that males average more letters and numbers than females. This feature of shortening appears only in the English messages of the students. There are no examples of letter and number homophones in the Arabic messages. This is because Arabic orthography does not allow this kind of writing. The most common letter and number homophones that appear in the data are *ru* for "are you", *4u* for "for you", *2* for "to". Economizing time and space, the texters embed this feature in their text communication. Therefore, letters and numbers are often combined for compression and convenience.

### 5.3. Phonetic spelling

The texters attempt to use this kind of phonetic assimilation to simplify their communication as much as possible by using contractions like *dunno* (don't know), *luv* (love) and *coz* (because). Of the 936 messages the males articulated, 44.2% of phonetic spellings are used in comparison to 40.1% which are used by females in their text messages. The data also show that the texters often emphasize their messages and convey their emotions by reduplication of speech sounds.

### 5.4. Emoticons

Emoticons are often used to express emotions and also add semantic value to the message. The data show that emoticons are a preferred choice among females. Emoticons appear in 37.9% of the messages of females in contrast to 28.8% of the messages of males. The most frequently used emoticon in the text messages of the students is the *happy face* followed by the *sad face*.

## 6. Discussion

The findings clearly show that young students (males and females) use typographical features differently. For example, females are found to use certain typographical features more than males, such as punctuation and emoticons. On the other hand, males are found to use certain typographical features more than females, such as letter and number homophones, and phonetic spelling.

Generally, the students lean towards lack of punctuation in their text messaging. Nevertheless, lack of punctuation in the students' messages does not necessarily show lack of proficiency in the language they are using. According to Crystal (2001), texters omit punctuation in a message and this does not mean that the texters are assumed to be lacking in the grammar of their language. Instead, it is possible that the texters were writing in a hurry. Writing a punctuation mark in a text message using a mobile phone could be tedious for some texters because one will have to press a particular key several times to type that symbol, or press a key to open a window and choose the desired symbol, depending on the type of phone he/she owns.

Females in this study have shown a tendency towards employing more punctuation marks in their text messaging than males. Thus, the current study supports Ling's (2005) finding that young Norwegian females employ punctuation more skillfully and prescriptively than males do. This shows that females tend to present more accuracy and clarity in their communication than males. Six of the ten female students and 2 of the ten male students interviewed mentioned that they use punctuation marks because they like their sentences to be correct and understood. Moreover, they mentioned that the use of unconventional punctuation like the excessive use of exclamation marks helps them to convey their emotions and feelings, an explanation that goes hand in hand with Hård af Segerstad's (2002) study.

The use of emoticons as a meta-communicative means emphasizes the informal characteristics of SMS communication (Hård af Segerstad, 2002). Emoticons are an important part of messages in that they can change the meaning of an SMS message just like body language can change the meaning of an utterance in face-to-face interaction. They are used to fill gaps in the SMS interaction due to the absence of verbal and non-verbal features usually found in face-to-face interaction which are important in expressing feelings and attitudes (Crystal, 2001). Emoticons can be employed by the texters to emphasize their feelings, to soften their negative tone, and to regulate their communication, just like smiles and frowns do in everyday conversations. Although emoticons seem to slow down the texters while they are typing their messages, texters take their time to include an emoticon within their text messages, revealing the need for such a feature in text messaging.

Females tend to use more emoticons in their text messaging than males do because they are more emotionally expressive than males. Social research has revealed that unlike males, females like to share their feelings and emotions with a wider range of people. Females are often associated with social roles which require them to be more emotionally expressive, and are thus more concerned with other people's feelings than males are (Tannen, 1990). Thus, the use of emoticons is a means by which females express their feelings, emotions, and support towards others.

This study reveals that phonetic spelling is an integral part of the language used by the students in their text messaging. According to Werry (1996), this feature is a mere reflection of the medium limitation as well as people's attempts to use a language that is similar to speech. The same idea is also confirmed by Thurlow (2003) who noted that young people write their messages as if they are speaking, for the purpose of establishing a more informal register, helping them to strengthen their bonding and do their small talk. Doring (2002), furthermore, suggested that some features of spoken language (e.g. dialectal words, interjections, prosody and facial expressions) are usually verbalized in text messaging. Although there is variation in the use of phonetic spelling between male and female students, almost all the males who participated in the questionnaires and interviews reported that they did it naturally and unconsciously. The females, however, reported that they tried to avoid using this kind of spelling because they were worried that their messages would be confusing.

## **7. Conclusion**

This study was conducted to explore gender differences in the language used in mobile phone text messaging. The study reveals that young male and female undergraduates differ in the use of typographical

features in their text messaging. The results indicate that female students use more punctuation and emoticons than male students do, whereas male students use more letter and number homophones and more phonetic spelling than female students. Finally, future studies are needed to explore gender differences in other linguistic elements in the text messaging of young students.

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