

**Comments on Kristin Vold Lexander's Working Paper
"Names U ma puce: multilingual texting in Senegal."
17-31 May 2011, EASA Media Anthropology Network**

**By Ken Banks
Founder, kiwanja.net and FrontlineSMS**

Hi Kristin, all

It's great to be on this list, and fun to be able to get stuck into these kinds of papers and issues every once in a while.

So, firstly, many thanks to Kristin for a very informative paper, and one which is of particular interest to me not only as a practitioner focused on helping non-profit organisations deploy socially-beneficial mobile technologies in the field, but also as a student of Linguistic Anthropology which I studied many years ago. We're witnessing a growing body of anthropological research on mobile, but as with wider academia much of it remains largely of interest - and relevance - to other academics. I know from my own experience that wider study of some of the practical challenges faced by people trying to deploy mobile phones at project level is much needed and welcome, and questions around language and technical literacy are common. Hopefully this paper will be of some benefit in helping people understand some of the complexities and strategies deployed by end users in at least the first of these areas.

Text messaging is an incredible (and relatively recent) phenomenon, and one which allows enormous flexibility in language choice and use. The fact that messages are limited to 160 characters encourages innovative behaviour, something which Kristin's paper draws out well. Having lived and worked in many countries, and having witnessed "code switching" in verbal communication, it was fascinating to read how this plays out in SMS, something I had not previously witnessed. What does seem to play out are the similarities between users choosing to use different languages, i.e. their choice of 'alternative' language may be the same regardless of whether they were speaking or texting it. Having a Finnish wife, I know that on the rare occasion she chooses to swear, for example, she tends to do it in Finnish.

Comparing the texting habits of the three target users gave an interesting flavour of different texting strategies, but in the interests of getting a discussion going I'd like to take the opportunity to submit a few follow-on questions on areas not covered in so much detail, although to be fair most of these are likely beyond Kristin's originally remit or focus area. Nevertheless:

What do you think the role of SMS and mobile could be in the preservation of minority of endangered languages in Senegal?

Does the behaviour identified play out in other social media arenas for the three subjects - on Facebook, for example - or is it exclusive to mobile and SMS?

How would users cope if their phone didn't support local character sets?

During the early stages of a new friendship, what would the default language be for an SMS, before the participants knew each other?

Are there savings in the number of characters needed in an SMS by using a traditional language over, say, French? Or does it come at a 'cost'?

As with concerns in the UK/US with children's written skills being eroded by slang and "text speak", are there similar concerns in Senegal?

How much of the observed behaviour is made up, or learned? I'm curious as to the evolution of

some of the behaviours highlighted

What behaviour patterns emerge when "illiterate" phone owners try to message others, if they do try at all?

Were emoticons (smiley faces, etc) ever used as part of messaging, rather than abbreviations? And if so, do they follow our own uses of them, or are there variations?

I hope at least some of the questions are relevant, and of interest to others on the list. As John knows, I come at this from a non-academic viewpoint, and know that other practitioner colleagues would also benefit from answers. I'll leave others on the list draw comparisons with other studies, or other conclusions drawn from comparable research carried out in other areas or countries.

I look forward to following - and hopefully contributing to - the discussion that follows.

Thanks.

Ken

Ken Banks

Founder, kiwanja.net and FrontlineSMS

Tech Awards Laureate 2009

National Geographic Emerging Explorer 2010

"Where technology meets anthropology, conservation and development"

Twitter: <http://www.twitter.com/kiwanja>