

## Linguistic Features in SMS Apologies by Malay Native Speakers

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### ABSTRACT

The emergence of communication channels such as the Short Message Service (SMS) gives rise to a different variety of language use, also known as textism. Textism is viewed as a hybrid form of communication as it merges the forms of both spoken and written language. Textism features are arguably part of the pragmalinguistic domain, which looks at the selection of strategies which can be applied in conveying illocutions. This study sheds some light on the pragmalinguistic conventions reflected in apologies conducted via SMS or text messages. Twenty six Malay native speakers responded to Written Discourse Completion Tasks (WDCT) via SMS. The WDCTs were categorised into two levels of offence which required the participants to apologise by texting their apologies. Data were categorised and coded based on adapted versions of coding schemes by Supyan (2006) and Crystal (2008). The results indicated that there were three significant variations in the SMS linguistic features used by the Malay Native Speakers (Malay NS) when apologising via SMS in their first language, Malay, and their second language, English. Differences were also identified when the apologies were sent because of more serious transgressions compared to when they were sent because of less serious offences. The findings suggests that the first language contribute to these differences in the selection of textual features when the participants texted their apologies.

**Keywords:** SMS/text messages; linguistic features; Malay NS; apology; pragmalinguistic

### INTRODUCTION

Mobile texting or SMS (Short Message Service) is arguably one of the most prominent means of electronic communication nowadays. In September 2007 alone, it was reported that around 4,000 SMS were sent per second in Britain (Plester, Wood & Joshi, 2009). In a study on mobile phone text messaging overuse in a university in Mauritius, Perry and Lee (2007) found that the highest number of SMS sent per day by one person could reach 60. In Malaysia, the use of SMS has also been on the rise (Badrul Redzuan, 2006). Ramayah, Yuliharsi, Amlus and Norzaliza (2006) estimated that in 2003, there were 10 million mobile phone subscribers in Malaysia, with 97% of users familiar with SMS (the terms *SMS* and *texting* will be interspersed herein).

The emergence of this electronic means of communication signals a new variety of language, or at least, a hybrid medium. Crystal (2008a, 2008b) terms this as *Textspeak* or *textism*. Unlike conventional writings, textism is a written variety which retains many features of the spoken language (Baron, 2004; Plester, Wood, & Bell, 2008). For instance, textism includes colloquial spellings which mimic how particular words are pronounced in everyday life. As a result, the degree of formality in electronic communications such as text messages may differ compared to conventional writings, even when compared to e-mails. Some support for this hypothesis is provided by Baron (2004, p. 84) who found that US American university students considered that emails (in contrast with instant messages like SMS) should be “edited, punctuated, spellchecked, and more formal”. A study by Najeeb, Maros,

and Mohd Nor (2012) on Arab students' politeness when writing e-mails showed that the e-mails were written in formal ways, with (sometimes failed) attempts at being polite. In contrast, instant messages can be written in a less formal way. This level of formality, in turn, is reflected in the user's choice of *linguistic features* – the characteristics unique to text messages such as using numbers to represent a word, or changing a word's spelling to reflect its pronunciation in colloquial use. These choices can be argued as being part of a language's pragmalinguistic domain.

### LINGUISTIC FEATURES IN SMS AS A PRAGMALINGUISTIC FEATURE

A number of studies have been conducted regarding the pragmalinguistic aspect of text messaging. Thurlow and Poff (2011) reviewed studies regarding the different linguistic features used in different languages and cultures in text messages, and remarked that there are a lot of variations inter-culturally when it comes to the pragmalinguistic domain. Pragmalinguistic, as defined by Leech (1983), is "the particular resources which a given language provides for conveying particular illocutions" (pp. 10-11). Based on Leech's definition, the pragmalinguistic domain therefore concerns the use of the language itself in the form of different linguistic strategies to deliver pragmatic force in specific contexts. Normally, this is applied to the realisations of speech acts. For example, a person may choose one of these utterances to apologise:

- (1) Sorry.
- (2) I deeply apologise.

Utterance (1) may be applied in less face-threatening situations, such as accidentally bumping into a stranger in a crowded place, whilst utterance (2) is perhaps applied in more face-threatening situations, for instance, when one erroneously accuses another of a wrong-doing.

In this study, though, the pragmalinguistic selection is not in the form of word or phrase used, but the SMS linguistic features applied in the speech act. The researcher argues that the selection of linguistic features by the user when typing text messages can be classified as part of the pragmalinguistic features as it: a) involves the selection of strategies (e.g. how to spell a word, whether to abbreviate, type in full, typed in capital letters, etc.), b) is governed by the language's resources and c) possesses its own pragmatic weight. Hence, in SMS, the word *later* may be spelled as:

- (1) l8ter
- (2) ltr
- (3) l8r
- (4) later
- (5) LATER

The use of the first three spellings in (1), (2) and (3), may be less formal than (4); hence, when a person uses (4), it is possible that the SMS is formal rather than informal. Meanwhile, an all-capitalised word or phrase (5) is most often used to convey strong emotions like anger, exasperation, shock, etc. (Rosen, Chang, Erwin, Carrier & Cheever, 2010). Similarly, when a word is typed as *nyte* instead of *night*, this can be considered as a pragmalinguistic choice of intentional misspelling by the texter, but only because the language allows it to be spelled in such a way and still sounds comprehensible. As explained by Crystal (2008a), there can be several variants of the same word or phrase, for instance, for the word *later* as demonstrated beforehand, or for the phrase *thank you* which can be spelled as *tq*, *thank u*, or *thank u*. However, the sets of possible abbreviated messages, or what one may call the formulaic chunk of texting, are actually limited, as too much abbreviation may render the message

ambiguous or even non-comprehensible (Crystal, 2008a). This happens as texters advertently follow the three maxims of texting – brevity and speed; paralinguistic restitution; and phonological approximation (Thurlow & Poff, 2011, p. 10). In order to identify the ways these are achieved, some researchers (e.g. Crystal, 2008; Supyan, 2006) have designed coding schemes for SMS.

### SMS CODING SYSTEM

Coding schemes for the linguistic features of SMS have been developed by researchers, amongst them, Crystal (2008a) and Supyan (2006). Based on a collected corpus of text messages sent to a local Malaysian television channel over the course of six months, Supyan devised six categories for Malay SMS features. The categories are *Common Abbreviations*, *Words with Vowel/Consonant Omission*, *Colloquial Abbreviations*, *Non-Abbreviations*, *System Violation* and *Malay-nised Words* (see Appendix A). This has some similarities to Crystal's (2008a) textism. Unlike Supyan, though, Crystal did not explicitly categorise SMS features, but mainly explained the main linguistic features found in English text messages, amongst them *Rebus Abbreviation*, *Coded Abbreviation* and *Deletion of Punctuation Marks* (see Appendix B). Crystal's text message descriptions were specifically designed for SMS typed in English, whilst Supyan's coding scheme was specifically created for SMS typed in Malay. In the current study, an amalgamation of Crystal's and Supyan's coding schemes were applied as responses were in both Malay and English. Certain criteria, for instance, Crystal's *Deletion of Punctuation Marks*, was not used for this study's analysis because it is only applicable for the English language's apostrophe usage (e.g. deletion of the apostrophe in *I'm* into *Im*), which has no counterpart in Malay. Any recurring themes were given their own code. After all the responses were analysed, five SMS features were selected to form a coding scheme which was sufficiently suitable for both Malay and English SMS comparison analyses. The coding scheme is shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Selected coding scheme for SMS linguistic features

| Linguistic features  | Examples  |
|--|---|
| Omission of vowel and/or consonant   | <i>nvr</i> = never, <i>appt</i> = appointment<br><i>bg</i> = bagi (give/to), <i>dtg</i> = datang (come) |
| Colloquial deviation and/or standard system deviation  | <i>tym</i> = time, <i>gonna</i> = going to<br><i>ko</i> = kau (you), <i>bley</i> = boleh (can)          |
| Use of emoticon and/or textonomatopoeia (spellings which resemble sounds like laughter, cry, etc.) | :-) smile (-__-) straight face<br><i>haha</i> , <i>oops</i> , <i>alamak</i>                             |
| Use of rebus abbreviation  | <i>l8tr</i> = later, <i>2mro</i> = tomorrow<br><i>2</i> = (i)tu (that)                                  |
| Use of coded abbreviation  | <i>gtg</i> = got to go<br><i>asap</i> = as soon as possible<br><i>x</i> = tidak/belum (no)              |

To ensure that data would be categorised accurately, the following definitions or criteria were imposed for each of the five linguistic features showed in Table 1. The definitions or criteria are as follows:

1. An *Omission of vowel/consonant*, as given in the examples, is created when one (or more) vowel or consonant is omitted from the original spelling.
2. A *Colloquial deviation/standard system deviation* occurs when the words are spelled according to the colloquial pronunciation of the word, or deliberately spelled wrongly.
3. The use of keyboard characters combined to express emotions is called *Emoticon*, whilst words which represent feelings or actions are termed as *Textonomatopoeia*.

*Emoticons* could be read sideways, e.g. ;- ) for a wink, or straight ahead (^\_\_^) for cute (Crystal, 2008b, p. 38).

4. A *Rebus abbreviation* is created from a combination of letters with pictures and/or logograms/numbers to form a word, phrase or sentence.
5. A *Coded abbreviation* is a special code which represents a particular word, phrase or sentence. It could be formed from the first letters of individual words, like *fyi* (for your information), or simply one or more letters which may not be in the original word, like *x* for no and *no* for number.

Insofar, no research has been done to analyse SMS linguistic features selected by native speakers of Malay in a speech act conducted in both their first (L1) and second language (L2). It is thus intriguing to study how Malay NS responses may differ, if they do differ, in terms of the language used and the context given. This study specifies a context (apology) to provide a similar ground for texting, and aims to determine the following:

1. Are there any differences in terms of SMS linguistic features when Malay NS apologise via SMS in their L1 (Malay) and in their L2 (English)?
2. Are there any differences in terms of SMS linguistic features when different apology contexts are applied?

## METHOD

This research employed 26 native speakers (NS) of Malay; 42.3% male and 57.7% female. At the time of research, all participants were students in universities in the United Kingdom. The criteria required of participants were: 1) they had to be students in any UK university at time of research, 2) have Malay as their L1 and 3) possess valid qualification as competent users of English. Appropriate qualifications included sufficiently high scores in internationally-accepted English tests such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or GCE-O Level English. For IELTS, the lowest accepted score was 6.5, which is equivalent to TOEFL 550 (paper) or 213 (computer). The two participants who took GCE O-Level both scored A1 in English and had completed the International Baccalaureate as well. Thus, it is safe to say that the Malay participants for this study were competent users of English and that all of them had been equally exposed to English native speakers and the English culture. This was done to avoid the participants' proficiency level being a potential confounding variable. To satisfy these requirements, the researcher used snowball sampling to select participants.

Data was collected with the Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT). Even though WDCTs have had its share of criticisms, the issues of validity only pertain to the collection of spoken data using a written method. For example, Woodfield's (2008) study on English NS responses to WDCTs revealed that written responses may deviate from actual spoken responses. One of the reasons given by Woodfield was that the written responses may ignore the number of interactional turns in a typical conversation. This limitation, as aforesaid, is more applicable for WDCTs used for collecting information about spoken speech acts. As this study focused on purely written data, WDCT is viewed as the ideal data-collecting tool. In an effort to add a measure of ecological validity, the WDCTs in this study were sent and replied to via SMS.

The WDCTs were designed specifically for scenarios pertaining to SMS usage. Since there was no precedent for apology situations in SMS studies, the situations were designed by the researcher but based loosely on previous apology studies such as the Cross-cultural Speech Act Realisation Project (CCSARP) (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989), which compared inter-cultural apologies in several given contexts across a number of languages.

For this study, four situations which required apologies were used. The situations were selected from the result of a short survey on the seriousness of social transgressions in an initial 11 situations. The top two most serious offences and the top two least offences were selected and further developed for this study.

The two situations which are considered risky for the apologiser were named High-Risk Situation 1 and High-Risk Situation 2 (HR1 and HR2), whilst the two less risky ones are called Low-Risk Situation 3 and Low-Risk Situation 4 (LR3 and LR4). The situations were varied for Social Distance (SD), or the closeness of the relationship between the people involved, and Power Status (PS), or the power relations between the apologiser and receiver (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Both SD and PS have been shown to affect apologies (Holmes, 1989). Each situation was restricted to one main offence, but directed towards different receivers with whom the participants would have different SD and PS. Gender was controlled by specifying that the receiver was a female in all cases except for LR4, which has no specified receiver gender. This is due to findings which revealed that male and female-directed apologies were shown to differ (Holmes, 1989). The purpose of keeping the offended person the same gender, thus, is to control any probable gender effect. The four situations are as listed:

**High Risk Situation 1:** You were supposed to meet your lecturer (female) at 2 pm. However, you only remembered at 5 pm. You called to apologise but she was not in. Send an apology through a text message/SMS.

**High Risk Situation 2:** Your supervisor (female) asked you to return a library book which she borrowed. You agreed to help but forgot to return the book. A week later she sends a text message/SMS inquiring whether the book has been returned. Reply to the text message/SMS to apologise.

**Low Risk Situation 3:** You were supposed to meet a female cousin at 11 am, but you only remembered around 2 pm. You called but it was not answered. Apologise through a text message/SMS.

**Low Risk Situation 4:** You send a text message/SMS from your mobile to a friend, but when the reply comes back you realise that you have sent it to a stranger. Send another text message/SMS to apologise.

## PROCEDURE

The participants were required to respond to all four different situations, two in Malay and two in English. The situations were counterbalanced across the sample to ensure that each received an approximately equal number of responses. Similarly, the language used for each situation was also counterbalanced across the group to avoid an effect of situation. The order of administration of the situations was also counterbalanced to avoid either practice or fatigue effects. All participants were told to respond to the situations with text messages which they would have written if they were to be in the given situations. In an effort to add ecological validity, the situations were sent via SMS, with inclusions of textism in them which implicitly disclose that the participants were free to use these features (see Appendix C). In cases where no responses were received after half an hour ( $n=2$ ), the situation was resent. In both cases, the participants immediately responded after the second message from the researcher.

A total of 104 responses were gathered from all participants. The responses were divided based on the response language (Malay=L1 or English=L2), and further classified into the High-Risk and Low-Risk categories.

## FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

For quantitative analysis, each response was examined using the SMS Coding System presented in Table 1. Inter-rater reliability was found to be at 94.4%. The frequencies of use from each category were cross-tabulated and analysed with the chi-square test. Additionally, the responses were also analysed qualitatively in an effort to interpret probable causes or motivations behind the findings. Table 2 below shows the summary of the chi-square test results.

TABLE 2. Summary of chi-square test results for the use of linguistic features in English and Malay apologies in both High-Risk and Low-Risk categories

| Linguistic features                     | High-Risk category |        | Low-Risk category |        |
|---|--------------------|--------|-------------------|--------|
|   | $\chi^2$           | Sig.   | $\chi^2$          | Sig.   |
| Omission of vowel and/or consonant      | 12.410             | <0.05* | 9.339             | <0.05* |
| Colloquial and/or system deviation      | 28.144             | <0.05* | 30.769            | <0.05* |
| Use of emoticon and/or textonomatopoeia | -                  | -      | 0.78              | >0.05  |
| Use of rebus abbreviation               | 7.879              | <0.05* | 6.315             | <0.05* |
| Use of coded abbreviation               | .787               | >0.05  | 2.564             | >0.05  |

\* Significant difference

- Insufficient data for chi-square test

The results from the chi-square analyses revealed that three linguistic features showed statistically significant differences when the apology was sent in Malay compared with the one sent in English. The three features are *Omission of vowel and/or consonant*, *Colloquial and/or system deviation*, and *Use of rebus abbreviation*. This result answered the first research question regarding differences when apologies in both languages were compared.

For research question 2, which deals with different apology contexts, the results indicated that in all three features for both HR and LR categories, SMS apologies in Malay showed more frequent usage. This finding is further discussed in the next section.

### APOLOGIES IN THE HIGH-RISK (HR) CATEGORY

In the HR category, participants were asked to send SMS apologies to their lecturer for: a) forgetting an appointment, and b) forgetting to return a library book which they had borrowed from a supervisor. From the five linguistic features analysed, three statistically significant results were derived from the chi-square test: the *Omission of vowel and/or consonant*, *Colloquial and/or system deviation*, and the *Use of rebus abbreviation*. Results revealed that participants used higher counts of these three features when texting in Malay, their L1. The researcher did not specifically mention that the text receivers have Malay as an L1, yet interestingly, it seemed that the instruction of sending a text in Malay was sufficient for the participants to assume that the receiver would be a Malay; consequently leading them to use less formal language, which was depicted from their choice of SMS linguistic features.

#### OMISSION OF VOWEL AND/OR CONSONANT

The high use of *Omission of vowel and/or consonant* can be explained by the Malay language system of consonant-vowel-consonant-vowel (C-V-C-V) spellings. The Malay language has

less consonant clusters compared to English. The loss of a vowel or a consonant in a word will usually not render the word completely unreadable to an NS, as illustrated in the *Panduan Singkatan Khidmat Pesanan Ringkas (SMS) Bahasa Melayu* (Malay SMS Abbreviation Guide) by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (2008). A Malay NS should be able to decipher *dln* for *dalam* (in), *byk* for *banyak* (a lot), and *spt* for *seperti* (like). Normally, more vowels are omitted compared to consonants, consequently supporting Crystal's (2008a) view that vowels are less important in deciphering a word's intelligibility. Another reason for the omission may be due to the length of words or expressions in Malay compared to English. For example, if one apologises in English, one may say:

*I am sorry*

There are eight letters in the apology, which would take up 10 spaces in an SMS (plus spacing). Consider the same apology in Malay:

*Saya minta maaf*

There are 13 letters in the apology, which, when added with the two spaces between the first and the second word, and between the second and the third word, would take up 15 spaces in an SMS. Thus, it was possible that the participants were forced to shorten their spellings through abbreviations to fit their apologies into the 160-character limit, mostly through omissions of vowels. In one striking case by a Malay NS, however, almost all of the words were abbreviated through the omissions of vowels and consonants. Two of the apologies are shown below:

*Bro, maaf bbyk, tslp tgg wktu nk jmp, igtkn kul 2, tp kul 11, tdi tlpn tpi tk angkt, maaf bbyk k*  
(Full Malay translation: Bro, maaf banyak-banyak, tersilap tengok waktu nak jumpa, ingatkan pukul 2, tapi pukul 11, tadi telefon tapi tak angkat, maaf banyak-banyak ok)

(Bro, [I'm] really sorry, I mistook our meeting time, I thought it would be at 2, but it was at 11, called you just now but you didn't answer, really sorry ok)

*Dr, sry vm 2 hvn't rtnd th book 2 d lib, I ovrlkd it, will rtn it asap*

(Dr., sorry very much to haven't returned the book to the library, I overlooked it, will return it ASAP)

In this particular case, the texter (in an informal Q&A session after the data-gathering) insisted that it was not the matter of space, but because this is the usual custom of corporate texting, or at least, where the texter worked. The texter claimed that most people in the corporate circle texted in a similar way. The choice of abbreviating the SMS clearly belongs to the texter, and it is what the texter believed to be a shared way of typing in the particular community. In order to belong to the community, the texter consciously omitted selected letters in the text messages, but making sure that the message was still communicated across. Interestingly, true to Crystal's observation (2008a), the texter was not consistent in selecting omissions. The word 'the' was first abbreviated as *th*, but two words later, it was turned into a rebus abbreviation (*d*).

#### COLLOQUIAL AND/OR SYSTEM DEVIATION

The general Malaysian Malay language, when spoken in everyday conversations, usually deviates from the standard spelling. For example, *saya* (English 'I') is pronounced *sa-ye* instead of *sa-ya*, whilst *betul* (right/correct/true) is usually pronounced as *be-tol*. The text messages showed a high amount of Malay NS who spelled *saya* as *saye/sye* and *betul* as *btol*, including in the HR category. For example:

*Alamak, maaf sgt2, puan. Sy mmg **bto12** lupa nak pulangkan buku tu.*  
(Ooops, I'm truly sorry, madam. I really forgot to return the book.)

The deviation in this SMS (*bto1*) mimics the actual sounds of colloquial Malay language, as is the case in this second example (*agaknye*):

*Saya call td puan dah keluar **agaknye***  
(When I called you might be out already)

The fact that participants chose to spell their SMS according to colloquial pronunciations lends support to Baron (2004) and Plester, Wood and Bell (2008), who pointed out that communication through SMS shows higher occurrences of the spoken language compared to written language. In this case, the spellings imitated colloquial spoken Malay and were mostly not spelled according to the standard language. This indicated that the texters viewed the communication was conducted in a less formal form. In contrast, SMS in English were mostly sent using the standard form, as shown in the following examples:

*Dr., i would like to apologize as i had missed our meeting.i thought that our meeting will be tomorrow and i just realized it just now.i am sorry once again*

*Dear Carmen, I'm deeply sorry for not seeing u today because I'm not feeling well. I called your office but you were not in...*

*Ms Sally,i'm so sory..i js realized tht i hvnt returned ur book 2libry yet though i've offered myself 2help u..it's all my mistake..wil try to sort it out asap*

Arguably, the lack of colloquial flavours in the participants' English SMS could be due to the fact that English was their second language, learned during their formal education in Malaysia. In other words, English language learned by each participant would have been the standard form of the language, hence the more formal style. Nevertheless, the researcher believes that the standard linguistic features reflected the participants' awareness of the context (High-Risk) rather than their learning history, as indicated later in the apologies in LR situations.

It can be easily noted as well that participants applied *Rebus abbreviations* in the second SMS (*u* = you) and third SMS (*ur* = your, *2* = to). This pragmalinguistic feature is discussed in the next section.

#### USE OF REBUS ABBREVIATION

The frequent *Use of rebus abbreviation* in this research was not unexpected, as it has been regarded as an important aspect of textism (Crystal, 2008a; 2008b). What is intriguing is the use of this linguistic feature in relation to code-switching. All of the examples of *Rebus abbreviation* in this research are English words, including *n* (and), *bz* (busy), *u* (you), and *y* (why). Whenever this feature made an appearance in the Malay apologies, participants used English as well.

*.. Esk sy jmpe dr at da same tym **n** place..*  
(I will meet you tomorrow at the same time and place..)

*...**bz** dgn assignment puan bg...*  
(...busy with the assignment that you gave...)



This occurred in all SMS except for the one below:

*Salam Dr sy mnta maaf,sy tlupa pulangkn buku 2 mggu lepas.nt sy pulangkn asap.*  
(Greetings, Dr I apologise, I forgot to return the book last week. I will return it as soon as possible.)

The use of 2 as a *Rebus abbreviation* in the text represents *tu* in Malay, which basically means ‘the’ or ‘that’ in English. This is the only example of a Malay *Rebus abbreviation* in this research.

#### USE OF EMOTICON AND/OR TEXTONOMATOPOEIA AND USE OF CODED ABBREVIATION

The findings showed that there were no significant differences in the *use of emoticon and/or textonomatopoeia* and *use of coded abbreviation*, whether participants apologised in Malay or in English. As a matter of fact, most participants did not use *emoticons and/or textonomatopoeia* in their text messages, either for L1 or L2, in the HR situations. As both situations called for participants to apologise to a superior (a lecturer), participants might feel that the use of smileys and spelling out laughter such as “huhuhu” was too informal. Neither situation for apology (forgetting an appointment and forgetting to return a library book) seemed to call for the use of this linguistic feature. It appeared that although participants felt that it was acceptable to use colloquial language and spellings, they drew the line at smileys and laughter. This resulted in insufficient data for the chi-square analysis. Interestingly, the only appearances of this linguistic feature were in the second HR situation (apologising to a supervisor). It is possible that the participants might feel that as a supervisor, the lecturer in question must be a familiar figure, and this familiarity is conveyed via less formal messages. This notion is further supported by the findings which showed that the number of times that *emoticons and/or textonomatopoeia* appeared was higher in SMS sent in Malay compared with when the SMS was sent in English.

In contrast, participants seemed comfortable with the use of *coded abbreviation* such as “asap” when apologising to their superiors. The *Use of coded abbreviation* could be found equally in both Malay and English text messages, and as shown in Table 2, there was no significant difference in the frequency of usage for this feature in the L1 and L2 apologies.

#### APOLOGIES IN THE LOW-RISK (LR) CATEGORY

In the LR category, participants were required to: a) apologise to a cousin for forgetting to show up, and b) to an unknown person for accidentally sending a text message to the person. From the frequent applications of all five linguistic features, it is clear that participants viewed these situations as less threatening apology contexts compared to the two in the high-risk category, thus showing that there was a clear distinction between the two types of categories.

From the five features, however, only three showed statistical significance when tested with the chi-square test. The pattern in LR category mirrored the pattern in HR category, with the exception of the *Use of emoticon and/or textonomatopoeia*. The *Use of emoticon and/or textonomatopoeia* was so few in the HR category that there was insufficient data for the chi-square, but higher usage was recorded in the LR category for apologies in both languages. Overall, the frequencies of use for all linguistic features were higher when participants apologised in Malay, their L1.

### OMISSION OF VOWEL AND/OR CONSONANT AND THE USE OF COLLOQUIAL AND/OR SYSTEM DEVIATION

Higher frequencies of these two linguistic features were found in LR situations when the apologies were sent in Malay. In some texts, both features were combined by the participants, resulting in one of the examples as follows:

*Salam pe'ah.aduhai.aku lpe gle la.ko tgu aku ke?*  
(Greetings, Pe'ah. Oh no. I truly forgot. Did you wait for me?)

In the given example, “*lpe gle*” (*lupa gila*) is both a case of omission and colloquial deviation. These features were also found in the English apologies, albeit on fewer occurrences. For instance:

*babe!! im so so sorry..=(.i totally 4got dat we suppose to meet diz m0rning.my bad...*

*...Totally forgot bout tat date...*

Similar to the HR category, this finding again concurs with the hypothesis that SMS language is spelled like the spoken language. Findings also revealed that the text messages in Malay in this category leaned even more towards colloquial language patterns. One example was the application of the particle *ek*, which is a type of colloquial variation for *ya*. This particle was only found in SMS sent in Malay in the LR category. There is no exact translation for this particle in English, but roughly it carries the meaning of either *alright/okay* or *really*, depending on the context. In the Malay NS apologies in this study, the particle was usually used as a substitute for *alright/okay* rather than *really*. For example:

*Sori ek*  
([I'm] sorry, **okay**)

*Harap hg tak bgtau kt org len psl apa yg ak tulis dlm msg tu ek*  
(I hope you won't tell anyone about what I wrote in that message, **alright?**)

Another commonly found particle, *weh*, was also used by the Malay NS in their SMS apologies. This is also one of the colloquial fillers which, when translated, usually acts as a weight for a statement, most probably to show that the person truly means what he or she said. Nevertheless, depending on the context, *weh* can also function as an alerter, as in the example from a Malay NS in one LR situation:

*Weh, sori la ek.*

Here, *weh* takes on the meaning of **Hey there/you there**, *I'm sorry, okay*. In another example:

*Ak lupe gile psl td weh*

In this second example, *weh* simply puts some weight of remorse on the statement, similar perhaps to the use of *yikes* in the translated version:

*Yikes, I really forgot about just now.*

These conscious selections of colloquial expressions again showed that the texters in this study were aware of the contexts given to them, and thus intentionally applied less formal forms for the apologies sent in less threatening situations.

### USE OF REBUS ABBREVIATION

Again, *rebus abbreviations* found in the text messages in the LR category were English words. This time, there were no Malay *rebus abbreviations* at all, which means that most of

the SMS sent by the participants in the LR category were code-switched. This particular finding can be viewed as a strong suggestion that the participants might relate informality with code-switching.

#### USE OF EMOTICON AND/OR TEXTONOMATOPOEIA AND USE OF CODED ABBREVIATION

In the LR situations, a higher number of *emoticon and/or textonomatopoeia* could be detected, both in the Malay apologies and in the English ones. Nonetheless, there was no significant difference between the two. If the *Use of emoticon and/or textonomatopoeia* is viewed as a less formal feature, then it makes perfect sense that the linguistic feature could be found more in the LR categories compared to the HR categories.

*Coded abbreviations* in the Malay SMS were all codes for ‘no’ or ‘do not’ (typed as *x*). However, in the English SMS, this code was not applied at all. Instead, participants used *Omg* (oh my God) and *btw* (by the way), as presented in the given sample:

*Babe Im so sorry I totally forgot abt our meeting! Omg I feel so bad...*

Clearly, the option of using either the L1 or L2 does influence the choice of linguistic features used in SMS. In their L1, Malay NS tended to be less formal when texting apologies, even in situations which involved higher risks of (creating) offence. One can see this from the highly frequent appearances of three linguistic features (*Omission of vowel and/or consonant*, *Colloquial and/or system deviation*, and the *Use of rebus abbreviation*) out of the five features analysed in this study when the SMS apologies were sent in Malay. Worthy of note is the fact that abbreviations found in this study were applied almost exclusively for English words, which revealed the frequent code-switching by the participants. Observant readers would have noticed that there were a lot of code-switching instances in the texts. This finding is very revealing; although code-switching was not part of the linguistic features examined here, it definitely contributed in terms of the selections of features to be applied in the SMS.

#### CONCLUSION/FURTHER RESEARCH

This study has revealed that apologies via SMS sent in Malay by Malay NS varied from apologies via SMS sent in English by the same participants in terms of the *Omission of vowel and/or consonant*, *Colloquial and/or system deviation*, and *Use of rebus abbreviation*. SMS sent in Malay were found to contain higher frequencies of all three features. These results held true for apologies in the HR category and the LR category. It was suggested that the use of these linguistic features denote that when Malay NS send text messages in their L1, they were less formal compared to when they send text messages in their L2.

The pace of mobile texting technology may contribute to the ephemeral nature of SMS language – previously, text messages came with the limitation of 160 alpha-numerical character (equals to one text message), but with the availability of the latest mobile models, unlimited SMS packages offered by mobile operators, and availability of instant-message-like applications which can be downloaded for free (e.g. Whatsapp), this has ceased to become a necessary limitation. It is possible that the 160 character limit is usually ignored by mobile phone users. This study therefore sets the stage for more pragmatolinguistic-related research in the area of various electronic communications. The use of linguistic features for other types of SMS-like applications like Whatsapp, Blackberry Messenger (BBM), i-Phone Messenger, and other similar applications may shed more light on textism and its perpetual development.

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## APPENDIX A

Supyan's (2006) categorisations and examples of Malay SMS features

| Category  | Examples   |
|---|--|
| Common abbreviations (already in use before SMS)  | <i>utk</i> – <i>untuk</i> (for)<br><i>dpd</i> – <i>daripada</i> (from)<br><i>ttp</i> – <i>tetapi</i> (but)   |
| Vowel deletions   | <i>lmbt</i> – <i>lambat</i> (slow)   |
| Consonant deletions   | <i>bngga</i> – <i>bangga</i> (proud of)<br><i>bcmpur</i> – <i>bercampur</i> (mixed with)<br><i>tgi</i> – <i>tinggi</i> (tall/high)<br><i>lom</i> – <i>belum</i> (have not) |
| Colloquial abbreviations (abbreviated spellings according to colloquial dialect(s))                         | <i>cane</i> – <i>macam mana</i> (how)<br><i>pastu</i> – <i>selepas itu</i> (after that)  |
| Non-abbreviations (actions/emotions)  | <i>muahh</i> – kissing<br><i>hmmm</i> – thinking<br><i>ow</i> – pain   |
| System violations (text spelling intentionally differs from standard language spelling but not abbreviated) | <i>nasik</i> – <i>nasi</i> (rice)<br><i>saye</i> – <i>saya</i> (I)<br><i>mane</i> – <i>mana</i> (where)  |
| Malay-nised English (English word/phrase which is spelled according to the Malay spelling conventions)      | <i>babai</i> – <i>bye-bye</i><br><i>sori</i> – <i>sorry</i><br><i>tenkiu</i> – <i>thank you</i>  |

## APPENDIX B

Crystal's (2008a) categorisations and examples of English SMS features

| Feature   | Examples   |
|---|--|
| Rebus abbreviation (words/phrases formed by letters/numerals/number representing syllables) | <i>NE</i> – any<br><i>b4</i> – before  |
| Coded abbreviation  | <i>YYSSW</i> – yeah, yeah, sure, sure, whatever<br><i>lol</i> – laugh out loud |
| Loss of vowel/consonant   | <i>rite</i> – right<br><i>aftr</i> – after                                     |
| Intended non-standard alternative spelling  | <i>equllay</i> – equally<br><i>nyte</i> – night                                |
| Intended move of word break position  | <i>a nenglish</i> – an English   |
| Loss of punctuation   | <i>theyr</i> – they're<br><i>Im</i> – I'm                                      |

## APPENDIX C

Exact texts sent to participants

### English

**HR1:** U were supposed to meet ur lecturer (female) at 2pm. However, u only remembered at 5pm. U called 2 apologise bt she was not in. Send an apology thru SMS.

**HR2:** Ur supervisor (female) asked u to return a library book which she borrowed. U agreed to help bt forgot to return d book. A week later she sends a text msg/SMS inquiring whether the book has been returned. Reply to the text msg to apologise.

**LR3:** U were supposed to meet a female cousin at 11am, but u only remembered around 2pm. U called but it was not answered. Apologise thru a text msg/SMS.

**LR4:** U send an SMS from ur mobile to a friend, but when d reply comes back u realise tht u hv sent it to a stranger. Send an SMS to d person to apologise.

### Malay

**HR1:** Anda mbuat temujanji dgn seorg pensyarah perempuan pd pkl 2 ptg, ttp hanya terigt pd pkl 5 ptg. Anda mnelefon pensyarah itu utk meminta maaf ttp dia tiada d pejabat. SMS pensyarah itu utk meminta maaf.

**HR2:** Pensyarah penyelia anda (perempuan) mminta anda memulangkn buku ppustakaan yg dipinjam olehnya. Anda brsetuju utk mbantu ttp tlupa utk memulangkn buku tsebut. Sminggu kmudian, dia mhantar SMS bertanyakn ttg buku itu. Bls SMS tsb utk mminta maaf.

**LR3:** Anda bjanji dgn sepupuu perempuan anda utk bjumpa pd pkl 11 pg, ttp anda hanya teringat janji itu pd pukul 2 ptg. Sepupu anda tidak mjawab pggilan telefon anda. Hantar SMS kpd sepupu anda utk meminta maaf.

**LR4:** Anda mhantar mesej (SMS) kpd seorg rakan, ttp apabila anda mdapat balasan SMS tsebut, anda mdapati yg anda tersalah hantar kpd org yg tidak dikenali. Hantar SMS utk mminta maaf.

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