




Effects of Phonological Features on Texting Styles: Future Directions

Jamal Kaid Mohammed Ali

Department of English, College of Arts, University of Bisha
Bisha, Saudi Arabia


jamalalhomaidi@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3079-5580>

S. Imtiaz Hasnain

Department of Linguistics, Faculty of Arts, Aligarh Muslim University


imtiaz.hasnain@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4216-4145>

M. Salim Beg

Department of Electronics Engineering, Aligarh Muslim University
Aligarh, India

salim.beg@amu.ac.in

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9434-3917>

Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the effect of phonological features on online written text messages. Data were collected from ninety ESL Indian students at Aligarh Muslim University with regards to their Facebook-based chats. The dataset was fed into SPSS for analysis. Major findings showed that the respondents tend to use vowels deletion, substitution of numbers for phones, words represented by a single letter and overuse of sounds to represent phonology in their written text messages. With this in mind, that the study yielded evidence that texting reverses the previous studies that spelling first and then phonology. That is to say, this study revealed that phonology affects the way of writing online text messages. This study also showed that phonology is used in the written forms and that Facebook users sometimes reject to follow the standard spelling of English and write the words as they are pronounced, not as they are written in standard English.

Keywords: internet linguistics, netSpeak, phonetic spelling, phonological features, textSpeak, webSpeak

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Introduction

The advent of social media in general and Facebook, in particular, gave users a chance to chat using the style of English they like, either in standard English or non-standard English. The usage of non-standard English necessitates an investigation of the features of English used in social media. Baron (2008: ix) states, "In writing this book, I have felt comparable frustration in attempting to characterize a phenomenon in flux." She continues, "this time the challenge is not words but technologies and the systems we build upon them for communicating with one another." The difficulty of categorizing texting can be clearly seen in the different variations of abbreviated English language forms used in Facebook chats. According to Shaw (2008) "One of the problems of texting English is the uncertainty and variation of spelling words: anything can appear as anything, nething, nethin, anyfing, anyfin, nefin, anyting, anytinor netin" (p. 48). Crystal (2008) has rightly discussed the abbreviated forms which appear in different guises. In Crystal's words: "I have seen tonight written as tnight, tonyt, tonite, tonit, 2nt, 2night, 2nyt, and 2nite, and there are probably several more variants out there" (p. 17).

In light of this, the authors of the present study believe that using language in online communication has some phonological features different from the features of Standard English. This has given ground for the present study to explore how phonology affects the style of online written language, precisely how the phonological features of English as used in the online contact. Within the scope of this study, online text messages refer to non-standard English used in Facebook chat. Hence, the term 'written text message' appears throughout the paper to refer to the English used in Facebook chat texts, known as texting, ICT English, txtng, textism, text messages, CMC, textspeak, netspeak and netwrite, and the like. This study is limited to exploring phonological features of online text messages only to ascertain how phonology affects the written forms of online text messages.

Literature Review

In this section, the researchers present an overview of the most relevant studies that discussed the phonological features of texting. Wei, Xian-hai and Jiang (2008) called the language used in text messages Netspeak believed that text messages are a spoken-like variety of the language. The language used in text messages has similar features to the spoken language. Similarly, Anis (2007) used "phonetic reductions, syllabograms or rebus writing. The term reducing verbal forms to writing was also used by (Rivière and Licoppe, 2005). Hård af Segerstad (2002) found that Facebook users alter their spelling from the standard by spelling phonetically and omitting vowels. In the US, unambiguous abbreviations (e.g., u for 'you'; r for 'are'), and vowel deletions are common (Ling and Baron, 2007). Nigerian ICT English users employ spelling manipulations, abbreviations and phonetic spellings (Chiluwa, 2008). Hamzah, Ghorbani and Abdullah (2009) indicated that the language used in students' text messages has spoken-like spelling. Similar linguistic characterizations have been outlined by Al-Ahdal and Algouzi, (2021), Thurlow (2003), Bodomo and Lee (2002), Al-Kadi (2019), Ali et al. (2021) and Kasesniemi (2003). This array of researchers discussed the various ways in which language is reduced and shortened. They also provide a long list of linguistic features that characterize the English used in text messages:

- Shortenings, contractions and G-clippings and other clippings
- Letter/number homophones
- Misspellings and typos
- Non-conventional spellings
- Accent stylizations
- Emoticons (or smileys)

- Overuse of sounds

Crystal (2008) argued that "people influence each other in the way they speak, often by adopting features of the accent of the person they are talking to. Very likely, a similar accommodation takes place in text messaging" (p. 58). Al-Khatib and Sabbah (2008) maintained that the emergence of text messages has motivated a real dichotomy among researchers to consider ICT English as a written or spoken form of language. Baron (2000) observes that (2000). "How serious is this new oral bent? Some have argued we're entering a period of what Walter Ong earlier called secondary orality, a literate culture becoming once again more oral. Like pre-literate man...." (p. 18). Baron (2000) also gave a metaphor to text messages as "an emerging language centaur, part speech, part writing" (p. 248). Crystal (2001), too, suggested that text messages are more than just a hybrid of speech and writing. Berger and Coch (2010) and Al-Kadi (2019) concede that texted English is a hybrid, technology-based language derived from Standard English modified to facilitate instant and text messaging communication.

Vosloo (2009) finds that many, if not most, textisms are some form of phonetic abbreviation, a findings endorsed by Ahmed and Al-Kadi (2016). As well, Hamzah, Ghorbani and Abdullah (2009) indicate that the language used in students' emails and SMS messaging was full of spoken-like spelling and abbreviations. Plester, Wood and Joshi (2009) argue that producing and reading such abbreviations requires phonological awareness and orthographic awareness. Choudhury et al. (2007) observe that commonly used abbreviations, shorter phonetic substitutions, and deletion of words and characters may seriously hamper the understanding of the message. Huang (2008) sees texting as "a horrifying language ... a nascent dialect of English that subverts letters and numbers, drops consonants, vowels and punctuation" (p. 10).

The above-mentioned previous studies investigated text messages as a new linguistic phenomenon and discussed various linguistic forms in text messages. About a striking point those studies highlighted is using spoken/phonetic/phonological style while writing text messages. However, the current study is different from the previous studies. It will focus solely on phonological features used in text messages and how writing text messages is influenced by phonology. Therefore, it aims to achieve some objectives that can be summarized in the following two research questions:

- 1) Does phonology affect online written text messages?
- 2) Do Facebook users follow any specific pattern while texting?

Method

This study aimed to investigate the influence of phonology on the structure of online written text messages. The data were collected from ninety students enrolled at Aligarh Muslim University.

Sample

The sample of this study consisted of ninety AMU participants who were enrolled at Aligarh Muslim University, India. They were grouped according to their levels: Plus Two, Bachelor, Master and PhD. The participants of the study were Fifteen from Faculty of Social Science and 15 students from Faculty of Engineering and Technology, while 25 students were from all other Faculties which have Plus Two levels, i.e., 25 students from Faculty of Arts, 25 students from Faculty of Science and 25 students from Faculty of Commerce. The researcher employed some criteria for selecting the subjects. The following criteria were taken into consideration when the students for the study were selected.

- Only the students whose L2 is English.
- Only students with at least five sent SMSes were saved in their mobile phones.

- Only those students who had Facebook accounts.
- Only Indian students were selected.

Data Collection

The data were collected from students' Facebook chats. The participants were asked to send only the sent text chat, not the received ones. Therefore, five sent chat texts from each participant were collected to explore the phonological features of online text messages. The participants were asked to send the last five sent chat texts from their Facebook accounts to the researcher's facebook and email accounts. To avoid bias and encourage the participants to write/send chats from their Facebook accounts, they were asked not to disclose their names or the receivers' names. The participants were provided with the first researcher's Facebook and email accounts so that they could send chat texts.

Data Analysis

After collecting the data, the editing, coding, classification, and tabulation processes were done. After coding, classification and tabulation, the data were inserted into SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), for analysis. After that analysis of the data collected was done. Descriptive statistics was used to report the numbers, percentages, means, and standard deviations of the data collected. To find whether there is a significant difference between the groups, ANOVA test was used. After analyzing the data and presenting the results in tables supported by graphs where necessary, the results of the data analyses were interpreted in detail.

Results and Discussion

To reiterate, this investigation aims to illuminate the effects of phonological features on online texting. In the following part of this paper, the statistical measures and outcomes of those measures are outlined and discussed to address the research questions posed in the introductory part of the manuscript.

Analysis of Phonological Items in Chats Data

Based on data outlined in Table 1, the means of the deletion of consonants, deletion of vowel(s), the substitution of equivalent sound(s), the substitution of a single letter for the phone(s), substitution of number(s) for the phone(s), words represented by a single letter and overuse of sounds in the data of Facebook chat were 1.51, 4.49, 1.08, .56, .59, 1.23 and .56 respectively, with a sum of 136 deletions of consonants, 404 deletions of vowel(s), 97 substitutions of equivalent sound(s), fifty substitutions of a single letter for the phone(s), 53 substitutions of number(s) for the phone(s), 111 words represented by a single letter and fifty overuse of sounds.

Table 1. Analysis results of phonological items in chats

Level of Education		deletion of consonant(s)	deletion of vowel(s)	substitution of equivalent sound(s)	substitution of a single letter for phone(s)	substitution of number(s) for phone(s)	words represented by a single letter	overuse of sounds
Plus	Mean	.4000	2.0000	.5333	.8667	.6000	1.4000	.0000
	Sum	6.00	30.00	8.00	13.00	9.00	21.00	.00

	% of Total	4.4%	7.4%	8.2%	26.0%	17.0%	18.9%	.0%
Bachelor	Mean	1.8000	5.2400	1.8400	.2000	.4000	1.0800	1.1200
	Sum	45.00	131.00	46.00	5.00	10.00	27.00	28.00
	% of Total	33.1%	32.4%	47.4%	10.0%	18.9%	24.3%	56.0%
Master	Mean	1.2000	5.0400	1.0000	.4800	.5600	1.4000	.4800
	Sum	30.00	126.00	25.00	12.00	14.00	35.00	12.00
	% of Total	22.1%	31.2%	25.8%	24.0%	26.4%	31.5%	24.0%
PhD	Mean	2.2000	4.6800	.7200	.8000	.8000	1.1200	.4000
	Sum	55.00	117.00	18.00	20.00	20.00	28.00	10.00
	% of Total	40.4%	29.0%	18.6%	40.0%	37.7%	25.2%	20.0%
Total	Mean	1.5111	4.4889	1.0778	.5556	.5889	1.2333	.5556
	Sum	136.00	404.00	97.00	50.00	53.00	111.00	50.00
	% of Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

In line with the data in Table 1, the following graph shows, in percentages, the uses of the phonological items used by the students surveyed in chat texts data. A major finding in this figure is the deletion of vowels which has echoes in the literature (to be discussed later in this part).

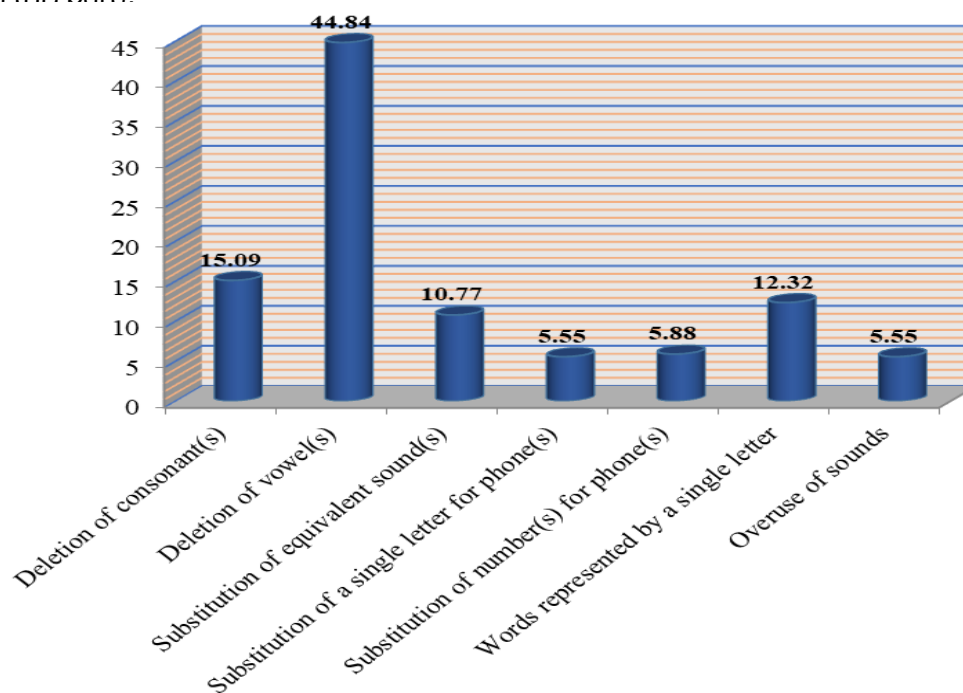


Figure 1. Phonological Items in Facebook text Data in percentages

Statistically speaking, Table 2 shows the P-value which determines whether the difference between the groups (i.e., level groups) in the items is significant. As shown in the table, there was no significant difference between the level groups in any items used.

Table 2. ANOVA results of phonological items in chats across levels

Items	Sig. (P-Value)
Deletion of Vowel(s)	.273
Deletion of consonant(s)	.093
Substitution of a single letter for a sequence of phone(s)	.346
Substitution of equivalent sound (s)	.062
Words represented by a single letter	.771
Substitution of number(s) for phone(s)	.586
Overuse of sounds	.208

Deletion of Consonants

As shown in Table 1, the mean of the deletion of consonant(s) used by Plus Two participants was .40, with a sum of six deletions of consonant(s) that represents 4.4%. The mean of the deletion of consonant(s) used by Bachelor participants was 1.80, with a sum of 45 deletions of consonant(s) that represents 33.1%. The mean of the deletion of consonant(s) used by Master participants was 1.20, with a sum of thirty deletions of consonant(s) that represents 22.1%. The mean of the deletion of consonant(s) used by PhD participants was 2.20, with a sum of 55 deletions of consonant(s) that represents 40.4%.

It was found that Facebook users deleted consonants in Facebook chats. They wrote the alphabets which reflects the phonological sounds of the abbreviated words. The following are some examples: no (now), wel (well), adres (address), fo (for), 2de (today), etc. They sometimes abbreviate without reflecting phonology such as numer (number), piture (picture), las (last), tis (this), etc.

This study found that the consonants were usually deleted if they were silent or occurred as consonant clusters. This was concerning the deletion in the words 'know', 'well' and 'address'. In the first examples, the consonants were deleted in the word 'no' (know). The consonants 'k' and 'w' were deleted because 'k' is silent and 'w' is silent-like. In 'fo' and '2de', the consonants were deleted after vowels when they occur as a coda. Sometimes Facebook users delete consonants that are neither clusters nor silent. In picture and number, the consonants c and b are pronounced but they were deleted from the words 'number' and 'picture'. In 'numer' and 'las', the second consonant clusters were deleted. But, in 'tis' and 'piture', the first consonant clusters were deleted. This shows that students do not follow a specific pattern when they text online.

Deletion of Vowels

As shown in Table 1, the mean of the deletion of vowel(s) used by Plus Two participants was 2.00, with a sum of thirty deletions of vowel(s) that represents 7.4%. The mean of the deletion of vowel(s) used by Bachelor participants was 5.24, with a sum of 131 deletions of vowel(s) that represents 32.4%. The mean of the deletion of vowel(s) used by Master participants was 5.04, with a sum of 126 deletions of vowel(s) that

represents 31.2%. The mean of the deletion of vowel(s) used by PhD participants was 4.68, with a sum of 117 deletions of vowel(s) that represents 29%.

In this study, it was found that Facebook users delete vowels in their Facebook chats. The following are some examples unftrntly (unfortunately), hv (have), don (done), wn (when), nw (now), gd (good), etc. They sometimes abbreviate without reflecting phonology, such as cr (care), nt (night), btn (between), pp (people), fn (fine), etc.

From the above examples, it can be noticed that sometimes vowels were deleted without following any pattern. Seeing the whole data of this study, the deletion of vowels was almost a random process. Crystal has rightly talked about variations of 'night'. Crystal (2008: 46) states "I have seen tonight written as tnight, tonyt, tonite, tonit, 2nt, 2night, 2nyt, and 2nite, and there are probably several more variants out there. Similar variations can be found in other kinds of electronic communication.". The research found, in this study, different variants of night. They are 9t, n8, 98, nyte, nt and nit. These examples show that vowel deletion mostly does not follow any specific pattern.

Substitution of Equivalent Sounds

As shown in Table 1, the mean of substitution of equivalent sound(s) used by Plus Two participants was .53, with a sum of eight substitutions of equivalent sound(s) that represents 8.2%. The mean of substitution of equivalent sound(s) used by Bachelor participants was 1.84, with a sum of 46 substitutions of equivalent sound(s) that represents 47.4%. The mean of substitution of equivalent sound(s) used by Master participants was 1.00, with 25 substitutions of equivalent sounds representing 25.8%. The mean of substitution of equivalent sound(s) used by PhD participants was .72, with a sum of 18 substitutions of equivalent sound(s) that represents 18.6%.

In this study, it was found that Facebook users substitute equivalent sounds for phone(s) or words as in the following examples: iz (is), gals (girls), c (see), u (you), luk (look), wtz (what's), l8a (later), etc. They also substitute sounds which are not much similar such as fnk (think), tnk (thing), dc (this), etc.. Facebook users substituted equivalent sounds for phones and words in the above examples. The above example shows that the substitution of sounds for equivalent phones reflects phonology to a great extent.

Substitution of a Single Letter for Phone(s)

As shown in table (1), the mean of substitution of a single letter for phones used by Plus Two participants was .87, with a sum of 13 substitutions of a single letter for phone(s) that represents 26%. The mean of substitution of a single letter for phones used by Bachelor participants was .20, with a sum of five substitutions of a single letter for phones that represents 10%. The mean of substitution of a single letter for phone(s) used by Master participants was .48, with a sum of twelve substitutions of a single letter for phone(s) that represents 24%. The mean of substitution of a single letter for phones used by PhD participants was .80, with a sum of twenty substitutions of a single letter for phone(s) that represents 40%.

The Facebook users sometimes substitute a single letter for phones as in the following examples thanx (thanks), thats enof (that is enough), etc. As shown in the above examples, Facebook users might use a single letter for phones. The letters 'f', in the word 'enouf' and 'x' in the word thanx. This shows that Facebook users follow a specific pattern to reflect phonology in written chats.

Substitution of Number(s) for Phone(s)

As shown in Table 1, the mean of substitution of number(s) for phone(s) used by Plus Two participants was .60, with a sum of nine substitutions of number(s) for phone(s) that represents 17%. The mean of substitution of number(s) for phone(s) used by Bachelor

participants was .40, with a sum of ten substitutions of number(s) for phone(s) that represents 18.9%. The mean of substitution of number(s) for phone(s) used by Master participants was .56, with a sum of 14 substitutions of number(s) for phone(s) that represents 26.4%. The mean of substitution of number(s) for phone(s) used by PhD participants was .80, with a sum of twenty substitutions of number(s) for phone(s) that represents 37.7%.

This study found that Facebook users use numbers to represent phones or words in their texting English. The following are some examples n8 (night), L8 (late), L8 (light), 6t (sixty), gr8 (great), b4 (before) me 2 (too), in2 (into), 2nty (twenty), sm1 (someone), 1thng (one thing) g (for), 2 (too/to) 4gt (forget), gr8 (great). These examples showed that Facebook users reflect phonology to a great extent in writing numbers to represent words. But sometimes they use numbers which do not reflect phonology, such as quali5ing (qualifying), f9 (fine), 4m (from), 9ic (nice), and 98 (night).

In the above examples, numbers were substituted for phones or words. In the first examples, the numbers in '9t', 'n8', 'L8', '6ty', 'b4', 'in2', '2nty', '4get', 'gr8', 'quali5ing', 'f9', '4m' and '9ic' were substituted for phones. In the last examples, the numbers in 'sm1', '1thng', '98 for night', '4 for for' and '2 for to or too' were substituted for the words.

Words Represented by Single Letters

As shown in Table 1, the mean of the words represented by single letters used by Plus Two participants was 1.40, with a sum of 21 words represented by single letters that represents 18.9%. The mean of the words represented by single letters used by Bachelor participants was 1.08, with a sum of 27 words represented by single letters that represent 24.3%. The mean of the words represented by single letters used by Master participants was 1.40, with a sum of 35 words represented by single letters that represent 31.5%. The mean of the words represented by single letters used by PhD participants was 1.12, with a sum of 28 words represented by single letters that represent 25.2%.

Facebook users use single letters to represent words. Few of them reflect phonology, such as c (see), r (are), u (you), and y (why), etc. Many of them do not reflect phonology, such as n (and/ now), w (where/when), m (am), h (how/who), r (our), z (is) y (you), etc. As shown in the above examples, there were words represented by single letters. In the first examples, the letters 'c' for 'see', 'r' for are, 'u' for you, 'y' for why, 'd' for the, and 'v' for we are used as spoken-like spellings. Using the letter 'v' for 'we' has a cultural issue. We may find the pronunciation of the sound 'v' instead of 'w' as some Indians pronounce 'v' instead of 'w'. The others are examples of the random use of letters for words. This could be investigated in a morpho-phonological study.

Overuse of Sounds

Table one shows that no participant at the Plus Two level overused sounds. The mean of the overuse of sounds used by Bachelor participants was 1.12, with a sum of 28 overuse of sounds that represents 56%. The mean of the overuse of sounds used by Master participants was .48, with a sum of twelve overuse of sounds that represents 24%. The mean of the overuse of sounds used by PhD participants was .40, with a sum of ten overuse of sounds that represents 20%.

Facebook users overuse sounds to reflect phonology and to follow the fashion of texting as in the following examples Okkkkkkkkk (okay), Im fineeeeeee (I am fine.), greatttttttttt (great), plzzzzzzzzz (please), Meeeeeee (me), funnii (funny) tooooooo (too), sooooooon (soon), sooooooo (so), misssssssss (miss), hiiiiiiiiiiii (hi), congratssssssssss (congrats), byeeeeee (bye), gddddd (good), fineeeeeeee (fine), etc. Sometimes they overuse only to follow the fashion of texting such as maaaaaa (am), okzzzzzz (okay),

etc. The overuse of sounds is the opposite of abbreviation. Therefore, it is not there because of time, money or effort. It could be only fashion, as Crystal (2008) believes.

This section discusses the phonological analysis of the non-standard English used in Facebook by Indian students. The data collected were statistically analysed and were phonologically analyzed. The data were divided into the deletion of consonant(s), deletion of vowel(s), substitution of equivalent sound(s), substitution of a single letter for phone(s), substitution of number(s) for phone(s), words represented by a single letter and overuse of sounds. The study finds that texting started as a matter of abbreviation for simplification but now breaking the rules of Standard English is a fashion and entertainment according to Crystal (2008). The study also found that students sometimes abbreviate or overuse sounds to represent phonology, as the sounds in non-standard English are similar or sometimes the same as the standard one. Therefore, Ali (2012) conceded that it is an infrequent random process.

Conclusion

The current study found two significant results. The first one is that Facebook users sometimes are affected by phonology when they abbreviate as in 'u', '4', 'y', '6t', 'b4' for you, for, why, sixty and before, respectively. This, therefore, shows that phonology comes first and affects the non-standard internet English used on Facebook. The study found that internet Facebook users sometimes follow specific patterns when using abbreviations that reflect phonology, such as 'c' for 'see', 'iz' for 'is', 'r' for 'are' etc. The researchers believe that Facebook users know phonology when they shift from standard English to non-standard internet English. They also believe that the more Facebook users know phonology, the more their non-standard internet English reflects phonology. Therefore, they recommend that future studies should investigate those claims. They also suggest that further studies examine the difference between literate and illiterate Facebook users reflecting phonology in written Facebook English. Other studies also should explore the factors behind following specific patterns and using random English.

Disclosure Statement:

We (the authors of this paper) hereby declare that research ethics and citing principles have been considered in all the stages of this paper. We take full responsibility for the content of the paper in case of dispute.

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We have no conflict of interest to declare.

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Authors

Jamal Kaid Mohammed Ali is currently an associate professor of Applied Linguistics at University of Bisha, Saudi Arabia. He received PhD degree in Applied Linguistics in 2012 from Aligarh Muslim University, India. His research interests include Texting, Psycholinguistics, Sociolinguistics, online learning, and informal digital learning. He is an e-learning and Quality Matters Master Reviewer. He got certificates from Quality Matters (QM) on Applying the Quality Matters Rubric, Peer Reviewer Course and Master Reviewer Certification.

S. Imtiaz Hasnain is Professor of Sociolinguistics at Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh. He is the Dean of Faculty of Arts. His main research interests include critical discourse studies, language endangerment, and language planning and minority language issues. He is currently working on two projects: i. Documentation and Preservation of two endangered languages, namely Birhor and Chinali, funded by Central Institute of Indian Languages (Mysore) under SPPEL (Scheme for the protection and Preservation of Endangered Languages), Ministry of Human Resource Development, Govt. of India, and ii. A collaborative Multi-varsity Project titled "Linguistic Activation and Bi-directional Reading: An Eyetracker and Electroencephalogram Investigation" funded by the Ministry of Science and Technology (Govt. of India).

M. Salim Beg obtained his B.Sc. Engineering (Hons) from Aligarh Muslim University in 1982; Master of Engineering in Communication Engineering from Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore in 1984; and PhD from Loughborough University, England in 1991. He has supervised 50 post-graduate theses (including doctoral theses) to successful completion and has about 180 research publications. He has worked on collaborative projects with personnel from industries such as Motorola, Lucent & Alcatel and he has also been the coordinator of several sponsored R&D projects. He is currently a Professor at Department of Electronics Engineering, AMU, Aligarh and he has also been Chairman of the department for 3 years.