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Orthographic and Orthoepic Distortions in the Corpus of SMS Messages

Abstract: In modern Romanian language, electronic communication has become a more complex discursive form that is frequently encountered. It is a synthesis of characteristics from other functional styles, but it also has specific elements, which allow us to speak about a new functional style: the style of electronic conversation or, to put it simply, the electronic style.

Text messages are rapid means of communication sent and received by means of a cell phone. They are part everyday users' life. Even if specialists announce the release of many other innovations on the market (voice identification of the caller, instant dialogues, etc.), it seems that text messages remains the favourite of mobile phone users. Now, more than ever, people prefer writing to oral communication. This type of writing is, most of the times, against most orthographic and orthoepic norms of the conversational language, whatever this might be. Thus, may text messages become a real threat for Romanian language?

Keywords: functional style, computerized discourse, Anglophone orthography, Romenglish, emoticon

Rezumat: (Distorsionări ortografice și ortoepice în corpusul SMS-urilor) În româna actuală, comunicarea electronică devine o formă discursivă din ce în ce mai prezentă și mai complexă, care sintetizează caracteristici ale celorlalte stiluri funcționale, dar și elemente specifice, fapt ce permite să se vorbească despre un nou stil funcțional: stilul conversației electronice sau, simplu, stilul electronic. SMS-urile, aceste mijloace de comunicare rapidă, primite și expediate cu ajutorul unui telefon mobil, fac parte așadar din uzanțele vieții de zi cu zi a utilizatorilor. Chiar dacă specialiștii anunță, la intervale din ce în ce mai strânse, apariția altor inovații (identificare vocală a apelantului, dialoguri instantanee etc.) pe piața mijloacelor de comunicare, se pare totuși că SMS-ul rămâne preferatul utilizatorilor de telefonie mobilă. Acum, mai mult ca niciodată, lumea preferă scrisul comunicării orale. Acest tip de scriere este însă, de cele mai multe ori, îndepărtat oarecum de normele ortografice și ortoepice ale limbii de conversație, oricare ar fi ea. Constituie, așadar, SMS-ul o amenințare reală pentru limba română?

Cuvinte-cheie: stil funcțional, discurs computerizat, ortografie anglofonizată, romgleza, emoticon

Is Romanian really threatened by SMS messages? Like any standard language used in a distorted manner in electronic language, Romanian, too, faces an undeniable orthographic and orthoepic "crisis", especially when used in short electronic conversations. The stakes are even higher as these methods of communication are used especially by the younger generation, which may result in an alteration of the scriptural style in general in this segment of users. The conclusion of a study by French researchers published in *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning* is that writing SMS messages or messages on social networks does not influence negatively teenagers' spelling, but that it provides a further opportunity to use the written expression. „The overall level of French students' writing determines the type of mistakes in SMS messages" and not vice versa, shows the Research Center on Knowledge and Learning, in a release about the research carried out on 4,524 SMS messages written by 19 12-year old students who did not possess nor used mobile phones before the study.

According to the above mentioned study, these are misconceptions that deserve to be nuanced. Research has shown that, when children start writing SMS messages, „their

level of knowledge of traditional orthography determines the form of SMS messages sent, SMS messages not adversely influencing traditional orthography". When the practice of SMS messages settled permanently after about a year, „there was no link between the level of traditional orthography and the form of SMS messages", added the researchers.

According to them, far from being a threat to the correct orthography of adolescents, SMS messages would be „a new and additional opportunity to practice writing". In addition, traditional writing taught at school and short messages written outside any institutional framework „depend on the same cognitive abilities", say the researchers.

Recent studies on English and Finnish have shown that there is no connection between the writing of 9 to 12 year-old students and the frequency of errors in SMS messages.

Moreover, because mobile phones and SMS messages are used easily and enthusiastically by teenagers, „they could be used as school learning support, an idea supported by UNESCO since 2010", French researchers say. (Agerpres)

At the end of 2013, in Romania there were 22.9 million active users of mobile services, up by 0.3% compared to 2012 (according to ANCOM.) In terms of SMS messages traffic, in 2013 approximately 16.9 billion SMS messages were sent, 22% more compared to 2012.

In current Romanian, electronic communication becomes an increasingly present and complex discursive form summarizing features of other functional styles, but also specific elements, which allows us to speak of a new functional style: the electronic conversation style or, simply put, the electronic style.

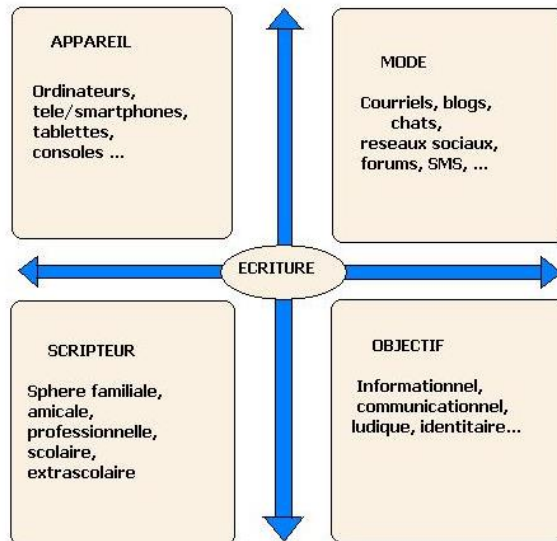
SMS messages, these means of rapid communication, received and sent via a mobile phone, are therefore part of the everyday usage of users. We could say that, now more than ever, people prefer writing to oral communication. This type of writing is, however, most of the times, somewhat distant to the orthoepic and orthographic rules of the language of conversation, whatever it may be.

Information and communication technologies (ICT) have experienced a strong momentum in recent decades. Initially, each of these ICTs involved some kind of communication with specific writing practices. For example, e-mails were sent, instant conversations were carried out, blogs were managed or comments on social networks were posted using a computer, while SMS messages were sent using a mobile phone. Following the logic of complementarity and convergence, computers have become increasingly portable and provides users with functions as close to those of a mobile phone, while the latter is getting closer to the performances and complexity of a computer. Therefore, users are able to communicate electronically through various ICTs, which makes most of them able to "juggle" with them, even communicating with the same party in different ways.

Regarding "cultured" languages, computer language technically has the most spectacular ascent. From another point of view, for cultures whose linguistic systems include in their evolution other graphic signs than those devoted to the English language, computer language exercised, at least for a time, a different kind of impact. Language is the foundation of communication between people, strongly impregnated with emotional and cultural connotations that come from their cultural, historical, philosophical and educational heritage. So mother tongues should not be an obstacle to access the multicultural knowledge available in the new environment. Since the dawn of computer language, specialists in the new areas of research have highlighted the importance of the harmonious development of the information society based on multilingual knowledge.

Regarding the Romanian language, the most important aspects of this new style of communication are related to orality, that combines writing with the visual or auditory style, and to the increasing merger between Romanian and English ("Romglish") and the *imagem*, or the English *emoticon*.

Fabien Liénard, a researcher in the CIRTAI Ideas Laboratory of the University of Havre, recently advanced the idea that electronic writing can be organized according to the following array (Liénard 2014, pp. 116-118):



This electronic writing array is based on the combination of four parameters involved in determining its nature. The variability in the quality of writing proposed by enunciators can be explained by the influence of writing, and awareness of the production process of the electronic message.

Applying this principle to a body of five different sentences that contain almost identical information, we can conclude that they either every message was written by another person, or that they were written by the same person using different ICTs or adapted to a certain means of communication and, moreover, differentiated his/her speech depending on the recipient.

- *Vrei să luăm cina la restaurant? La ce oră ai fi disponibil?* (Do you want to have dinner at the restaurant? What time would be good for you?)
- *Restaurant diseară? La ce oră ești dispo?* (Restaurant tonight? What time is good?)
- *Restadiseară? La ce oră poți?* (Resta tonight? What time?)
- *Resta tonight????? Ora???* (Resta tonight????? Time???)
- *Resta?? 20h15??*

These five messages produce different effects, as they are not just information, but acts of communication in which the enunciator is not the only participant. If we try to analyze these new forms of written language reviewed by many semio-linguists, we can identify new scriptural methods characteristic to this particular form of writing. The first four are for simplicity, following to use the shorter and less complex versions. The most important of them is based on abbreviations, using consonant skeletons (*pls* for *please* or *rdv* for *rendezvous*), for

speed. The second process is related to the truncation of words, removing either the front or the back of the word (by mean of an apocope: *restaurant* becomes *resta*, *cinematograf* becomes *cinema*, and aphaeresis: *autobus* becomes *bus*). This process announces the third: the elision of semiological elements or graphic signs, including punctuation marks, diacritics, allograft forms (e.g., upper case), semiological elements (quotation marks, question marks), and signs with a particular status (for example, articles and conjunctions). The fourth method of simplification is related to signaling and is characterized by exclusively maintaining the initial graphemes of a series of commonly used signs (*cf* [HRU] for *ce faci* [how are you], *mdr* [LOL] – *mort de râs* [laughing out loud]). These processes are prevalent in numeric writing, whose main objective is to communicate effectively, using the most appropriate and the shortest words, eliminating information deemed unnecessary.

The subsequent three, considered to be of “specialty”, allow users to exercise their linguistic creativity. However, the regularity and frequency of use of these methods betrays a desire to make the message more complex. They claim a certain level of expertise, signaled to other users (who receive the message), implicitly offering them to join the group if they decipher it and are able, in turn, to respond by using comparable scriptural methods.

The first of these three methods refers to semio-phonological notation, according to which alphabetic writing is waived. Most times, the encoding is syllabic, replacing sounds with simple letters or even numbers. Writing is therefore schematic, conceptually similar to ideograms. This process is strongly influenced by the ludic size, but also betrays the social engagement of dialogue partners. Resorting to such a truncation, the broadcaster seeks to reveal his level of expertise, but also to test that of the recipient. This “game” or way of relating to the other participates in the numeric identity construction. Partly, this is also the role played by the second process of specialization: merging commonly used signs. Thus, we attain a popular expression, or, more, a sentence consisting of a single linguistic sign that supports the whole semantic charge of the sentence. Last in this series of methods consists in borrowings from other languages, especially English.

The fact that Romanian uses the same Latin alphabet as English engages it in orienting the spelling of SMS message texts to forms specific to Anglophone writing, although the language in question does not contain those letters that phonemically and graphically represent the specifics of the Romanian alphabet. This is also highlighted by the illustrious linguist D. Caracostea who says that: “*Even assuming that the Romanian language has sounds identical to other languages, because the functions are different, so are the values*” (Caracostea 2000, 13). Foreign letters acquire a different value in Romanian words, achieving an alphonetic writing that disagrees with the academic spelling rules.

Elena Trohin noticed the same trend in Romanians using GSM networks or the Internet to adapt the local pronunciation to the phonetic value attributable to English alphabet graphemes. These “graphic reforms” are also justified by pragmatic reasons of linguistic economy: “*As the modern world’s tendency to accelerate life, and, therefore, the economy in speech is known, this offensive of the language of computer-mediated conversations must also be taken into account by linguists*” (Trohin 2006).

Another major cause of distortions in this form of speech would also be the absence of diacritical marks, prompting the emergence of more or less justified compromises, often following the same English pattern. The most common are replacing *ș* with *sh* and *ț* with *tz*. In other situations, however, replacing letters with other graphic signs is not justified, it being rather a “linguistic fashion” (*2dor* for *Tudor*, *1t* for *unt* [butter], or *kmi* for *Cami*).

The last two methods relate to expressiveness. Their role is to give an emotional touch to messages. One of them is based on the use of emoticons whose existence is signaled since early electronic writing. Initially, to animate the conversation and make it more expressive, initially the enunciator added comments in parentheses (ha, ha). Soon their place was taken by emoticons that speak for themselves (the most common are 😊 and 😄). Note that these iconic signs are aestheticized and that the choice of mood is very generous, depending on the mode of communication used. The second scriptural method consists in introducing graphemes or signs (mostly punctuation) in the message. Their degree of repetition reflects the intensity of the emotion that the transmitter wants to convey in his message. Note forms such as *Ce-ai zis???????* (What did you say??????), *Te iubeeeeesc!!!!* (I loooooove you!!!!).

This subtle blend between orality and writing allows us to obtain not necessarily a new language, but a form of written language dependent on “external” parameters. Thus, this variety is in itself a simple evolution of contemporary language.

Currently, there are lots of creative ways, but we can assume that this linguistic diversity will gradually stabilize, even if the number of users increases constantly. This stabilization does not necessarily mean creating a rule, but it will likely evolve into a form of usual communication, a usable scriptural use in certain electronic communication situations. In other words, like many other scriptural practices preceding it, this type of numeric writing also corresponds to specific uses, as was the case with the Tironian¹ notes or the antique tachygraphic or stenographic systems.

Closer today, advertising is frequently using various methods of specialization (e.g., *F2F* – *face to face*, *4U* – *for you*, etc.), and an even more frequent use may be seen in note-taking, when most of us resort to more or less skilful simplifying processes.

So, coding, i.e. how the writer changes the language to “customize” numerical sentences, is articulated around three interacting processes: simplification, specialization and expressiveness.

Related to this latter method are **vowel or consonant geminates**, such as: *te roooog* (*pleeease*), *pleeease*, *vinooooooo* (*coooooome*), *mmmmmda* (*mmmmyeah*).

In writing, we find a preference for using the apostrophe to the detriment of the hyphen under the influence of the English model: *nu's* (nu-s), *nu'i* (nu-i), *ce'i* (ce-i), which is a first phase of distortion, possibly to be followed by the total absence of orthographic signs, one of the worst misspellings specific to electronic discourse.

At a lexical-semantic level, computational style abbreviations are permanent sources of expressiveness. The most commonly used are taken from English and introduced in Romanian speech, increasing the lexical and grammatical fund of Romnglish. Thus, most SMS messages contain combinations of words and terms from English and Romanian of the type: *pls* (*please*), *thx* (*thanks*), *ty* (*thank you*), *u* (*you*), *btw* (*by the way*), *brb* (*be right back*), etc. No less interesting and original are the abbreviations of the Romanian linguistic forms: *dc* (*de ce/why?*), *22ror* (*tutoror/to all*), *npc* (*n-ai pentru ce/ don't mention it*), *cf* (*ce faci/how*

¹ Tironian notes are a method of abbreviated stenography invented in the first century BC by Tiron, secretary and confidant of Roman orator Cicero. Tiron's system originally contained about 4,000 signs. In the Middle Ages, in Europe, Tironian notes were taught in monasteries, the system knowing a significant increase of up to 13,000 signs. This writing system starts its decline in the twelfth century, but some notes continue to be used until the eighteenth century.

are you?), *b* (*bine/fine*). Moreover, for the sake of simplicity, sometimes words are not used at all, their place being taken by punctuation (? for *ce faci?/how are you?*).

Also, in SMS messages, e-mails or blogs, even emoticons can be reduced to combinations of punctuation marks, such as: :) for ☺ (= smile)

:)) for (= laugh)

: (for (= sad)

Often the morpho-syntactic level is a consequence of amendments to the phonetic level. Therefore, we note a type of carelessness in writing words, having as main cause the economy of language and either incomplete or excessive punctuation when seeking to suggest an emotion or emphasize an idea.

French linguist Jean-Marie Klinkenberg notes with concern this phenomenon of ignoring orthographic rules in current French, considering it a scourge on the linguistic heritage: “*la crise de la langue est ainsi, on le voit, une crise de la culture, voire une crise morale, puisqu’on peut reformuler tous nos cris d’alarme en termes de péchés capitaux imputables à l’usager et à rien d’autre : BD, vidéo, ordinateur ne sont que des prénoms, les vrais noms de famille de ces responsables de la crise sont Paresse, Précipitation, Laisser-aller, Désinvolture... Devant ce tableau, on est tenté de se frotter les yeux. Est-il ressemblant? Est-il possible que nous en soyons arrivés là?*” (Klinkenberg 2001, 101).

Conclusion: Functional style features used in writing SMS messages are due to various phenomena, such as: the thematic and stylistic diversity of conversations, abbreviations, poor spelling, ellipses, lack of punctuation and diacritical marks, Romglisch. Clearly, the current diversification of the language is closely related to the rapid evolution of contemporary technology, and the conversational style via SMS messages proves to be one of the most dynamic and open to change, deeply marking the consciousness of users.

By the extent of this linguistic phenomenon, we ask ourselves whether this gap between the two scriptural systems: the academic and the new one, that of computer writing, progressively and irreversibly deepens to the detriment of all classes of users, but especially of the young. The effects of this new linguistic phenomenon are similar to other languages that have adopted it, which entitled linguist D. Caracostea to assert, in line with French philologist Antoine Meillet and German sociologist Werner Sombart, that: “*modern languages, as they develop under similar conditions, lose their own character and become special aspects of one and the same language*” (Caracostea 2000, 15).

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