Oriekose’s essay “BB Me Naija: The ‘Forgotten Nigerian Man’ and the Blackberry Phone” started as an investigation of a paradoxical phenomenon: the immense popularity of the Blackberry Phone in Nigeria—a nation where 65% of the population lives in poverty. Being from Nigeria, Oriekose was curious to learn more about the relationship between Nigeria and the Blackberry. During her research, she discovered that the popular response to the Blackberry was due less to marketing but rather to linguistic parallels between Nigerian practice of Pidgin English and “text talk” in the Blackberry device. Moreover, she observed that Blackberry “text talk” does not merely mimic the semantics of Pidgin English, but, in fact, “enhances” Nigerian language to reveal new linguistic developments. When she initially approached me about the topic, Oriekose voiced concern about the scope of the argument and whether she could make a strong enough case. However, her well-crafted and well-researched essay demonstrates how well she overcame these worries. Through her artful examination of the Blackberry phenomenon in Nigeria, the linguistic debates surrounding Pidgin English, and the similarities between the spoken and text language, Oriekose displays not only a skill in weaving complex ideas in support of an argument but also an ability to tell a powerful story about adaptability and transformation of language in the age of mobile technology.

—Sohui Lee
Dr. Benjamin Oguejiofor woke up prematurely one summer morning for his daily jog around Enugu, Nigeria. He slowly emerged from under the mesh-blanket of nets that cloaked him from the microscopic winged parasites of the night. Having woken up early, Ben moved to turn off his alarm, but the usually illuminated screen was blank. He reached up to his bedside lamp and pressed its round switch repeatedly, but the new 10-Watt bulbs were unresponsive. His entire bedroom, home, and city were covered in darkness, not from the hidden sun but from yet another blackout. He stumbled across the room searching for a candle, a flashlight, or anything that could serve as a source of light. Suddenly, a glow appeared from atop the dresser sending bright white light creeping up the bedroom wall. Ben steadily, and with newfound vision, walked over to his wooden dresser and reached for the small, glossy, and black light source. He had just received a text message on his Blackberry Torch phone. The text read, “Make you BB me wen u wake” (Message me when you wake) (Oguejiofor).

In 2006, the chairman of Nigeria’s Shell Petroleum Development Company called the Blackberry phone “a must-use device” (Businessdayonline.com). Somehow, Blackberry has successfully marketed their technologically sophisticated product to an impoverished people. They systematically penetrated the developmental obstacles that poverty erects in Nigeria, a country near the lowest level of the financial pyramid. But why must so many underprivileged Nigerians own this somewhat lavish device? Why is the sizable expenditure worthwhile? This paper investigates Blackberry’s rapid spread in Nigeria after the turn of the 21st century and explores
how the company’s success is intimately connected to the device’s fundamental function, text messaging.

Blackberry’s emphasis on text messaging fed into Nigerians’ need for a viable means of communication that would simultaneously cater to their rich and unique culture. One important aspect of communication in this culture is the language Nigerian Pidgin English, a dialect made up of the mix between indigenous tribal terminology and English. Blackberry’s texting features complemented Nigerian Pidgin English possibly through its linguistic similarities to text message language, “text talk.” In Nigeria, text messaging may indeed act as an extension of Nigerian Pidgin language and, by association, make Blackberry devices an addendum to Nigerian communication culture.

DIALING INTO DEVELOPMENT: THE PARADOX BETWEEN NIGERIAN SCARCITY AND THE CELL PHONE BOOM

“Hey black out!” Ben exclaims with humorous exasperation. “That one no be news ke for weya u come see light now b4 u com talk of black out” (Oguejiofor). Here, Ben expresses that blackouts are no new occurrence in his life. Ben experiences them so frequently, in fact, that blackouts are no longer newsworthy. Nigeria herself is a country plagued with developmental darkness. As Africa’s most densely populated nation of approximately 170 million people, Nigeria has more than 65 percent of her total population currently living in poverty. This translates to almost 100 million people surviving on less than two dollars a day. Twenty-five percent of children under the age of five suffer from undernourishment. Furthermore, for every 100 Nigerians, only about 28 currently have access to fixed Internet, connection to the Internet via one’s home or residence (WorldBank.org).

In light of these statistics that characterize Nigeria as an impoverished nation with a declining infrastructure, Nigerians seem to fit into what President Franklin D. Roosevelt called the “The Forgotten Man.” In his call to action in “these unhappy times” on April 7, 1932, Roosevelt addressed the U.S. nation via radio broadcast where he defined the “Forgotten Man” as a person in need of prosperity and capital with no means of obtaining it. Although destitute, such people were “the unorganized but the indispensable units of economic power” (Presidency.ucsb.edu). In other words, the “Forgotten Man” is an impecunious person who still possesses the potential to stimulate economic growth. Today, “unhappy times” may also include Nigeria’s dearth of sustainable infrastructure and Blackberry’s irrelevance
and opposition in the developed world, namely the United States and the UK. According to *New York Times* reporters Sam Grobart and Ian Austen, Blackberry “once commanded more than half of the American smartphone market. Today it has 10 percent.” Currently, the “forgotten” mentioned in Roosevelt’s speech can be viewed as those in the developing world, like Nigerians, who suffer from the negative publicity magnified over the good in the media.

The concept of the “Forgotten Man” applied to modern context may be that of the ability for economic powerhouses like Blackberry to gain access to and benefit from the untapped wealth of an often-overlooked natural resource, impoverished people. Blackberry recognized that one ought not forget the forgotten. Consequently, Nigeria’s lack became the foundation of Blackberry’s success, and “The Forgotten Men” of Nigeria inherited the Blackberry phone. Although it appears perplexing, a land that suffers from such scarcity in one area can have abundance in the form of cell phones in another.

The advent of the mobile phone has presented Nigerians a way to essentially skip normal infrastructural development stages. The penetration of cell phone usage is so deep that Nigeria has made their contribution to Africa’s status as the only continent to have a greater number of cell phone users than landline users. The cell phone equipped with Global System for Mobile Communications (GSM) capabilities was first presented to Nigeria in 2001 (Chiluwa 51). The impacts, in historical terms, were almost instantaneous. At that time, access to fixed-line phones was limited to three landline phones to every 100 Nigerian households (Africa-Business.com). By 2008, a short seven years after the new technology entered the country, there were over 22 million Nigerians using a GSM cell phone (Abiola). Today, there are a reported 88 million cell phones in Nigeria (WorldBank.org). The Blackberry phone entered the scene around that time and rode the mobile wave to beat out competing cell phone companies in Nigeria three to one a mere four years later (AllAfrica.com). This luxury item is quickly becoming an integral part of the landscape of Nigerian society. Results of this growth could have large social implications, as Daniel Jordan Smith present in his article “Cell Phones, Social Inequality, and Contemporary Culture in Nigeria” in the *Canadian Journal of African Studies*. According to Smith, the most significant of these implications is the power of mobile phones to act as a socioeconomic equalizer, giving both the elite and lower class people of Nigerian society access to the same information at the same fast rate (496).

Another important implication and the focus of this paper is the effect of Nigerian language on the success of mobile phone technology. Some say that the use of
this luxurious technology inevitably comes with a price. Academics argue that technologically enhanced communication and formal language cannot coexist without the former negatively influencing the latter. Many scholars have even gone as far as to claim that mobile communication, and text messaging in particular, has led to the deterioration of literacy. However, their opinions often disregard that this form of mobile language is not universally revolutionary but evolutionary. Scholars like Crispin Thrulow and David Crystal refute claims that condemn mobile communication as an enemy of normative language. Their analyses, combined with the paper’s investigation of the relationship between “text talk” and Nigerian Pidgin English, reveal that in actuality, text-messaging's somewhat foreign nature may not inevitably lead to the decline of language in all cases.

Interestingly, Nigeria represents an ideal counterexample that defies these critiques of technologically enhanced communication. In Nigeria, mobile communication and normative language exist in a sort of symbiotic relationship where each has the potential to affect and transform the other. In fact, an analysis of Nigerian Pidgin English will show that texting and mobile talk are not new phenomena but a thriving evolution of a preexisting form of communication that has not harmed language but enhanced it. When one compares Nigerian Pidgin English and text message lingo, the two seem to mirror similar semantic and historical characteristics. This similarity positioned the Blackberry device for assimilation into the Nigerian language. The seamless integration of the Blackberry phone into Nigeria is due in large part to the specialized texting features of this particular phone brand. It is essential that true components of these arguments, which define texting as a source of linguistic decline, be examined. Only then can proper revisions be made to these theories, which may establish the true effects of texting on linguistic performance and reveal contributory factors.

BB CULTURE: NIGERIAN CULTURE AND THE BLACKBERRY PHONE

When GSM capable technology first entered the foreign Nigerian market in 2001, it would encounter a diverse culture special to the underdeveloped world. Benjamin is a member of the Igbo tribe, one of the over 250 ethnic groups present in Nigeria. He prides himself on his linguistic prowess, as he is a master of Igbo, Hausa, English, and Nigerian Pidgin English. Ben, however, can only speak a small fraction of the over 500 languages spoken in Nigeria (CIA.gov). This cornucopia of culture has experienced a process of unification under Nigerian Pidgin English, a
dialect that has borrowed from Nigeria’s many languages to design a form of speech accessible to all citizens (Mensah 209). At first, Nigerian Pidgin English underwent a degree of scrutiny from the elite community. Nigerian Pidgin English’s origin as a “language of trade and business” (210) marked it as a “‘vulgar’ and ‘corrupt’ form of expression” (212). Furthermore, the use of the language was equated to those peoples belonging to the lowest classes (212). As the number of speakers increased, the language remarkably survived legal persecution and degradation and ultimately flourished as a national dialect. Today, Nigerian Pidgin English has become “a full-fledged language in its own rights as a result of acquisition of new vocabulary items to meet the expanded communication challenges of its speakers” (210). The emergence and eventual acceptance of Nigerian Pidgin English by Nigerian citizens answered the question of “what” language so many different people would use to communicate, but the lack of telecommunications infrastructure left the question of “how” these people would correspond unsolved.

This “how” is an urgent question because Nigerians place great emphasis on communication between friends, family, and the greater Nigerian community. The growing use of Nigerian Pidgin English was able to help bridge these different subcultures so Nigerians could understand one another. This union was fundamental in a country like Nigeria where connecting with other citizens is what Naija (Nigeria [n]) people pride themselves on. When asked about the importance of communication in Nigerian culture, Ben responded with:

“Who get time for take write any thing now everything na to talk am.

Who wan read watin u write now.

If u no fit talk na him be say u go forget am” (Oguejiofor).

In this passage, Ben expresses Nigerian’s dependence on immediate correspondence. In his opinion, effective Nigerian communication should not have an intermediate medium of time. Writing a thought down on paper and sending it to someone wastes time, and by then, the thought has lost a substantial amount of its original meaning. Waiting around to send an email is even worse because of the lack of relevant technological infrastructure. Additionally, according to Ben, “Black out na every day” (Blackouts occur nearly every day), so, erratic electricity would consequently cripple the speed of the telecommunications processes in Nigeria. Nigerians throughout the nation are aware of how limiting Nigeria’s electrical framework is, as expressed in the common saying “NEPA don take light.” When
there is a blackout, Nigerians accuse the National Electric Power Authority (NEPA), in a sense, of stealing the country’s electricity.

Into this quandary entered the cell phone, a device impermeable to Nigeria’s frequent blackouts. The Blackberry would soon fill the communication gap left by the unstable infrastructure in Nigeria. There was a need for quick, reliable, sustainable, and most importantly, affordable communication. With mobile phones being battery- and satellite powered, Nigerian cell phone owners would not have to worry about NEPA stealing their communication capabilities. This meant, however, that only a specific phone would “bill.”

In order to make a phone call, a customer has to pay a certain rate, a minimal amount that becomes substantial over time. MTN Nigeria Communications Limited (MTN Nigeria) is currently Nigeria’s leading telecommunications provider and charges a fee of 25 kobo (<$.01) per second (MTNonline.com). However, if a customer decides to purchase a Blackberry device package, MTN supplies a number of extra technological perks. Blackberry offers users unique data plans and packages that make using mobile technology in Nigeria inexpensive and accessible. Once a Nigerian enters the MTN webpage for Blackberry services, they are greeted with a large, bold, and red tagline that reads: “Introducing new Blackberry® packages from MTN…specially designed for you” (MTNonline.com). This headline utilizes apostrophe to demonstrate that the aim of MTN, and ultimately Blackberry, is to please the consumer. By providing financially attractive data plans, they achieve their goal to “enrich the lives of [their] consumer[s]” (MTNonline.com).

For instance, each data bundle includes at least one email account, social networking capabilities, and unlimited use of BlackBerry Messenger (BBM), with the cheapest of these plans costing 500 Naira (= $3.18) a week. Blackberry provides BBM, a cheaper alternative to phone calls and an equally simple way for Nigerians to connect with their fellow citizens. The inexpensive nature of the text message in comparison to the phone call made puts texting technology within the reach of Nigerians. With MTN, Blackberry provides Nigerians with dependable access to Internet and communication on the go. Hence, the “how” filled the communication opportunity in Nigerian society. Blackberry’s growing popularity across the nation is constructing a kind of mobile and virtual infrastructure in Nigeria.

Those critics of technologically enhanced communication, however, may argue that Nigerian’s growing dependence on “text talk” will negatively affect Nigerian
Pidgin English. In the same way that Nigerian Pidgin English was discredited at its inception, the relatively new technology of text messaging and consequently “text talk” is also fighting for credibility among intellectuals.

THE F8D FALL?: TEXTING AND THE DECLINE OF NORMATIVE LANGUAGE

Technologically enhanced communication, such as text messaging, and its effects on language have been thoroughly researched, analyzed, and documented for many years. The growing sentiment concerning mobile messaging seems to be that “text talk,” like a foreign invader, has led to the detriment of pre-existing formal language. Intellectuals such as author David Crystal and Crispin Thrulow have written about the relationship between text messaging and language. In his book *Txting: The Gr8 Db8*, Crystal attempts to explain the evolutionary and fluid qualities of text messaging. He then exposes flaws in debates concerning the detrimental nature of texting. In his first two chapters in particular, “The Hype About Texting” and “How Weird Is Texting?” Crystal explores the specific syntactical characteristics of texting and perceives that text messaging is surprisingly more similar to existing forms of language than previously thought. According to Crystal, “[texting’s] graphic distinctiveness is not a totally new phenomenon” (9). Therefore Crystal goes even further to make the convincing claim that “All the popular beliefs about texting are wrong, or at least debatable” (9). He asserts that that text messaging and “its long-term impact on already existing varieties of language is likely to be negligible” (10). Crystal is skeptical, and correctly so, of the logic behind the “moral panic” surrounding the bad qualities of texting.

However, his belief that texting will have no noticeable affect appears overgeneralized. Crystal’s argument focuses solely on proving that the negative effects of texting on language do not exist but fails to examine the possibility of the existence of positive effects. However, Crystal’s findings do provide supporting evidence to the claim that text messaging may not be the only source of language’s deterioration. Other scholars like Crystal have tried to challenge the growing belief that technologically enhanced communication harms language.

Crispin Thrulow, with assistance from scholar Alex Brown, tackled the truth behind the speculated transformative power mobile communication has over language. In his paper, “Generation Txt? The Sociolinguistics of Young People’s Text-Messaging,” Thrulow uses data from a sample of 159 young adults to examine how texting
affects the language of relationships. Like Crystal, Thrulow refutes the growing feeling that text messaging will lead to “the putative ‘death’ of the apostrophe in English” (4). Thrulow strongly argues that describing text messaging as code-like is a false representation of the system. He writes, “the language of text-messaging [is] invariably caught up in an exaggerated sense of its impenetrability and exclusivity” (4). However, Thrulow goes further to say that texting will not have any substantial effect on the “long-standing patterns of interaction and language use” (5). This assertion disregards the transformative power of “text talk” to change the way people communicate orally and visually. By using the terminology of “long-standing patterns,” Thrulow may be incorrectly assuming that these text-message-initiated changes are ephemeral.

**PIDGIN POSSIBILITIES: INVESTIGATING THE LINGUISTIC SIMILARITIES BETWEEN NIGERIAN PIDGIN AND “TEXT TALK”**

In contrast to Thrulow’s argument, scholars like Dr. Eyo Offiong Mensah argue that Nigerian Pidgin English’s “simplicity also enhances learnability, given its reduced and contracted form” (Mensah 213), which has consequently increased the language’s vitality in Nigeria. Text messaging’s fragmented structure mirrors that of Nigerian Pidgin English. This similarity supports the argument that “text talk” may have lasting effects on language. Table 1 displays a selected number of English words translated into Nigerian Pidgin English and “text talk.” This chart shows that from an aesthetic perspective, Nigerian Pidgin English and “text talk” appear almost interchangeable. Words such as “you” and “ugly” are exactly identical in both Nigerian Pidgin English and “text talk.” The translations of the words “brother/friend,” “tough,” “want,” and “don’t” only differ by a few letters. Throughout the chart, the theme of contracting holds true. The Nigerian Pidgin English and “text talk” translations both tend to forfeit the use of multiple vowels and consonants while still preserving the audial characteristics of the word. These languages seem to adopt the strategy of shortening English words to simultaneously maximize the number of words in a given space and to accelerate the rate of comprehension.

There are other apparent parallels between “text talk” and Nigerian Pidgin English. Dr. Mensah notes that “[there] is no speaker of [Nigerian Pidgin English] in Nigeria without a distinct mother tongue,” just like the claim could be made that very few users of “text talk” in the developed world do not have a primary language such as English (210). As the arguments against the use of “text talk” demonstrate, text-messaging lingo is experiencing an intellectual condemnation comparable to that of
Nigerian Pidgin English. Nigerian Pidgin English proved resilient against powerful critiques until “[it] [was] no longer seen as the restricted mode of interlingual communication with limited lexicon but as a language with its own vitality and essence” (Mensah 213). Because of the many similarities between the two languages, it appears likely that “text talk” possesses vitality like that of Nigerian Pidgin English. So, as the use of Blackberry phones, text messaging, and consequently “text talk” increases in Nigeria, text-messaging language may also emerge irrepressible by the critical academic world.

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THE BLACKBERRY BLAST: A QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF BLACKBERRY’S SUCCESS IN NIGERIA

Benjamin has been an avid user of Blackberry devices since 2008. Benjamin had a Blackberry Curve, a Blackberry Bold, and Blackberry Torch. Ben noted that “All de young people around me de use Blackberry” (All the youth around me uses a Blackberry device). But is this Blackberry mania restricted to Ben’s social circle, or is this a nationwide phenomenon? Currently, there are a reported 2.4 million Blackberry users in Nigeria (Okonedo). Furthermore, the number of Blackberry users has increased over 140% in just two years (BusinessDay.com). This increase generated more than $1 billion in revenue for Research in Motion (RIM),
Blackberry’s parent company (Uzor, “Nigeria”). The CEO of Globacom, another leading telecommunications provider in Nigeria, admitted that his company is “aware of the immense popularity of Blackberry in Nigeria, and the desire of many to avail of the service” (qtd. in Uzor, “Globacom”). Blackberry’s growing acclaim is so immense and has generated such rivalry between telecommunication companies that Globacom has had to adjust product pricing and discounts in order to remain competitive (Uzor, “Globacom”). Considering these statistics, it appears that Ben’s observation is indeed correct. Blackberry hysteria is rampant throughout Nigeria.

WE BB THE FUTURE: BLACKBERRY’S INTEGRATION INTO MODERN NIGERIAN PIDGIN AND FUTURE APPLICATIONS

The love of Blackberry devices is so widespread in Nigeria that the brand has even begun to change Nigerian culture. BBM texting has enabled the Blackberry product to seep into some of Nigerian Pidgin English terminology. When Nigerians want someone to reply to a text message, they use the phrase “BB Me” or “Ping Me,” a reference to the distinct sound a Blackberry phone makes when a user receives a BBM message. In fact, Nigerian Pidgin English “witnessed series of transformations given the degree of contact with its superstrate and substrate sources”(Mensah 212). In this case, text messaging may be an outside substrate source that has the power to transform Nigerian Pidgin English.

Additionally, Blackberry is now a status symbol for young adults in Nigeria. Ben commented: “No be students dem dey take am pose? E don become dem ting. Wey dey wan show demselves na black berry dem go dey wave. But all this MTN, Airtel, GLO don make browsing cheap well well with bb so everybody don get am.” Students, a major market of Blackberry devices in Nigeria, “pose” with their phones to boast. In Ben’s opinion, they bring their Blackberrys and “wave” them around whenever they are trying show their high status. Blackberrys are not merely a mode of communication but a symbol that says, “We, Nigerians, are advanced.”

COMMUNICATION EVOLUTION

As a technological extension of the mobile phone, text messaging is quickly spreading across the world. As technology continues to increase, so will the areas that texting and other forms of technological communication can infiltrate. Many have studied the effect of mobile communication on normative language, and several of these academic studies have concluded that this effect is largely negative. However, these emerging advanced communication systems may be wrongly targeted as the source
of the decline of language. It is therefore important to weed out any non-causes of the decline to more easily identify the true roots of the problem. This paper shows that Nigeria is a case where text messaging may not be the cause of etymological decay in the world; rather, it may, in fact, transform and enhance language.

Indeed, how can we expect language to stay stagnant when the world is constantly changing? Nigeria’s adoption of text messaging and, consequently, the Blackberry phone has not been a virus on the human body that is language. Mobile communication, instead, has acted like an artificial limb that although not necessarily better than the natural appendage, proves to be an advantageous technological innovation in the case where the original limb—land communication—is insufficient. According to Nigerian scholar Dr. Innocent Chiluwa, the use of text talk “does not imply lack of proficiency in English, rather a level of creativity associated with proficient users” (55). In that way, text messaging has creatively attached itself to Nigerian Pidgin English and other languages across the globe shaping a modern approach to normative language.

Some may argue that Nigeria is the exception because of its distinctive culture and therefore the findings of this paper will not be applicable on a larger scale. However, Nigeria is not an exceptional case. One reason that Blackberry fits in Nigeria may be because of the country’s style of communication, Pidgin English. Although the nuances of this form of communication differ from country to country, there are several other developing nations that have their own unique forms of broken English, including Haiti, Kenya, and Jamaica. Even areas of the developed world like Hawaii share this linguistic trait. In Jamaica, where locals speak a form of Pidgin English called Patwa, Blackberry controls more than 70 percent of the mobile phone industry (Riley). Blackberry hysteria in developing countries may be a growing trend. While the exact Nigerian model may not be a perfect fit when applied to other peoples, it is a good lens through which to examine linguistic transformation in other nations as texting becomes more prevalent.

Blackberry’s success in other developing nations including Nigeria may be a sign that the United States and the UK markets should not be the company’s main focus. The developing world should be Blackberry’s new frontier and primary focus. In these countries, Blackberry and their unique texting features have the upper hand. Other telecommunications companies that are thriving in the developed world like Apple and Android have not been able to make as large and rapid an impact as Blackberry. This may be because their devices place emphasis on incentives such
as user interface games, task managers, and high-pixel pictures—features that are superior to that of Blackberry. In developing nations, however, the basic need is for communication, which Blackberry provides.

For different mobile communication companies to be successful in other nations, it seems that they must first realize that the fundamental service of their product is communication and language always dwells at the origin of communication. RIM representative Waldi Wepener acknowledged, “As a business, we are aware that there is a need to tailor our offerings to meet local needs and market requirement. It is particularly important to gain local market knowledge by employing local Nigerian resources” (qtd. in Uzor, “Nigeria”). Opportunely, Blackberry utilized the linguistic characteristics of Nigerian Pidgin English to create the most ultimate marketing strategy, optimizing their success within Nigeria. Blackberry has realized that there is indeed prosperity and wisdom in remembering the “Forgotten Man.”

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