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English SMS Language Use: Between Linguistic Appropriation and Identity Affirmation Among English Learners

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Abstract

This article explores the role of English SMS language as a vehicle for linguistic appropriation and identity affirmation among non-native English learners. Drawing on linguistic identity theories and the sociocultural approach to learning, it analyses how digital exchanges, digital interactions via WhatsApp, constitute spaces for linguistic experimentation, socialization, and identity construction. Using a qualitative methodology combining corpus analysis and questionnaires, this research highlights learners' linguistic creativity and their ability to negotiate their English-speaking identities in a multilingual environment. The results invite us to reconsider pedagogical practices by valuing the skills developed during these digital interactions and to recognize text messaging as a powerful tool for learning and social emancipation.

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Introduction

Digital technologies are driving linguistic practices to evolve rapidly. Language learners, in particular, are making massive investments in virtual spaces such as instant messaging, social media, online forums, and WhatsApp. Among these practices, English text messaging stands out for its ambivalent role: both a vehicle for rapid communication and a space for linguistic experimentation. Long perceived as a weakening of standard language, SMS language is now attracting growing interest in the fields of sociolinguistics, linguistics, and identity studies. Indeed, in daily exchanges on platforms like WhatsApp, non-native English learners mobilize specific linguistic forms, often far removed from academic norms, to express ideas and emotions, but also to position themselves socially and linguistically. This appropriation of digital English is not limited to the simple mastery of a functional code; it contributes to the construction of a plural identity, situated between the local space and the globalized world.

This study seeks to analyse how non-native English learners use SMS language as a vehicle for linguistic appropriation and identity affirmation, particularly through their exchanges on WhatsApp. The objective will be to show how these language practices, often marginalized, can constitute legitimate spaces for linguistic, cultural and social development. To do this, two theoretical frameworks were used. On the one hand, Norton's theory of linguistic identity (2013), which postulates that learning a language is closely linked to dynamics of power, legitimation and subjective positioning; on the other hand, the sociocultural approach to learning developed by (Vygotsky 1978) and (Lantolf and Thorne 2006), highlights the role of social interactions and mediating tools; here, the telephone and SMS language in the construction of linguistic skills.

This research is based on a qualitative approach, based on the analysis of messages extracted from a British television program and a WhatsApp group frequented by non-native learners of English. A questionnaire was designed to explore the participants' language representations and strategies. This corpus was examined in light of emerging categories relating to linguistic creativity, the identity function of language and appropriation.

This work is organized into three main parts. The first provides a theoretical context for the concepts of SMS language, linguistic appropriation, and identity. The second analyses the concrete forms of appropriation of SMS

English by learners. Finally, the third highlights the way in which these practices contribute to the affirmation of singular and social linguistic identities. This investigation necessitates a theoretical framework that can adequately capture both the sociolinguistic dynamics of English language appropriation and the identity negotiations of learners in digital contexts. The following section outlines the key theoretical perspectives that guide this study, particularly those concerned with language practices in multilingual, technology-mediated environments.

I. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The study of English SMS language in the context of second language acquisition sits at the crossroads of two major theoretical domains: linguistic identity theory and the sociocultural approach to learning. This section offers a critical synthesis of key African and international studies to highlight the linguistic, social, and identity-related dimensions of the phenomenon.

1.1. Literature Review

1.1.1. SMS Language and Linguistic Creativity

Pioneering studies by (Crystal 2008) and (Tagg 2012) have demonstrated that, far from undermining language, SMS communication forms a codified, creative, and socially embedded linguistic system. (Crystal 2008) argues that abbreviations, contractions, and omissions are sophisticated linguistic strategies that mobilize users' implicit knowledge of linguistic norms.

In the African context, (Kamdem 2017) underscores the dynamics of linguistic reinvention in which short message formats become platforms for identity expression among young Cameroonians. Similarly, (N'Guessan 2019), in his analysis of young Ivorians, examines the frequent mixing of English, French, Nouchi, and emojis in digital conversations, illustrating a context-sensitive, multilingual appropriation.

1.1.2. Specific Issues in the Francophone African Context

In Francophone African settings, the use of English in digital spaces particularly via SMS and WhatsApp, assumes a particular sociolinguistic significance. (Djité 2008) notes that in many African countries, foreign languages such as English coexist with indigenous languages and are often imbued with symbolic capital. In this context, using English digitally becomes

an act of social and generational self-assertion.

Such practices often lead to a form of linguistic reconstruction, wherein SMS English blends with local vernacular elements. Rather than a mere transposition of formal language skills, this appropriation reflects a process of cultural hybridization. This is evident in the emergence of message forms combining English, local idioms, and culturally specific references, religious, communal, or generational.

1.1.3. Linguistic Identity, Hybridity, and Legitimacy

(Norton 2013) contends that learning a foreign language inherently involves negotiating one's identity. The language learner, according to Norton, is not merely acquiring skills but seeking to reposition themselves within a social and discursive landscape. In digital spaces, this repositioning becomes especially evident through code-switching, stylistic appropriation, and culturally embedded discourse practices. (Gee 2014), through his theory of "Discourses," conceptualizes language as a gateway to social affiliations and identities. SMS communication in English, in this view, signifies participation in global digital cultures while remaining anchored in local realities.

African scholars such as (Calvet 1999) and (Kouassigan 1979) have long highlighted the political and emancipatory potential of language. In digital contexts, this tension between norm and innovation persists. English is not simply imitated as a native model but recontextualized and reinvented to create hybrid spaces of expression, as illustrated by (Blommaert and Rampton's 2011) work on "super-diversity." While the previous section has provided a structural and stylistic overview of English SMS language, such an analysis would remain incomplete without considering the sociocultural dimension of language use. Beyond the surface of lexical abbreviations and syntactic innovation lies a deeper process of linguistic appropriation, shaped by learners' experiences, perceptions, and identity negotiations. Therefore, it becomes essential to interrogate not only how English SMS language is constructed, but also how it is received, internalized, and repurposed by non-native learners in digitally mediated contexts. The following section adopts a more critical lens, focusing on the reception and appropriation of these informal linguistic practices, and their implications for identity construction, language learning, and digital socialization.

1.2. Theoretical Framework

This analysis draws on two complementary frameworks: linguistic identity theory and the sociocultural approach to learning, both of which illuminate the interplay between language, identity, and digital interaction.

1.2.1. Linguistic Identity Theory

(Norton 2000) posits that language learning entails identity transformation. In this framework, identity is seen as multiple, fluid, and constantly negotiated particularly in multilingual and multicultural contexts. Learners do not merely conform to linguistic norms but rather appropriate the language across diverse settings, both formal and informal. SMS language thus becomes a strategic tool through which learners articulate hybrid linguistic identities. Their writing choices, including abbreviations, Anglicisms, and code-switching, act as markers of social belonging and linguistic positioning within Anglophone discourse communities.

1.2.2. Sociocultural Theory of Learning

Simultaneously, Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, further developed by (Lantolf and Thorne 2006), conceptualizes learning as a socially mediated process that relies on cultural tools and interaction. Language, in this context, is not only a system to be acquired but also a medium for engaging in real-world practices.

SMS English, when used in WhatsApp exchanges, functions as a mediating tool that integrates learners into Anglophone communicative environments. Even when far from standard norms, these informal practices constitute authentic experiences of linguistic engagement. Learners operate within a zone of proximal development where they negotiate, adapt, and internalize both language and social dynamics. Taken together, these frameworks reveal that English SMS language, rather than being a mere informal or substandard register, serves as a powerful instrument for linguistic appropriation and identity assertion within the digital spaces of contemporary global communication. These theoretical insights provide the foundation for understanding how digital linguistic practices reflect broader processes of identity construction and social positioning. In order to operationalize these concepts, the next section details the methodological approach adopted to analyse English SMS language use within WhatsApp interactions.

II. Methodology

2.1. General framework

This study adopts a sociolinguistic and didactic perspective, aiming to explore how non-native English learners' appropriate informal registers and slang found in English SMS language, and how such appropriation contributes to identity affirmation. The analysis is based on an audio-visual corpus extracted from the British program *3Ways2*, broadcast on English Club TV, which presents three ways of expressing the same statement in English: formal, casual, and slang, often used in text messages. A WhatsApp discussion group, titled “**English Speaking Fluent**,” was also included to complement the data.

2.2. Corpus and Data Sources

2.2.1. Corpus Description: *3Ways2* and WhatsApp

The corpus for this study consists of two main sources. The first is the *3Ways2* television program, which aims to teach non-native English learners about register variation in English. Each episode presents a set of speech acts, such as making a request, expressing refusal, or apologizing, through three different formulations: formal, casual, and slang, including text message language. Each episode contains between four and ten sentences, followed by self-assessment activities.

The second source is a WhatsApp discussion group titled “**English Speaking Fluent**”, composed of non-native English learners who engage in regular digital interactions. Additionally, an online questionnaire was submitted both to members of this group and to other learners via private messages.

2.2.2 Corpus Compilation

A total of eight *3Ways2* episodes were selected for analysis, covering everyday speech acts such as thanking, greeting, saying goodbye, accepting apologies, asking for approval, expressing surprise, congratulating, and reporting a lack of information. These episodes were selected based on thematic relevance and accessibility. Full transcriptions of the slang segments were produced manually, preserving prosodic and lexical variations.

A data table was then constructed, listing for each speech act:

- the theme of the exchange,
 - relevant linguistic features such as abbreviations, interjections, and intensifiers,
 - and stylistic register notes.
- (See Appendix, page 17.)

2.3 Analytical Approach

2.3.1 Linguistic Analysis of the Corpus

The corpus analysis follows a two-pronged approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods.

a. Quantitative Analysis

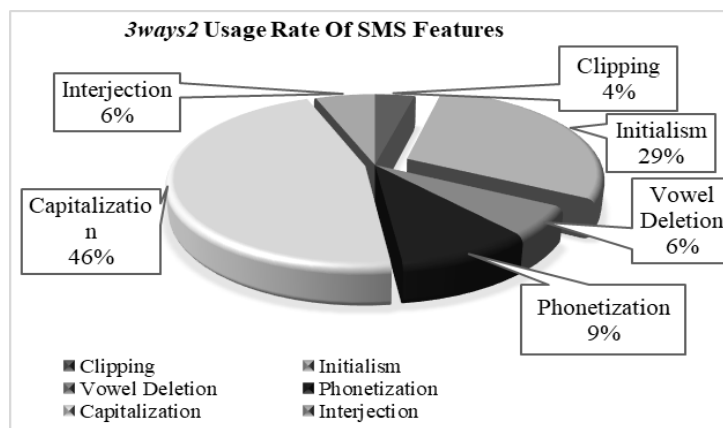
The frequency of specific lexical features in SMS English, such as initialisms, clippings, vowel deletions, interjections, capitalization, and phonetic spellings, was measured across a sample of fifty sentences and expressions.

Table 1: *3Ways2* Frequency Use of SMS Language Features

<i>3Ways2</i>	
<i>3ways2</i> SMS Features	Frequency Use
Initialism	15
Clipping	02
Vowel Deletion	3
Interjection	3
Capitalization	24
Phonetization	5

(Source: Author's personal project)

Fig 1: *3ways2* Usage Rate of SMS Features



(Source: Author's personal project)

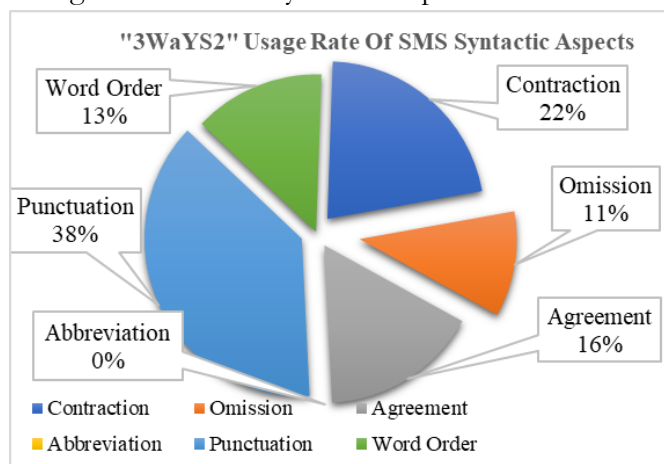
Syntactic features such as contraction, omission, agreement, abbreviation, punctuation, and word order were also analysed across the same sample.

Table 2: 3Ways2 Frequency Use of SMS Language Syntactic Aspects

3Ways2 Programme	
SMS Language Syntactic Aspects	Frequency Use
Contraction	16
Omission	8
Agreement	12
Abbreviation	0
Punctuation	28
Word Order	10

(Source: Author's personal project)

Fig 2: Usage Rate of SMS Syntactic Aspects



(Source: Author's personal project)

b. Qualitative Analysis

Selected message extracts were analysed qualitatively to highlight lexical choices, syntactic structures, and markers of speaker identity or cultural affiliation. The analysis includes aspects such as proximity, speaker involvement, and cultural references.

Table 3: Study of strategies of lexical choice and speaker involvement

Speech act	Formulation	Structure syntaxique	Morphological choice	proximity / distance	Identity/cultural markers
Thanks	TIA / YW/TYVM	elliptical	Initialism	immediate proximity	culturally coded (youth, networks)
Greeting	SUP?	Elliptical and agglutinative	agglutination	equality or youth register	culturellement codé (jeunes, réseaux)
BYE	CU	Block of sentence	Phonetisation	immediate proximity	registre oral / neutre
ASK FOR APPROVAL	Do you dig it?	Interrogative sentence	Standard form	Daily use	Cultural slang, expressions typical of a community or generation
SURPRISE	wow	Exclamatory sentence	Expressive interjection	Universal use / common	Oral amplifier, used in texting conversation

(Source: Author's personal project)

Discourse markers and morphological variations, often considered “language tics,” play an essential role in conveying speaker attitude and guiding communication. According to Ducrot (1972), “interjection allows the speaker to adopt attitudes and play roles” (19). Such features, when used in digital English, help learners create a more natural and expressive discourse. This communicative authenticity reinforces their identity construction and sense of belonging in English-speaking digital communities.

Table 3 provides a nuanced analysis of how non-native English learners engage with SMS language across various speech acts. Through strategic lexical and morphological choices such as abbreviations (TYVM, YW), phonetic spellings (CU), and culturally coded slang (Do you dig it?), learners demonstrate both communicative efficiency and social alignment. The syntactic forms are often elliptical or agglutinative, enhancing immediacy and informality. These choices reveal learners' pragmatic competence and participation in Anglophone digital discourse. As Norton argues, language choices in informal contexts reflect identity negotiation and affiliation with discourse communities (2013). Similarly, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory suggests that interaction with peers through tools like WhatsApp enables the construction of real-world communicative skills (1978). Thus, Table 3 exemplifies how English SMS language supports both linguistic development and identity affirmation.

With a clearly defined corpus and analytical framework, the study proceeds to examine the linguistic features and discursive strategies employed by learners. The following section presents and interprets the main findings, highlighting patterns of appropriation, and identity expression through English SMS language.

III. Reception and Appropriation of English SMS Language by Non-native Learners: Field Survey

The use of English SMS language is a growing phenomenon that is influencing the way English learners communicate online. The perception of this linguistic practice and its impact on formal English language learning are debated. An online questionnaire was developed to gather the opinions of a few English learners.

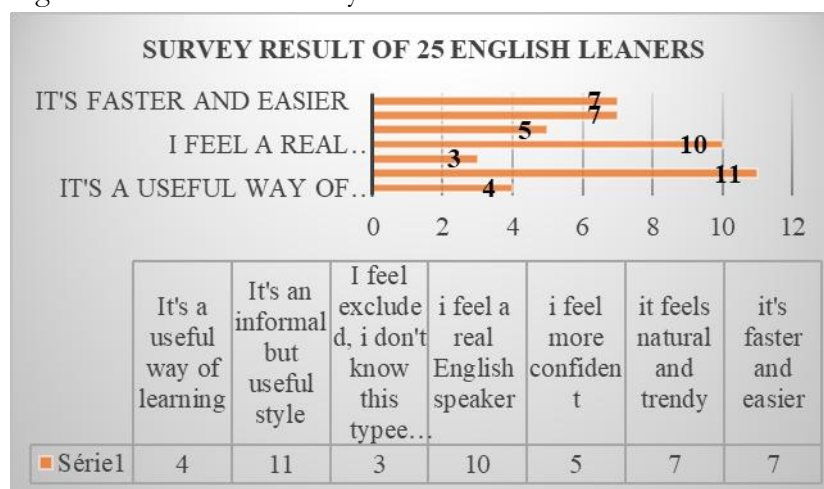
3.1. Exploratory Questionnaire

The aim of the survey was to explore learners' use of SMS-style English within WhatsApp groups and their perceptions regarding its role in language acquisition and self-expression. A total of 25 participants responded to the questionnaire, including 12 postgraduate students (Master's and doctoral levels) from Alassane Ouattara University, and 13 additional learners drawn from the WhatsApp group "English Speaking Fluent." This group was linguistically and culturally diverse, composed of Ivorian, Beninese, Rwandan,

Sudanese, and Indian members with English proficiency levels ranging from B1 to C1, as defined by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The survey combined multiple-choice and open-ended questions to capture both quantitative trends and qualitative insights. It focused on participants' frequency of SMS language usage, their lexical and stylistic choices, and their perceived relationship to Anglophone identity.

3.2. Survey Results and Interpretation

Fig 3: The Results of Survey



(Source: Author's personal project)

The findings suggest that English SMS language is not only widely used among learners but also normalized within their digital interactions. A majority reported using abbreviations (for instance: “idk,” “brb”), and simplified spellings on a daily basis. Notably, many participants stated that they felt more confident writing in English in informal settings, and some even reported feeling “like real English speakers” rather than “learners”.

These responses indicate a decentring of academic norms in favour of context-sensitive, expressive, and adaptive uses of English. Informal texting is perceived not as an obstacle to formal learning but as a parallel domain of practice that fosters fluency, confidence, and communicative spontaneity. Learners emphasized that SMS language allows for faster expression, emotional immediacy, and social bonding, all essential components of authentic language use.

3.3 English SMS Language as a Vector of Identity Construction

3.3.1. Linguistic Identity in Flux

English SMS language usage among learners reveals a process of ongoing identity negotiation. According to Norton's theory of linguistic identity (2000), language learners do not merely acquire a new code; they engage in a transformative process that reshapes their self-perception and social positioning. In WhatsApp conversations, this transformation becomes visible in the deliberate use of abbreviations (e.g., "bro," "mb," "idk") and linguistic blending. Such practices reflect an evolving affiliation with global English-speaking communities, while also expressing individuality and cultural rootedness.

Rather than striving to imitate native-like English, learners engage in hybrid language practices that serve both communicative and identity-related functions. These practices reinforce the idea that linguistic competence is not defined by proximity to the "standard," but by relevance, intelligibility, and social embeddedness. SMS English, in this regard, becomes a site of personal and collective meaning-making.

3.3.2. Informal Texting as a Space for Sociocultural Learning

Drawing on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and its application in second language development (Lantolf and Thorne, 2006), informal digital communication should be understood as a legitimate space for language learning. In WhatsApp groups, learners are immersed in authentic, dynamic, and context-sensitive uses of English. These exchanges, though non-standard, are rich in pragmatics, cultural nuance, and interpersonal negotiation. Such digital interactions provide learners with what Vygotsky termed a "zone of proximal development," wherein they can experiment with language forms, observe peer behaviour, and gradually internalize linguistic norms. WhatsApp thus functions as more than a messaging app; it becomes a mediating tool that fosters linguistic autonomy and intercultural awareness.

SMS language, often marginalized in formal pedagogy, reveals its potential as a medium of emancipation, empowering learners to participate in global discourse while asserting local and individual identities. These findings underscore the complex interplay between language use, technological mediation, and identity negotiation in the context of English learning.

Conclusion

The study of English SMS language used by non-native learners in spaces such as WhatsApp groups reveals complex linguistic and identity dynamics. Far from being a simple deviant register from standard English, this form of communication constitutes a space for the active appropriation of English, where academic norms are reinterpreted, transformed, and adapted to real-world social contexts.

The analysis highlighted two central phenomena. The first is linguistic creativity, which reflects a flexible and functional mastery of the codes of digital English. Second, WhatsApp discussion groups are learning spaces in which learners use English authentically, outside of an academic setting. These language practices are part of a logic of sociocultural appropriation developed by (Vygotsky and Lantolf 2000), where language becomes a tool for social and identity mediation. These authors agree with the postulates of Norton's theory of linguistic identity, according to which learning a language also means negotiating one's position in the world.

Based on these findings, several pedagogical recommendations emerge. First, educators should recognize and integrate students' out-of-class digital language practices into formal learning, validating them as legitimate forms of engagement with English. Classroom tasks could, for instance, draw on authentic WhatsApp exchanges to analyse real-world creativity and digital discourse conventions. Second, language instruction should adopt a more flexible view of correctness that acknowledges multilingual learners' agency in navigating English for their own social and expressive purposes. Third, teacher training programs might include modules on digital sociolinguistics to help educators critically engage with students' online language practices.

Ultimately, this study contributes to sociolinguistic research by emphasizing the interplay between digital media, second language acquisition, and identity performance in non-Anglophone contexts. It highlights how learners co-construct meaning and social belonging through everyday interactions on mobile platforms. From a pedagogical standpoint, it advocates for an expanded vision of language learning one that embraces the dynamic, context-dependent, and user-driven nature of English use in the 21st century. Future research might further explore how these practices evolve across other digital platforms or among different learner demographics, thus enriching our understanding of language, technology, and education in a globalized world.

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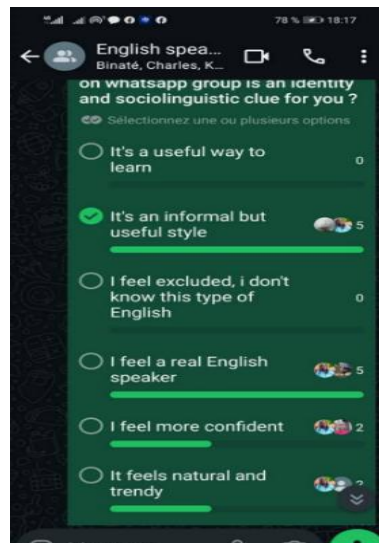
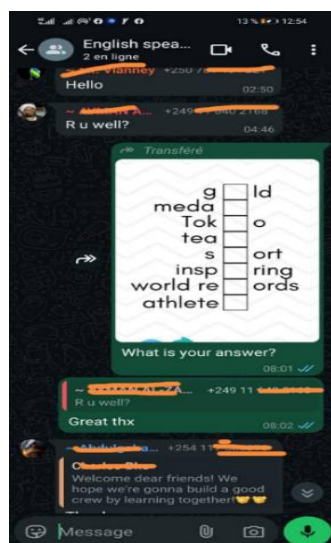
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Appendix

Fig1: “3Ways2” Data

3WAYS2 TOPICS	SMS CONTENT AND THEIR MEANINGS
(Episode 1) THANKS	- Hi Joe, you left the iron on. I turned it off ☺
	- TYVM
	- YW
	- Hi Joe. Please buy some milk. TIA
	- Ok, mum, I will
(Episode 2) GREETING	- Just been to your house and took your dog for a walk.
	- TY
	TY : An abbreviation for ‘thank you’ THNX : An abbreviation for ‘thanks’ TYVM : An abbreviation for thank you very much
	TIA : An abbreviation for thanks in advance YW : An abbreviation for ‘you’re welcome’
	- How r u?
(Episode 3) REFUSAL	- I’m good! Chat later
	- SUP? ☺
	- Good, thanks. Talk later ☺
	- How r u , man? What about going to the pub
	How r u? An abbreviation for ‘how are you?’ SUP : A short way of writing ‘what’s up?’
(Episode 4) BYE	- Marvin r u in the office?
	- Nope
	- Hi: how’s about skydiving this weekend? ☺
	- No way , José
	Nope/Nah/Uh-uh : a slang text way to say ‘no’ No way : a strong slang way to say ‘no’
(Episode 5) BAD NEWS	- Hi Marvin! Wanna catch up? ☺
	- Great idea
	- Let’s meet in the café in 30 minutes
	- CU
	- Hi! Are you gonna meet us tonight at the cinema?
(Episode 5) BAD NEWS	- Sure! CU
	CU/See ya : Slang way to write ‘bye’ in text messages
	CU soon : See you soon, another Slang way to write ‘bye’ in text messages
	- I’ve been dumped ☹
	- I am really gutted for you
(Episode 5) BAD NEWS	- Marvin, u r dumped!
	- It sucks.
	- I dropped out of uni today
	- Damn!
	It sucks : an extremely emotional slang way to react to bad news

Fig 2: WhatsApp discussion group Screenshots



Screenshot1: “English speaking fluent” Screenshot2: WhatsApp Survey

Fig: 3. Completed Questionnaire

Questionnaire: English SMS Language Use on WhatsApp Groups

🎯 **Target:** Non-native English learners using WhatsApp

🕒 **Estimated completion time:** 5–7 minutes

★ **Purpose:** To explore how learners use SMS-style English and how it relates to language identity and learning.

Section 1 – Background Information

1. **Age:**
 - ☐ 18-24
 - ☒ 25-34
 - ☐ 35-44
 - ☐ 45+
2. **First language(s):** french
3. **Your estimated level of English:**
 - ☐ A2 (Elementary)
 - ☐ B1 (Intermediate)
 - ☒ B2 (Upper Intermediate)
 - ☐ C1 or higher (Advanced)
4. **Do you participate in WhatsApp groups where you write in English?**
 - ☒ Yes
 - ☐ No

Section 2 – Language Practices

5. **How often do you write in English in WhatsApp groups?**
 - ☒ Every day
 - ☐ Several times a week
 - ☐ Occasionally
 - ☐ Rarely or never
6. **Which of the following do you often use when writing in English on WhatsApp?**
(You can check more than one.)
 - ☐ Abbreviations (e.g. *u, btw, idk, brb*)
 - ☐ Emojis or GIFs
 - ☐ Simplified spellings (e.g. *gonna, wanna*)
 - ☐ Mixing English with my native language
 - ☒ Only correct, standard English
7. **Why do you use SMS-style English?**
(Choose all that apply.)
 - ☒ It's faster and easier
 - ☒ Everyone in the group writes like that

About the Authors:

Youa Sidonie Lyadan Épouse Kamalan was born on March 14, 1979, in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. She is married and the mother of three children. She is currently a PhD candidate in English linguistics at Alassane Ouattara University in Bouaké, Côte d'Ivoire. She holds a Master's degree (2013), with a thesis titled "A Sociolinguistic Study of Women Language in Ebrié Community", and a DEA (2014) on "Sociolinguistic Study of Youth Texting Messages: the case of Côte d'Ivoire." From 2015 to 2021, she worked as a Welcome Secretary at the International Committee of the Red Cross. Her research focuses on the intersections of gender, language, and indigenous knowledge systems. In June 2024, she presented a paper at the international conference organized by WCFL-CI, titled: "The Question of Female Gender and Language in the Analysis of Indigenous Knowledge in Côte d'Ivoire: A Driver of Influence in Governance."

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