A Discoursal Study of Mobile Phone Messages

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Abstract

This study aims at analyzing synchronous text messages among friends in English and Translation Departments at Mosul University, to show their communicative aspects and how people use written discourse and change the discourse of the text of the messages to fit their needs for communication. Emphasis will be laid on the discoursal rules that are followed, and whether or not we have a complete sense out of these messages (and whether or not texters can make any sense out of these messages).

The study hypothesizes that texting involves using language informally. Texters will somehow not follow linguistic conventions. However, they are going to keep the regularity of the discoursal rules. Thus, according to the information expressed by texters, there will appear types of turn-taking with the message having opening, maintaining and closing phases.

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The study has come up with some conclusions that verify our hypotheses. It has been found that text messaging is very complex and personal. In communicating, texters create a new mode of writing having its own rules. Texters have, somehow, used language informally. Though the discourse of mobile phone message is fragmented and abbreviated, yet there have been discoursal rules to be followed. All texters do make sense out of the messages. All texters have been able to send and receive messages immediately to the extent that there have been different types of turn- taking, viz. greeting, information, elicitation and closing.

1. Introduction

Millions of people use digital technology in their daily lives from using a computer for data processing and playing games to accessing the internet as well as using mobile phones to communicate verbally and textually across space and time .

The digital technology in the 21st century has caused a shift in language. It has created a shortened language system with its own rules. As a result, users have changed written discourse to comply with technology. They have even made greater changes in using text messages.

The mobile text messaging is known as SMS (short message service), E-mails or texting. It has become a common means for

keeping constant touch, especially among young people in many parts of the world today.

2. The Problem

This is, to the best of our knowledge, one of the fewest studies which focuses on the discourse of mobile phone messages. It relies on Bush (2005:3) who made his first study on the subject arguing that previous studies have not systematically studied the linguistic conventions and the variations in individuals' texting style. The problem is coupled by the fact that there are no books, but only very few resources on the net, that help us to get more information about the subject.

3. Aims of the Study

The study aims at analyzing 20 synchronous text messaging among friends to show the communicative aspects of mobile phone messages, i.e. how people manipulate written discourse and change text messaging discourse to fit their needs for communication.

In this study, we are going to study the message as a whole unified text in terms of the discoursal rules that are followed to see whether we have a complete sense out of these messages (and whether participants can make any sense out of these messages).

4. The hypotheses

The study hypothesizes that:

1. Texting involves using language informally. It is expected that texters will somehow not follow linguistic conventions.
2. Texters keep the regularity of the discoursal rules in texting.

5. Subjects and Data Collection

The research depends on 20 synchronous mobile phone messages sent and received by students in English and Translation Departments at the University of Mosul. We categorize our data into two types of encounters: same-sex and cross-sex.

Some problems have faced the researcher, the first of which is the limited resources about the subject; only just some on-line articles are available. Second, it is difficult to find a large number of Arab students sending English messages even if they are at departments for teaching languages. Third, the long period spent on the research (two months) for finding messages containing the elements that would change the texts of the messages into unusual ones and make them different from other normal texts. In addition, we have got so many messages but unfortunately they are not suitable for our research because they deal with gossip and other subject matters such as those dealing with girls in relation to their love affairs.

6. Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis is concerned with the examination and analysis of language in use. In this field of linguistics, the main idea is that language cannot be understood without reference to the context of production, linguistic and extra –linguistic, in which it is used. It involves looking at both language from and language function. The emphasis, then, is not only on the form of the linguistic items but on their uses; that is, what the speaker (or writer) intends to achieve, and what he in fact achieves with these linguistic items. Thus, discourse analysis aims at analyzing the total picture of natural communication. The analyst may need to take into account phonetics, morphosyntax, syntax, semantics, pragmatics and paralinguistic features in addition to real world knowledge. As a result, the form of the data is larger texts beyond the sentence as they flow together with which various features come, such as hesitations, non-standard forms, self–corrections, repetitions, incomplete clauses, words, etc.(1). (For more details about discourse analysis, see Brown and Yule, 1983; Stubbs, 1983; Coulthard, 1985;

(1) This contrasts with types of analysis that are concerned with the study of grammar: the study of smaller linguistic items such as sounds (phonetics and phonology), parts of words (morphology), meaning (semantics), and the order of words in sentences (syntax) (Tannen, 2002:1).

Schiffrin, 1994; Salkie,1995; Gee, 1999; Perkan, 1999; Grenoble, 2000; Demo, 2001; Tannen, 2002).

Furthermore, Prekan (1999:1) and Demo, (2001:1) state that discourse analysis includes the study of both written texts and spoken interaction. It shows linguistic features as well as social and cultural factors that help in our interpretation and understanding of different texts and types of talk. A discourse analysis of written texts, Demo adds, might include a study of topic development and cohesion across the sentences, while an analysis of spoken language might concentrate on these aspects plus turn-taking, opening and closing sequences of social encounters or narrative structure. Besides, Brown and Yule (1983:2) distinguish between transactional discourse (message-oriented) and interactional discourse (person – oriented). Levinson (1983:368) thinks that there are 'discourse analysts' and 'conversation analysts'. On the one hand, discourse analysts focus on transactional discourse (mainly written texts). Conversation analysts, on the other hand, usually focus on interactional discourse. They are ethnomethodologists who prefer to talk about regularities rather than well- formedness and rules. But, Abdesslem (1993:224) states that despite their different theoretical backgrounds, the two approaches are complementary in that they both study verbal communication but look at it from different angles.

7. Short Message Service (SMS)

The advancement in digital technology has led everyone to communicate easily through messaging since a mobile phone user can send a text message from anywhere, if a signal is available, and to anyone having a mobile phone.

However, there is a limitation in using this technology, namely the characters which depend on the phone and the company. This has led users to be creative with language. They have expanded the abbreviations that are used in chat rooms. So, as the phone technology has changed communication from verbal to textual, many people have used the language rules from rooms chat and expanded these rules for text messages (Bush, 2005:5).

During the 1990's, the mobile phone industry developed its short messages service (SMS). This has been a remarkable growth when 8 billion messages were sent worldwide in August 2000, and 15 billion in December. Furthermore, the phone users are of lowering ages, two-thirds of 14 to 16 years old are the fastest growing users. A Mori / Lycos UK survey which is published in September 2000 showed that 8190 of mobile phone users are between the ages of 15 to 24. They were using their phones for sending text messages, typically to co-ordinate their social lives, to engage in language play, to flirt or to send a "thinking of you"

message. Apparently, 3790 of all messages have used the service to tell others that they love them. At the same time, reports suggest that the service is being used for other services (purposes), such as sexual harassment, school bullying, political rumors and the interaction between drug dealers and clients (Bush, 2005: 5-6).

8. Data Analysis

8.1 Numbers Replacing Sounds in Words(2)

Users may, in a word, try to manipulate numbers to replace syllables having the same sounds. This is clearly presented in the following table when users have used heavily the numbers1,2,3,4, and 8.

Samples	***Definition***	***Type of Encounter***
A3 (3)	anytime	Same –sex Male-male
Activ8	activate	Same-sex Male-male
B4	before	Same-/Cross-sex All users whether male or female
2moro	tomorrow	Cross –sex Male-female
2nite	tonight	Cross-sex male -female
l8r	later	Cross-sex male -female
d8	date	Cross-sex male –female
every1	every one	Same-/Cross- sex All users whether male or female

Table 1. Numbers Replacing Sounds in Words

[adopted from Bush, 2005, with some modifications]

(2) Most of the terms of these sections have been adopted, with some modifications, from Bush (2005).

(3) It should be mentioned that 'a3' may mean 'anytime' , 'anywhere' , or 'anyplace' .

8.2 Homophonic Single Letter Abbreviation

Homophonic single letter means putting a letter, instead of a whole word, that gives the same pronunciation to it. The users try to change the words to the extent that they are phonetically transcribed sounds. This, in turn, will allow faster response. In fact, these abbreviations of language are due to the limitation in the number of characters allowed per message. Let us look at the following table:

Samples	***Definition***	***Type of Encounter***
Am	I am	Same –sex Male-male/female -female
B(4)	bye	Same-/Cross -sex Male -male and male -female
C	see	Same-/Cross –sex All users whether male or female
Cu	see you	Same-/Cross –sex All users whether male or female
F	if	Same- sex Male - male
Ic	I see	Same- /Cross- sex All users whether male or female
Ru?	Are you?	Same-/Cross –sex All users whether male or female
UR	you are	Same-/Cross- sex All users whether male or female
Ya	yes	Cross –sex Female - male

Table 2. Homophonic Single Letter Abbreviation

[adopted from Bush, 2005, with some modifications]

(4) The letter 'b' may mean 'bye' or 'be'.

8.3 Dropping Vowels

To shorten the language quickly, texters resort to dropping vowels from a word . However, they retain the consonants of the word for the aim of recognition. However, Bush (2005:10) states that not all the vowels in every word are dropped, for example, "wickd" for "wicked". This suggests the need to keep at least one vowel to help understand the meaning of the word. This is clearly presented in the following table:

Samples	***Definition***	***Type of Encounter***
@hom	at home	Same-/Cross -sex All users whether male or female
@wrk	at work	Same-/Cross -sex Male-male-/female-female/female-male
Cn	can	Same –sex Male-male
Mtng	meeting	Cross –sex Male-female
Spk	speak	Cross- sex Male-female
Sry	sorry	Cross –sex Female-male
Thn	then	Same-/Cross- sex Male-male/female- male
Txt	text	Same- sex Male-male
Msg, Mesg	message	Same-/Cross-sex Male-male-/female- male
Bettr	better	Same –sex Male-male
Wer(5)	where	Same-/Cross- sex Male-male/female-male
Wen	when	Same-/Cross- sex Male-female/female- male
Doin	doing	Same-/Cross- sex Male-female/female-male

Table 3. Dropping Vowels

[adopted from Bush, 2005, with some modifications]

(5) 'wer , wen and doin' may also refer to dropping consonant, which is the letter " h" in the first two words and "g" in the last one.

8.4 Alphanumeric Ellipsis

Texters use numbers to represent words. This happens when the numbers are turned up side down completely. There is only one example in the data viz. “01134” for “hello”. Moreover, in her study, Bush (2005:12) presents other examples that include symbols instead of numbers, "c%l" for "cool", "c%d" for "could", and "dem" & for "demand", "d00d5peak" for "doodspeak"

8.5 Letter Changes

Texters often change the spelling so that only the letter needed for the sound is applied and they eliminate any unnecessary extra letter. Bush (2005 :12) presents some examples in the word "bcum", which is phonetically represented as /bIkΛm /, we drop the letter <e> because the pronunciation of the letter <b>encompasses the sound / e /, and the sound /Λ / replaces the letter <o>. Another example is the word "ezi" or "ezy" which keeps the initial letter <e>, drops the letter <a> since it is silent, replaces the letter <s> with <z> because the letter <s> represents the phoneme / z / and keeps the letter <y> as the original spelling, or replaces it with <i> which both can represent the phoneme / i /. This is shown in the following table:

Samples	*Definition*	*Type of Encounter*
Luv	love	Cross –sex Male-female
Bcum	become	Same-/Cross- sex Male-male-/female-male
Ezi, ezy	easy	Same-/Cross- sex Male-male/female-male
Fone	phone	Same-/Cross –sex Female-female/ male- female
Gimme	give me	Same –sex Male-male
Juz	just	Same - /cross – sex Male-male/female-male
Ofis	office	Same -sex Male-male
Pliz	please	Cross -sex Female-male
Thnx	thanks	same-/Cross –sex female-female/ male-female
Truluv	true love	Cross –sex female-male

Table 4.Letter Changes

[adopted from Bush, 2005, with some modifications]

8.6 Aphesis and Abbreviations

We have combined Aphesis and Abbreviation since both are related to the severing of the word. Aphesis refers to omitting the beginning of the word while abbreviation refers to omitting the end of the word. Let us look at the following table:

Samples	*Definition*	*Type of Encounter*
Bye	goodbye	Same-/Cross- sex All users whether male or female
Cos	because	Same –sex Male-male
@coll	at college	Cross –sex Male-female
Fun	funny	Cross- sex Female-male
Info	information	Same-/Cross- sex All users whether male or female
Mob	mobile	Same-/Cross- sex Male-male-/female- female
Mom	moment	Same-/Cross- sex All users Whether male or female

Sec	second	Same-/Cross-sex All users Whether male or female
Tom	tomorrow	Same-/Cross-sex All users Whether male or female
W	with	Same -sex Male-male

Table 5. Aphesis and Abbreviations

[adopted from Bush, 2005, with some modifications]

8.7 Contraction

Contraction is another way to condense the language. In using this technique, texters try to omit the middle of the word as in "bday" for "birthday" or sever the middle of the phrase as in "werru?" for "where are you?". (Bush 2005:14) believes that contraction overlaps with other abbreviations, such as a letter changes and homophonic single letter abbreviation, but in this use texters are dropping the middle of the word or phrase. This is seen in the following table:

Samples	***Definition***	***Type of Encounter***
Cmon	come on	Same-/Cross -sex Male-male-female- male
Wassup?	what's up?	Same- sex Male-male
Werdu..?	where do you..?	Cross -sex Male-female
Werru?	Where are you?	Same-/Cross –sex Male-male-/female-Female female-male

Table 6. Contraction

[adopted from Bush, 2005, with some modifications]

8.8 Abbreviated phrase

Many of the phrases used in text messaging combine several techniques including using combinations of acronyms, contractions, numbers, dropping vowels, and homophonic single letter abbreviation. For example, "howru?" uses the homophonic single letter abbreviation for "are" and "you", but keeps the word "how". Let us look at table 7.

Samples	***Definition***	***Type of Encounter***
Gudnite	good night	Cross- sex Male-female
Howdepiuluv?	How deep is Your love	Cross –sex Female-male
Iwonu	I want you	Cross –sex Female-male/ male-female
Obabi	oh baby	Cross –sex Female-male
Werubn?	Where are you been?	Same-/Cross- sex Male-male /Female-male
Wlumryme?	Will you marry me?	Cross- sex Female-male
Xmeqek	kiss me quick	Cross –sex Female-male

Table 7. Abbreviated phrase

[adopted from Bush, 2005, with some modifications]

8.9 Turn-Taking

In the mobile phone messages, a number of discoursal acts are combined together to produce a turn. This last term refers to everything said by one speaker before the other's utterance. (for more details about the turn, see Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975;

Stubbs, 1983; Coulthard,1985; Mey, 1993; Langford, 1994). As a result, a kind of turn-taking in the form of adjacency pairs is created, for example, greeting, asking about health or where one is and saying good bye, etc. The following types of turns are found: greeting, informative, elicitation and closing. All these types are combined again to have a kind of turn- taking system or exchanges among texters.

In greeting, for example, one might notice the following discoursal structure:

A: Gudam, brother.

B: Gudam.

Moreover, a texter in his/ her greeting might ask about the other's health or talk about one's attitude. Let us look at the following excerpts:

A: Hi. Omar, how ru ?

B: ah, i am juz fin, nu ?

A: i am ok.

****

A: Hi X, am feel bad bcuz of my research.

B: comon juz take it ezy, that's funy. don't delay ur work man.

In contrast, in another example, asking about one's health comes from the second texter:

A: Gudam switti

B: Hi, gudam baby, how ru ?

However, having in mind saving money and effort, a texter may use an elicitation form immediately with his/ her greeting. This is clearly presented in the following extract where one of the texters asks about where her friend is:

A: gudmor switti, werru now ? am @ coll.

B: gudmor, am @ hom yet now.

To save more money and effort, a texter, sometimes, does not greet even, but just asks about one's health to be followed by an elicitation form. In the following example, the texter asks about what his friend is doing which follows his asking about the other's health:

A: how ru , what do u do?

B: am study

Similarly, in the following two extracts, one of the texters gives information, in the first one, about his friend whose name is Asa'ad and asks about what her friend is doing in the second one:

A: Hi m how ru, I talkt w Asa'ad in Malisia

****

A: Hi, honey, how ru ? wru doing now ?

B: Hi. am gud. am lisning 2 smuzik.

Finally, it must be said that in greeting there might be a speaker selection before presenting the greeting form. It is achieved by using real names or by using an expression of endearment, namely dear, honey, baby, brother and switti (for sweet).

Furthermore, texters, after starting their conversation with greeting, proceed to give some details about something. Let us look at the following excerpt in which the texter talks about his wish to marry his friend:

A: I won 2 cu I won 2 ask ur hand. am sry f this sub. disturbu

However, presenting certain information might be met with an immediate response from the other interlocutor. This is clearly shown in the following extract where one of the texters talks about his difficulties in writing his research and the other presents his point of view in response:

A: really, i don't know w happen w me

B: it's bttr 2u 2c ur supervised 2 advic u.

Instead of giving information, texters might direct some questions for each other to be accompanied by a response and/ or

evaluation. It should be mentioned, however, that there are different discoursal structures as far as elicitation is concerned. Thus, we might have a mere elicitation to be followed by a direct response. This is seen in the following extract where one of the texters is asking about a girl that his friend wants to marry and he gets an immediate response, in result.(6)

A: i know her?

B: ya, of course.

Besides, an elicitation turn might be preceded by another discoursal act, viz. a marker. The last term refers to a signal which is presented just before the elicitation as a prelude to it. Let us look at the following extract in which one of the texters asks the other to open voice chat to talk to him:

A: ok, can u open v. chat, I wan 2 talk 2 u ?

B: oh, ya wait me ther @ 10:00 pm.

With the previous structure, i.e. IR, the response might be accompanied by another discoursal act, namely comment. This is shown in the following excerpt where the second interlocutor presents a comment about his situation at a certain time:

(6) It should be noticed that the response might be in the form of an elicitation which leads to another response.

A: switti can cu 2day ?

B: ya, we can meet in coll @ 12:00 i'll bfree @ this time.

Sometimes, there might appear an evaluation after the response whether it is neutral or emphatic. This will present the discoursal structure IRF.

A: am lesning 2 MJT and byonce they r col.

B: ya, which1 do u prefer ?

A: i luv both of them.

B: ic

It is not uncommon with the previous discoursal structure to have various realizations. Let us look at the following example in which texters discuss the idea of going to Syria and a comment is realized after the response:

A: dear, do u have a3 within this 4 days ?

B: No, why ?

A: i juz wanna 2 go wme 2 Syr. i have sum business f u want 2 cum.

B: oh, ya wy not.

In another example, texters discuss the idea of coming to the college and one of them tries to adopt a starter, which is a statement, just before his elicitation:

A: Samir i wanna u 2 cum w me 2moro 2 coll @ 9:30, culd u cum, please ?

B: ya, but u know that i have sum works 2 finish 2moro.

A: ya i know.

Sometimes, an elicitation might be not understood. This obliges the other texter, in turn, to adopt a specification request. This is well presented in the following extract where one of the texters directs a specific request about the kind of help required from him:

A: but iwann ur help?

B: w a kind of help?

A: i won u 2 help me in my research.

B: ok, don't mind.

Furthermore, in an IRF structure, the R might be in the form of an elicitation and the F will be in the form of a response. This is very clear in the following example where texters are talking about a date:

A: comon, shall I cu la8r ?

B: It's a d8 ?

A: ya, I won 2 cu @ 11:00.

As for closing up the text on mobile phone, the following discoursal structures are adopted:

1. A: closing

A: bye

2. A: closing

B: closing

A: bye

B: bye

3. A: pre-closing

closing

B: closing

A: ok now, bye.

B: bye

4. A: pre-closing

B: pre-closing

A: closing

B: closing

A: ok, i'll do my best 2 cum.

B: thnx brother.

A: Don't mind, cu.

B: cu.

9. Conclusions

In using mobile phone messages, texters try to communicate with one another through text by creating a new mode with its own rules different from the grammatical rules which are used in written language. They attempt to change the language distinctively.

It has been found that texters have, somehow, used language informally without following linguistic conventions. However, some of the discoursal techniques that texters use are common enough that the majority of individuals who text messages are familiar with because they are easily identified and because they have been used for a long period in written communication. For example, "every 1" for "every one", "cuz" for "because", while many of the words and phrases are group depended, for example, when texters use "m8" for "mate".

On the other hand, a question may be raised whether or not educators will separate conversational text from formal writing or they will accept the new mode of language. So, how, for example,

do teachers communicate with their students when there is a lack of depth, ambiguity and fragmentation in such a mode?!. Would they have to translate the text messages abbreviations as this new mode of writing is used with formal writing. Bush (2005:18) argues that one teacher from Britain asked her students to write about their summer and received the following essay:

" my summer hols wr CWOT. B4, we used 2go2 Ny. 2c my bro, his GF & thr 3:- kids FTF. ILNY, it's a gr8 plc "

The translation for those who are not texters is:

" My summer holidays were a complete waste of time. Before we used to go to New York to see my brother, his girl friend and their three screaming kids face to face. I love New York. It's a great place ".

As far as the content is concerned, various types of SMS have been realized.They can be romantic and are subdivided into two forms, those for showing love and those for dating, giving encouragement, giving thanks and those related to business. On the other hand, it has been found that romantic messages are the most prominent than the other types.

In communicating through text, paralinguistic features are lost, such as facial expressions, gestures, and body language which are so critical for determining meaning in context. As a result, texters use

smiley (also spelled smiles). As a form of smileys and emoticons, texters use letters and symbols on the keyboard to create the appropriate emotion: symbols such as " :) " or " :-) " for (smile ☺ or happy ☺), " ;) " for (wink)… etc. However, in this research we have not found a case of using smileys on the mobiles used by the texters, (despite the fact that there are some mobile phones like Sony Ericson which contain these symbols).

As mentioned earlier, the discourse of mobile phone messages is fragmented, abbreviated and words are often left out. In addition there is a lack of paralinguistic features of communication. Thus, the language seems ambiguous and affects how we can make sense out of the text. However, it has been found that there are discoursal rules to be followed. All the texters have made sense out of these messages. This is supported by the fact that each one of the texters has been able to send and receive messages immediately using all the unconventional linguistic techniques. This has also been shown in the turns among texters, namely greeting, information, elicitation and closing. Besides, the greetings have been introduced by using real names or by using an expression of endearment, viz. dear, honey, baby, brother and switti. In addition, the elicitation turn has shown itself to reflect various realizations. So, we expect that the rules of mobile phone messages will influence how we write in the future.

10. Suggestions for Further Studies

1- An investigation is needed for studying Arabic mobile phone messages.

2. A study may be conducted for showing the similarities and differences between mobile phone and chat discoursal strategies.

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ملخص

دراسة خطابية لرسائل الهواتف المحمولة

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تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل رسائل الهاتف المحمول الآنية بين الأصدقاء في قسمي اللغة الانكليزية والترجمة في جامعة الموصل لتوضيح الخصائص التفاعلية وكيف يستخدم الأشخاص الخطاب المكتوب ويغيرون خطاب النص في رسائل الهاتف المحمول ليوافق حاجاتهم. وسيكون هناك تركيز أيضا على القواعد الخطابية المتبعة وفيما إذا كان هناك فهم كامل لهذه الرسائل (وفيما إذا كان يستطيع المرسلون ان يفهموا هذه الرسائل).

تفترض الدراسة ان الرسائل تتضمن استخدام اللغة غير الرسمية لذلك فان المرسلين نوعا ما سوف لن يتبعوا أي تقاليد لغويه. وعلى أية حال، فان المرسلين سيبقوا على القواعد الخطابية المستخدمة بصورة عامة بين الناس. لذلك سيظهر، وحسب المعلومات المعطاة، أنواع من اخذ الأدوار والتي تحتوي على بداية واستمرارية ونهاية.

توصلت الدراسة إلى عدد من النتائج المؤكدة للفرضيات المذكورة. فقد ظهر ان الرسائل معقدة وشخصية وان المرسلين يبتكرون نوعا جديدا من الكتابة له بنيته الخاصة به أثناء اتصالهم مع بعضهم البعض. وان المرسلين نوعا ما قد استخدموا اللغة غير الرسمية. وقد وجد كذلك انه بالرغم من ان خطاب رسائل الهاتف المحمول هامشي ومختصر لكنه كان ينطوي على قواعد خطابية متبعة. فقد كان كل المرسلين يفهمون الرسائل وكان بمقدورهم إرسال واستلام الرسائل على الفور إلى الحد الذي أدى إلى ظهور أنواع مختلفة من اخذ الأدوار وتحديدا التحية والمعلوماتية والاستفهامية والمغلقة.

(*) قسم اللغة الانكليزية – كلية الآداب / جامعة الموصل.