



DISCURSIVE-LINGUISTIC PRACTICES AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY IN THE SRI LANKAN SMS (SHORT MESSAGE SERVICE) DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

Recent advances made in the field of technology have had a drastic impact on language. Conventional rules of language for written and spoken varieties have succumbed to many a change. Consequently, these changes have led to the emergence of unique sub varieties of language. Senders of text messages, simultaneously, have taken advantage of this opportunity, not simply to exchange information in creative ways but also to create, communicate and preserve their individual and collective identities in this digital space. Texters, especially in Sri Lanka, have demonstrated that the SMS environment has metamorphosed into a contrivance by which they can negotiate and maintain various power relations.

Key Words: Discourse, Short Message Service (SMS), Identity, Sri Lankan English (SLE), Language Varieties, Computer Mediated Communication (CMC)

INTRODUCTION

Conventional varieties of written and spoken communication have succumbed to drastic changes in recent times with the advancement of information and communication technologies. The initiation of digital discourses, such as e-mail, chat, instant messaging and

virtual worlds, especially connected to the Internet (Crystal 2001), saw English language being used in unconventional and novel ways. The traditional orthographic and syntactic conventions of the language were discarded for efficiency and communicative impact, which resulted in new language varieties

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with unique linguistic features and syntactic conventions.

Rapid advancement in mobile phone technology, on the other hand, saw similar developments. The creation of SMS (for Short Message Service), with the intention of alerting a mobile phone user about an incoming voicemail (Beslile 1996), swiftly developed into a mode of communication which engulfed every corner of the world. The language of SMS shared many features with the language of the Internet¹. Abbreviated spellings, acronyms, emoticons, initialisms and phonological approximations were all utilized by 'SMS language' to achieve the dual maxims of brevity and speed (Thurlow 2005).

Thus, due to its wide availability, discreteness, low cost and the ability to communicate both synchronously (i.e., sending and replying to messages happen in rapid succession) and asynchronously (i.e., sending and replying messages are delayed, allowing the parties involved to measure and present their responses as well as respond at their convenience), SMS has become popular among a large number of people around the world. As a result of this, SMS discourse, more than any other digital discourse, is increasingly becoming reflective of social, cultural norms and identities of the society in which it is situated.

BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH PAPER

The SMS discourse in Sri Lanka demonstrates remarkable linguistic, syntactic and discursive features that are otherwise not found in 'conventional SMS discourse'². 'Texters'³ in Sri Lanka

are not merely copying their international counterparts. Instead, they have adopted and appropriated the language and the discourse of SMS in order to reflect cultural nuances, thought patterns and their individual and group identities.

A socio-cultural or ideological approach to SMS orthography elucidates that the use of orthography is a value-laden practice that reflects the cultural nuances and identity of an individual or a social group with regard to linguistic/discursive variation and its representation in writing, and that it is not the mere employment of written conventions for representing language. As Street (1984) observes, "Orthographic choices constitute a form of semiotic design in which people construct their identity and affiliation with particular social groups and practices" (p.37).

Hence, this research paper seeks to establish the specific nature of linguistic and discursive practices that are employed by texters in this country in negotiating various identities in their daily interactions and to delineate how such appropriation demarcates different social/ethnic group identities. In so doing, its aim is to situate the SMS discourse as a platform where considerable studies of identity construction and maintenance can be undertaken.

THEORY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The following sections will focus on the nature and demarcation of concepts i. e. *language*, *communication* and *discourse*, the definition and scope of *digital discourses* and its affiliations with *Internet Linguistics*. It also seeks to extend a discussion on the nature of SMS

language. Similarly, an outline of previous literature on the *concept of identity* and its manifestations in digital environments too is forthcoming.

• **Language, Communication, and Discourse**

Language is the cognitive faculty that enables humans to learn and use systems of complex communication⁴. In other words, language is a social tool that enables human beings to express and frame their thoughts and to infuse some meaning into their day-to-day interactions. All natural languages are highly complex systems in that they are based on a set of rules that relate symbols to meaning (Saussure 1913). Hence, a single 'language' has the capacity to form an infinite number of possible creative utterances from a set of finite number of elements (Chomsky 1957). Due to this characteristic of all natural languages, they constantly evolve and diversify over time. One of the main factors that act as the catalyst in this process of evolution is the impact of technology on language.

As a result, many lexical items that prevailed in the earlier periods of language became obsolete and in their place, new words, expressions, coinages etc, are added each day into the existing languages of the world. Thus, a shift occurred in the emphasis on languages from being defined in terms of 'form' (such as in terms of syntax, morphology etc.) to being defined in terms of 'communicative function' (such as semantics). Communication came to be regarded as a process of exchanging information and ideas. However, there is more to human communication than the simple act of engaging in speaking

and listening; it is a process whereby one creates, negotiates and interprets personal meaning. As Douglas Barnes (1971) elaborated,

Communication may be regarded as a combination of 'acts' with a purpose and intent. Communication is not merely an event, 'something that happens'; it is functional, purposive and designed to bring about some effect-some change, however subtle or unobservable-on the environment of the hearer and speaker. Communication is a series of communicative acts or speech acts to use John Austin's (1962) term, which are used systematically to accomplish particular purposes (p. 250).

Thus, it is possible to understand, that communication is a continuous process in which individuals are simultaneously engaged in, by not only sending and receiving messages but also in creating, interpreting as well as negotiating meaning.

The concept of 'discourse' also plays a prominent role in the current backdrop. It needs to be defined further in relation to the present discussion as, a combination of social acts that take place within a specific society or community in a specific context (Halliday 1978, Kress 1988). It is in this regard that SMS text messages can be identified as a type of 'discourse'. Mendis (2006) in her article titled 'Situating SMS (Short Message Service) discourse' also establishes the rationality in incorporating SMS text messages within the category of 'digital discourses'.

The concept of 'discourse' has become imperative in this setting to fully analyse and understand a language. As Brown

and Yule (1983) noted, "The analysis of discourse is necessarily the analysis of language use. As such it cannot be restricted to the description of linguistic forms independent of the purpose or the functions which these forms are designed to serve in human affairs." (p. 1)

An analysis of discourse, therefore, requires the exploration and description of not only the linguistic/discursive forms but also of the purpose or the functions of such linguistic/discursive forms according to the theory espoused by Brown and Yule. Thus, it is the intention of this research to enumerate not only the linguistic and discursive features employed by the texters but also to scrutinize underlying functions performed by those features found in the SMS discourse in Sri Lanka.

• *Digital Discourses and 'Internet Linguistics*

As texting is considered to be another digital discourse, it comes within the purview of a new discipline according to an argument put forth by David Crystal (2005). In his opinion, the arrival of the Internet in particular, has had a revolutionary impact on languages around the world, so much so, that he believes "the time is right to recognize and explore the scope of putative 'Internet linguistics'" (p.1). He defines the term Internet Linguistics as, "Synchronic analysis of language in all areas of Internet activity, including email, the various kinds of chatroom and games interaction, instant messaging and web pages and including associated areas of computer-mediated communication (CMC), **such as SMS messaging (texting)**" (My emphasis) (p.1).

Crystal claims that the formal properties of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) are more important than the 'rather minor effects CMC is having on the surface properties of languages' (p. 1). According to him, several features separate the language of texting from the traditional written and spoken discourses due to the medium's inherent nature and its limitations.

The lack of simultaneous feedback, its ability to communicate asynchronously, and the absence of non segmental phonology, such as tone of voice, clearly demarcate the language used in text messages from traditional conversational discourse (p.1). Conversely, the language of texting is also differentiated from the traditional written discourse due to such characteristics as, the dynamic dimension, which enables the use of emoticons, unconventional abbreviations, acronyms and the use of various symbols, etc.

Hence, one ought to be cognizant of the fact that, the language of texting cannot be affiliated either with the traditional written variety or with the spoken variety of language. Instead, it demonstrates a unique 'hybrid' quality.

Brown and Yule's (1983) comments on the functions of written and spoken discourse will further shed light on this particular aspect of the SMS language. They elaborate that:

We can use speech largely for the establishment and maintenance of human relationships (or we use it for interactions) whereas we use written language for working out and transference of information (primarily for the purpose of transaction). However we can have written discourse that is intended

to be spoken (a speech) a spoken language to be read (an informal letter) (as cited in Dahanayake 2012, p.19).

This 'hybrid' quality of language used in SMS messages is further exhibited from the fact that text messages are used for both interactional as well as transactional functions. As established by Mendis (2006), SMS discourse as a result, can be considered as an independent discourse genre in its own right, within the other digitally mediated discourses.

- **Language of SMS**

One prominent characteristic of 'SMS language' is the *brevity* of the messages. As most of SMS communication is interpersonal communication between people, due to their 'shared knowledge', (i.e. the knowledge about each other and the communicative context), the length of text messages are usually limited. Furthermore, "the character limit of the message and the cumbersome text input makes this otherwise rude behavior acceptable" (as cited in Dahanayake 2012, p.19).

The challenge of the small screen size and its limited character space (160 Characters) as well as the small keypad has motivated the evolution of an even more abbreviated language than emerged in chat groups in virtual worlds (Crystal 2001, p. 229). Thus, the users of SMS are continuously challenged by the *technological limitations* of space and style of the medium and are therefore in a constant process to reinvent and circumvent the problems posed by such limitations.

As a result of such limitations, SMS messages are actually an amalgam of

real words, acronyms, abbreviations and short forms. "They are shortened through a process of truncation, omission of letters or substitution of consecutive letters in a word with a shorter chunk of consecutive characters that are phonetically equivalent" (as cited in Dahanayake 2012, p.20).

- **The Concept of Identity**

The concept of identity is one of the most contentious social abstractions that continues to be explored by sociologists. Its dual-tier composition further adds to the complexity of the concept: on one hand, identity is viewed as one's self image and individuation and on the other, it relates to ascribed and achieved social roles within a particular social context. This inherent and assigned nature of identity is encapsulated in the definition put forth by Ableson and Lessig (1998) who define identity as a "unique piece of information associated with an entity...a collection of characteristics which are either inherent or assigned by another." "...the skills that a person possesses can also become part of one's identity" (p. 5).

Thus, no two people are said to have the same identity though they may share a particular characteristic i.e. skin colour or gender or a skill i.e. the ability to communicate in English. Identity evolves over a period and shapes and moulds one's perception of 'self' as well as one's perceived rights and obligations⁵. Nevertheless, it is viewed as being in a constant flux and is being formulated and reformulated in each communicative act, social context and in each interaction in relation to that of other identity/ies. This paper, in particular, seeks to situate an understanding of identity in relation to

Ervin Goffman's dramaturgical approach as presented in his book *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959).

For Goffman, life is a series of performances, in which two types of performers operate. The *actor* and the *audience* in each interaction become the observers of each other. The perception of the 'other' and of 'self' is shaped and reshaped with the shared knowledge and link (or the lack of it) that exists between them and management of audience impression.

Further, in each performance, as elaborated by Goffman, the *actor* and the *audience* employ dual mode of code for written and oral communication. Intentional overt communicative devices i.e. linguistic and discursive elements and unintentional covert cues i.e. eye contact, tone, body language etc.

Through the use of these overt as well as covert cues, an 'actor' seeks to manage 'self', conforming to (or deviating from) social norms and expectations, thereby, desiring a level of management of 'audience impression'. The management of audience impression on one hand allows an actor to create a particular effect on the audience, in order to achieve a specific communicative purpose and on the other hand, paves the way to conform to (or deviate from) the norms and beliefs of particular social/ethnic groups or classes.

- ***Identity in the Cyberspace***

The construction of identity in the cyberspace is in stark contrast to the process undertaken in a face-to-face context. McKenna and Bargh (2000) outline four major architectural differences

that could alter the way identity is operated in the digital space. They postulate that features i.e. *anonymity, lack of physical self online, virtual space and temporal context* all have potential to demarcate how identity is constructed in Computer Mediated Communication (CMC).

The act of communication that occurs in the SMS environment does not allow its users to *see* or *hear* each other. As such, many important covert cues i.e. eye contact, intonation, facial expressions are unavailable for texters to interpret and assign meaning to their interaction. Instead, they operate in a virtual space where they lack the ability to communicate their identity through the presence of their physical self. Hence, the anonymity that is created through this environment necessitates texters to convey their identity through other means.

Thus, the application of McKenna and Bargh's claims to the present research defines that, unlike in face-to-face, real-life interactions, in the SMS domain, the *actor* and the *audience* operate in a virtual environment where certain constraints and privileges are accorded them. As such, innovation and creative appropriation of linguistic, morpho-syntactic, discursive and graphical elements offered by the medium are the sole means through which the creation and preservation of individual and group identities can be achieved within the SMS discourse in Sri Lanka.

STUDY DESIGN

- ***The Participants***

The participants in the study are males and females in the age range of 21 to 50 years, who are affiliated to the

university system of the country either as undergraduates, postgraduates or students of external courses or as lecturers, especially in the University of Colombo, University of Kelaniya, and the University of Sri Jayawardhenapura. They represent highest educational qualifications from General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (GCE A/L) examination to a PhD. In terms of language proficiency, the participants were either monolingual or bi/multilingual and use Sinhala, Tamil or Sri Lankan English for communication.

- **The Corpus**

A total of 1512 SMS messages were collected from the participants. All SMS text messages were then transcribed into a single Microsoft Word Document. A second person was employed by the researcher, in order to ascertain the accuracy of the transcriptions. References to personal information were deleted during the process of transcription and the SMSes were then included in the corpus. The participants were asked to provide messages that

were sent rather than received. Creative messages, jokes and verses/poems, etc., were also excluded from the corpus, as there is a higher tendency to circulate these messages rather than to author them.

ANALYSIS OF DATA

The examination of the corpus of SMS messages exposed the basic patterns of texting behavior and mechanisms employed by the senders of these messages in order to achieve their communicative objectives.

The following sections delineate the main patterns and mechanisms.

- **Interjections**

Texters in Sri Lanka use interjections to not only express meaning and emotions, but also to convey their identity, whereby they seek to align themselves with a particular culture and an ethnic identity. 18% of SMS messages in the corpus, with English as the base language, clearly demarcate this phenomenon:

Message 1⁶ : Yup! got the book bt IO I 4got to take money 4m bank! will do 2moro

Message 2⁷ : O! Romba Nalladhu! will come 2 c u latr.

Message 3⁸ : Na Na don't u rmembr anytn! where's da cake u promised! ;)

In these messages what is significant to note is not the mere appearance of colloquial Sinhalese and Tamil interjections, rather how the 'form' of those has been altered to suit the medium they communicate in. In other words,

the interjections have been transformed into abbreviations⁹ which act much the same way as initialisms/ alphabetisms¹⁰ do in the written language. Hence, the pronunciation of the interjection in M1 is [aɪjo:] which roughly corresponds

to how these letters are spoken as individual letters in English-[aɪo:] . The Interjection in M3, on the other hand, displays how skillful the texter is, as he/ she uses a phonetic approximation. The correct pronunciation of it is [ʌne: ʌne:], however in the message it reads as [en e: en e:] and not as [na: na:]. Thus,

the creativity and the ability of this texter to bend the rules of language clearly highlight the uniqueness of the Sri Lanka SMS discourse.

With regard to the construction of their identities, it is interesting to note how texters negotiate ‘self’ among themselves:

Message 4¹¹ : Oops! 4gt to remind u abt t wrkshp on prsnt8sion skills-Mon 9.30 am sme place come if u cn

Messages, one and four are written by the same texter. What is notable in M4 is the avoidance of use of a Sinhalese/ Tamil interjection. In this, he/she uses an informal conventional English interjection- ‘Oops!’. Though, many factors may have influenced the use of this discursive element, a wish on the part of the texter, not to ‘align’ or ‘distance’ him/herself in relation to the addressee is evident.

• **Question Tags**

In colloquial Sri Lankan English (SLE), the tag ‘no?’ fulfills several expressive functions that are characteristic of the local languages-Sinhala and Tamil. Many find it difficult to do away with, as it has sunk deep into the Sri Lankan

psyche. Consequently, it is one of the most noticeable linguistic features that project the Sri Lankan identity among the speakers of English in the country.

Nonetheless, the analysis reveals that Sinhalese texters in the country not only use the productive tag-‘no?’ quite frequently, but in fact, they use five different, yet linguistically and functionally similar tags (Dahanayake 2012) in their English medium text messages. Such question tags were identified in 17% of the text messages in the corpus. This is contrary to the belief that they largely remain faithful to the use of tag ‘no?’, when speaking in English and in sending English medium SMSes:

Tag	Variant Forms
No?	neda? ne? da? ah? Nedda?

The following messages will demonstrate this point further:

Message 5¹² : Evey where bomblasts neda?

Message 6¹³ : Hey happy birthday dabs!!! Soo jayatama party da ah?? :|)

Message 7¹⁴ : Cn u snd it on mon,pls?nw e'thn is k bt il be leavin in a whle.thr ws a blst & stndt unrest.u knw ne usual thn ;-)

All these variant forms of the tag 'no?' are borrowed from the Sinhala language. The mixing of such syntactical elements from L1 with the English sentence structure, although on the surface seems to distort both the languages, in actuality demonstrates the linguistic prowess of texters in the country in both languages.

For example, in message 7, the texter has used the linguistic equivalent 'ne' instead of 'no?'. Here he/she demonstrates their competence in the syntax of both the languages by realizing that the syntactic structure of the English sentence when coupled with the syntax of the Sinhala tag, does not allow him/her to use 'ah?' there. Thus, 'u knw ah usual thn' will be an unacceptable grammatical structure. Therefore, Crystal's (2005) opinion regarding SMS language and

linguistic innovations that accompany it, as requiring a sound knowledge in the rules of language can be extended to the innovative use of tags by the Sri Lankan texters (and speakers of English in the country). Though on the surface level it seemed chaotic and difficult to understand, a careful analysis reveals that it, in fact, is rule-governed.

Such appropriation and innovation also directs the addressee's (audience's) attention to the role performed by the 'actor' i.e. the sender of the text. According to the *Optimal Distinctiveness Theory* presented by Brewer (1991; 1999; 2003), the motivation for this behavior stems from two bipolar extremes: the desire to belong or assimilate with a particular in-group and simultaneously be distinct and unique in relation to out-group/s.

M8 on the contrary, seems to operate on a different level:

Message 8¹⁵ : Hi, hope u r comin 4 trip... bring some vadai ... seri? ;-)

In this, the texter (whose first language is Sinhala), clearly shows signs of linguistic convergence, (i.e. the use of a Tamil tag question – 'seri' by a Sinhalese texter), to appeal to the identity of the audience. Such convergence is the result of a desire to glean "a more favourable appraisal of

him/herself. When convergence is viewed positively it leads to the enhancement of the conversation as well as the attraction between the listener and the speaker" (Gallois, Ogay, and Giles 2005, p.84). What is also noteworthy is the texter's use of an emoticon ' ;-)' to indicate that

he/she is stepping out of their usual linguistic practice.

Hence, it can be hypothesised that identities are negotiated either vertically or horizontally within the SMS discourse

in the country. In other words, actors and the audience construct their individual identities either to assimilate or to be unique on a *vertical level* and to remain neutral and ‘unmarked’ in relation to the ‘other’ on a *horizontal level*.

Negotiations on a horizontal axis to remain ‘unmarked’ vis-à-vis the audience, is projected remarkably well in the following exchange:

Message 9¹⁶ : Hi, is t k if I com arnd 10.30?
But, it's b8r if v cn finish e meeting b4 11.30 isn't it?

Message 10¹⁷ : Ya, bt hv 2 do group marking ne :(?
11.30 bari wei

Message 11¹⁸ : Ane! then I ve 2 come ne?

M 9 and M 11 are authored by the same texter. Nonetheless, these two messages indicate a different linguistic and discursive style: while M 9 uses an informal yet close-to-standard register, M 11, is clearly adhering to colloquial SLE. Noteworthy is the fact that this ‘shift’ in style is the immediate consequence of the exchange occurring between the

sender and receiver. In order to converge to the discursive-communicative style of the ‘other’ the sender distances from his/her usual linguistic identity and conforms to that of the receiver’s. This cements the negotiation of identity on a horizontal axis where the sender wishes to remain ‘unmarked’ and ‘equal’.

In contrast, the creation and preservation of identities on a vertical level leads to indexing of identities:

Message 12¹⁹ : Gm, ada clz theyenawa kiuwada?

Message 13²⁰ : Ya, ya class @ 7 as usual ;(

An inclination on the part of the texter of M13 to demarcate him/herself from that of the sender of M 12 is perceptible from this exchange. As a reply to a message which is almost completely compiled in Sinhala, the texter of M13, sends a message compiled completely in English. Though the underlying reasons for such

‘divergence’ cannot be gleaned outright, the necessity of preserving the identity as belonging to an out-group (at least within this speech act) is discernible. Such interactions, therefore, point to the indexing of texter identities within the Sri Lankan SMS discourse.

• **Expressions and Loan Translations**

Yet another linguistic device employed by the Sri Lankan texter is the use of expressions and loan translations to construct their digital identities and index those to particular social groups in the

country. 22% of the corpus consisted with such messages. Sinhalese texters²¹, in particular, indicate an interest in interweaving Sinhala language expressions into their English medium text messages:

Message 9²² : Hey machan, hwz lyf ? hv u forgotten about Sri Lanka? Apita nam ithin 'ulath ekai pilath ekai' ;-)

Message 10²³ : Found a new persn, bt he's a real baka pandithaya- didn't like his attitude, ane pls try n fnd me another wil u?

These expressions in Sinhala add a local flavor to the text message, while enabling the texters in Sri Lanka to display their expertise of not only English, but also in the local languages, thereby creating a 'bond' between the texter and the receiver. Such linguistic/discursive practices also signify the desire to create a 'code' (Kasesniemi and Rautiainen 2002, p.183) to exclude out-group members from their private discourse. Thus, a strong desire to index themselves as part of a particular social group is evident in these messages superseding the basic need of

exchanging information.

Similarly, Loan Translations are expressions which have been directly translated into the English language. In message number 11, 'a small drink' is a direct translation of the Sinhala expression-'podi drink ekak', while 'leaving to home' is a direct syntactical translation of the Sinhala expression-'gedarata yannawa'. Message number 12 employs another interesting loan translation. 'Eating drinking people' is directly translated from 'kana bona minissu'.

Message 11²⁴ : no party today. had a small drink with friends. now leaving to home.

Message 12²⁵ : Y do u say dat? V r also eatin drinkin ppl no?

Texters whose first language or the dominant language is Sri Lankan English (SLE), on the other hand, appropriate expressions that are endemic to SLE.

These discursive devices are not found in the Sinhala language but have originated from it.

Message 13²⁶ : Just hm from Fnaral house.gnt

Message 14²⁷ : Hi wel 2da v boght a nice karaduwa frm dat place.
ane pin men,yes men il cum 2 junc around 7, 4 flowrs it'l cost
1000wage,so u can gv 500 if posbl..

Message 15²⁸ : i'm putting a chat with my old friend. he also going to help me. take
care. TS

In these messages, the highlighted expressions are accepted and used in Standard Sri Lankan English. Therefore, these are not branded as errors in the variety of English spoken in the country. In fact, these add colour and depth of expressive ability into the text messages, which otherwise will be plain and devoid of the nuance in meaning. (This is evident in the footnotes provided for each message.)

The examples indicated above, underscore that the texters in this country have broader expectations than a mere exchange of information in sending SMS messages. Their intentions are not limited to the achievement of Thurlow's (2005)

dual maxims of brevity and speed. In fact, the appropriation of these linguistic/discursive devices often times violates the necessity of achieving brevity and speed.

- **Facetious Forms**²⁹

Aside from the use of Standard English forms i.e. TC (Take Care), GN (Good Night), OMG (Oh My God) and KIT (Keep In Touch), Texters of Sri Lanka make use of a host of unique and innovative facetious forms in their SMS communications. While this allows them to maximise the expressive quality of the message by facilitating brevity and speed, it also accords them an opportunity to situate their individual and group identities:

Message 16³⁰ : Api enne 8.05 train 1. Enakota 9 withara wei. Dan adui. Oya awit
inna api ikmanata enawa. GN. BS.

Message 17³¹ : Strike going well...:-P...no ane it's a token strike tomoro hav lecs
as usual...TXnGP for the Ppt!

Message 18³² : whaaaat! BS! i specifically told her we need d print outs by moro!

M16 is authored by a Sinhalese speaker whose communicative ability in English may be limited, or the message may be indicative of linguistic convergence as the addressee is predominantly a Sinhalese speaker with limited ability in the English language. The texter in this message uses two facetious forms: a Standard English form 'GN' (Good Night) and the other an

innovation in SLE 'BS' (Budu Saranai), which means 'may Lord Buddha bless you'. Contrary to this, the same facetious form 'BS' appears in M18 in a purely contrasting context which generates a completely different meaning! Thus, the appropriation of the SMS discourse by the texters in this country directs one's attention towards varying linguistic/

discursive practices utilized by individuals belonging to different social classes and categories: while for the majority of Sinhalese texters, 'BS' indicates a wish or a blessing, for speakers of English in the country 'BS' may indicate an offensive remark!

M17 on the other hand, displays the innovation and prowess of the texters in surpassing the traditional rules of written language. The form 'TXnGP' in actuality, not only acts as a facetious form but it also indicates the marriage between two languages; English and Sinhala. While 'TX' stand for 'thanks' with the

use of an abbreviation, it also uses a misspelling. 'GP', conversely, stands for 'Godak Pin' in Sinhala, which means 'a lot of merit to you'. Morphological binding of the two has been achieved through a letter homophone in place of 'and'. Capitalization and the use of lower case too, are significant discourse strategies in this instance.

- **Letter/Number Homophones**³³

Tamil texters show a general preference for letter homophones in the corpus whereas Sinhalese generally prefer numbers:

Message 19³⁴ : ada neme tute 1. Next wk 1. Man kohomat bus 1 inne dan mattiye!

Message 20³⁵ : A'ppa 'D irukkeenga?

Message 21³⁶ : neenga V2'ku waruveengalaa?

In the Tamil messages (M20 and M21), the function performed by capitalisation and punctuation i.e. apostrophes, is also significant as these signal to the receiver, that the capital letters act as homophones, and so, should be kept in mind when reading the message.

The linguistic and phonological nature of the native languages seems to direct the texting mechanisms and behaviour displayed by individuals using this technology. This in turn distinguishes the texters' awareness of their mother tongue and the creativity employed in manipulating its rules. While the phonological and morphological ecology of the Sinhala language facilitates the appropriation of number homophones, (more than the use of letter homophones),

such as 'bus ekak (bus 1)', 'week ekak (week 1)', wherever an English borrowing appears in the Sinhalese language, Tamil, due to its phonological nature allows for more letter homophones i.e. 'A'ppa'D' for [eppəɖɪ] within this corpus of messages. Hence, the use of letter/number homophones as well as capitalization and the use of lower case and punctuation are of strategic importance for the Sinhalese and Tamil texters to accentuate their group identities within the SMS discourse in Sri Lanka.

- **Transmission of Cultural Schemata**

The expression and exchange of cultural schemata is yet another demarcation of individual and group identity. Nishida (1999) in presenting *cultural schema*

theory postulates that the more experience one has in interacting with and discussing information related to a particular cultural context, the more cultural 'schema' will be created and stored in one's brain. These schemata are conceptual frameworks that allow

a member of a particular cultural group to interpret cultural experiences and expressions.

The corpus of text messages reveal such exchanges which aid in the segregation of various group identities within the matrix of interactions:

Message 22³⁷ : Ane no! coz temple's having da Katina ceremony on Sat nd nywy v have many events these days as it da vas season.

Message 23³⁸ : I don't think so- have to go to Mass- r u coming?

Message 24³⁹ : Okita ehema kivuwata vas wadinawa ban... yana tena kata karanne danne ne

What is noticeable in these interactions is the shared cultural knowledge between the actor and the audience. References to religious ceremonies i.e 'Mass' and 'Katina' demonstrate within which social boundaries they operate in. Indicators of shared cultural schemata is clearly visible in M22 and M24, where the word 'vas' appears in differing contexts. A Sinhalese-Buddhist will know that the reference in M22 is positive and that it indicates the 'rainy season'. On the contrary, M24's referenceto 'vas', gives

out a negative connotation and suggests that 'a curse' will be upon the person they are discussing, due to a blasphemous remark made by the person concerned.

However, a cross-cultural exchange of schemata is also discernible from the corpus. These exchanges establish different culturally exclusive identities on a vertical axis. In other words, texters in Sri Lanka employ cultural schemata in order to either, assimilate or to be unique on a hierarchical order:

Message 25⁴⁰ : Hav u done any poojas 4 your baby issue? Thr this person... don't hav 2 be a buddhist to do it

Message 26: Will your kids like to go to a Christmas party? I can take- Have they been to 1 before?

Though their identities are different, they are accommodating and reconciling the social gap that exists between them. Hence, such exchanges may indicate which direction a society is taking. This could well be quite significant to Sri Lankans in general. Given the historic

crossroads the country is at, SMS discourse, though on a smaller scale, can be observed to provide a fertile ground to plant the seeds of 'reconciliation'.

In other words, as SMS discourse records authentic communication exchanges

among various individuals of a society, one can very easily observe the 'cross-cultural exchanges' that occur between different ethnic and social groups in the country. Thereby, establishing, if the society is moving towards reconciling differences among them or if it is moving away and becoming more segregated.

DISCUSSION

This paper has analysed a corpus of SMS messages in order to bring to light how texters in Sri Lanka engage in the creation and preservation of their individual and group identities in a virtual written discourse. The analysis was further informed and enriched by Goffman's (1959) *dramaturgical approach* to identity construction, McKenna and Bargh's (2000) notions on *digital identities*, Brewer's presentation of *Optimal Distinctiveness Theory* (1991; 1999; 2003), and Nishida's (1999) *cultural schema theory*. Consequently, the complex inter-disciplinary nature of the study has uncovered many dynamic and interesting aspects of the current SMS discourse in Sri Lanka.

Significant is the way many texters have appropriated a digital written medium to fulfill their communicative needs such as maintenance of friendship, exchange of information etc. However, what is engrossing is the way they have manipulated the facilities offered by SMS to go beyond the above stated communicative needs. In so doing, they have, at times violated the basic rules of SMS i. e. the achievement of brevity and speed.

It was further identified through the analysis, that texters in Sri Lanka utilize

various discursive-linguistic elements such as interjections, questions tags, expressions, loan translations, capitalization and punctuation, as well as, facetious forms, letter-number homophones and cultural schemata to project and maintain their identities. The use of these elements, however, cannot be assigned concretely to any one particular identity. Rather, the fluidity of use of these elements point to the fact that they seek much more than the mere exchange of information via the SMS discourse.

Texters clearly indicate a preference for negotiating their identities on two levels: vertical and horizontal. On a vertical level, they utilize aforementioned discursive-linguistic elements to 'distance' themselves from out-groups and in certain instances, to index their identity in relation to others. Such indexing also underscores perceptions and assumptions about their own identity as well as the group/class identity they wish to affiliate with or deviate from. These assumptions also indicate the nuances in the 'power relations' between various individual and group identities.

On a horizontal level, these elements are used to remain 'unmarked', thereby seeking to momentarily bridge the social gap that exists between the 'actor' and the 'audience'. Again, an awareness of various identities that operate in society seems to control the texting behaviour of individuals. Convergence of texting style allows texters to bridge the social divide perceived to exist between different class and group identities.

Hence, the SMS discourse in the country has clearly provided a unique platform

for Sri Lankans to not only engage in their daily interactions and exchange information, but it has also facilitated the creation of various individual, and group identities in a virtual space. Texters in the country are thereby, able to infuse a sense of 'self' into each and every text message exchanged among them. Thus, enabling them to approximate 'real speech-like' situations in a digital environment.

NOTES

1. Crystal (2001) identifies the language of the Internet as 'Netspeak' while Zitzen & Stein (2004) refer to it as, 'Internet Language'.
2. The term conventional SMS discourse is used to refer to a type of SMS discourse where the use of typical linguistic features such as, abbreviated spellings, acronyms, emoticons, initialism and phonological approximations are used without any features of regional varieties of English being present. In other words, the term refers to SMS discourse without the features of colloquial SLE.
3. Texting refers to the sending of short typed messages between mobile phones using the SMS service. Users of texting will be labeled texters in this paper.
4. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language. 3rd ed. (1992).
5. Carol Myers Scotten (1998) referred to Rights and Obligations (RO) in their Markedness Model to refer to norms for social interaction and codes for social behavior.
6. M1: Yes! (I) got the book but oh dear! I forgot to take money from (the) bank! (I)will do it tomorrow.
7. M2: Oh! That's good! (I) will come to see you later.
8. M3: (Sinhalese Interjection + reduplication) Don't you remember anything! Where is the cake you promised (to bring) ;)
9. It is identified by Weber as, "the shortening of a written form of a word or words without concomitant shortening of pronunciation (1986:415)".
10. "Items which are spoken as individual letters" (Crystal 2003:120)
11. M4: Oops! Forgot to remind you about the workshop on presentation skills-Monday 9.30 am, same place , come if you can
12. M5: Everywhere bomb blasts (no?)/isn't it?
13. M6: Hey happy birthday (nick name)! so, partying hard ha?
14. M7: Can you send it on Monday, please? Now everything is ok but I'll be leaving in a while. There was a blast and students' unrest. You know (no?) the usual thing ;:-)
15. M8: Hi hope you are coming for the trip... bring some vadai (a tamil shorteat) .. ok? ;:-)
16. M9: Is it okay if I come around 10.30? But, it's better if we can finish the meeting before 11.30, isn't it?
17. M10: yes, but (we) have to do group marking (isn't it?) :((I) Don't (think) we can finish by 11.30.
18. M11: oh! then I have to come (right?)
19. M12: Good morning! Did (They) say if we have the class today?
20. M13: yes, yes the class (starts) at 7 as usual ;:(
21. Senders/users of SMS text messages whose first language is Sinhala.
22. M9: Hey Brother/dude, how's life? Have you forgotten about Sri Lanka? For us of course, whatever come may
23. M10: Found a new person ,but he's a real know-it-all-didn't like his attitude, can u please find me another one, will you?
24. M11: No party today. Had a little drink with friends. Now going home.
25. M 12: Why do you say that? We are well to do people too?
26. M 13: Just home from funeral. Good Night!
27. M 14: Hi, well today we bought a nice casket from that place. A lot of merit to you/thank you (buddy?), yes (buddy?),I'll come to the cross-road around 7, for flowers it'll cost Rs. 1000 like, so you can give Rs. 500 if possible...
28. M 6: I'm having a chat/chatting with my old friend. He also, is going to help me. Take Care. TS
29. Written abbreviations which correspond to spoken phrases-(Crystal 2003:120)
30. M 16: we are taking the 8.05 train, it will be around 9 when we get there. Less (pain) now. Wait for us. we will come as soon as we can. Good night. May lord Buddha bless you!
31. M 17: strike is going on well. No (teasing) It's a token strike tomorrow I/we have lectures as usual. Thanks and lots of merit to you for the PowerPoint.
32. M18: What! Bull Shit! I specifically told her we

need the print outs by tomorrow!

33. Letters and numbers whose pronunciation is identical with words or parts of words that are used to replace words or letter sequences” . Crystal (2001:229). 40% of the English medium SMS messages in this corpus contained these.

34. M19: tute (note) is not (needed) today. Its needed next week. Anyway I'm in the bus now, you silly (girl)!

35. M20: How are you?

36. M21: Will you come to my house?

37. M 22: (oh) no! Because (the) temple is having da Katina (Buddhist ceremony) on Saturday and anyway we have many events these days as it (is) the Vas (rainy) season.

38. M 23: I do not think so-have to go to Mass -are you coming?

39. M24: A curse will fall upon her for saying that (Colloquial term of address)...does not know how to talk, wherever she goes.

40. M 44: have you done any (offerings) for your problem (of not being able to have children)? (You) do not have to be a Buddhist to (get it done).

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