

The Language of Texting: Altering English or a Language of its Own?

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the first paragraph of the paper.

Because language is so intangible, changes over time are not only unavoidable, they also are common and expected. Language is not the same today as it was when it originated; it is not the same today as it was last week. Phrases become "so yesterday" and expressions from a hundred years ago have been entirely eliminated from our language. There are many reasons for change—culture, technology, events in history— but the most influential catalyst for change in today's era is technology. Things like email, texting, and Facebook have led to new words forming, new grammatical changes, and other modifications that are both subtle and noticeable. Technology could eventually help the language become easier to follow, growing similar to other languages, and stray away from the numerous irregularities that we all struggle to master. Language, though, is constantly evolving with culture, and as technology becomes a larger and more influential part of our culture, it also becomes a larger and more influential part of the English language.

***"The Language of Texting:
Altering English or a Language of its Own?"***

Elizabeth Gorney

Because language is so intangible, changes over time are not only unavoidable, they also are common and expected. Language is not the same today as it was when it originated; it is not the same today as it was last week. Phrases become "so yesterday" and expressions from a hundred years ago have been entirely eliminated from our language. There are many reasons for change—culture, technology, events in history— but the most influential catalyst for change in today's era is technology. Things like email, texting, and Facebook have led to new words forming, new grammatical changes, and other modifications that are both subtle and noticeable. Technology could eventually help the language become easier to follow, growing similar to other languages, and stray away from the numerous irregularities that we all struggle to master. Language, though, is constantly evolving with culture, and as technology becomes a larger and more influential part of our culture, it also becomes a larger and more influential part of the English language.

The most prominent trend in the language is a direct result of the technological world in which we live: abbreviations. Instant messaging and texting have created a need for our messages to be delivered *now*, and in order to make this occur a fraction of a second faster, abbreviations came into existence. "OMG" is not only a coined phrase, but there are different variations and plays on the abbreviation to keep in circulating and in use. Even punctuation symbols such as "@" have become a constant in not only typing, but also handwritten papers. Though abbreviations do allow for faster communication, they take away the eloquence of the language and lead to a less professional impact and potentially a loss of understanding between people.

In the article entitled "Texting" by David Crystal, he details the abbreviations that have been introduced into our language. Crystal is the author of numerous books on linguistics and the development of the English language, and he explores in detail

how it is changing due to technology. He refers to the language of texting as "textspeak", and explains why textspeak differs from traditional English in the following examples:

B	Be
B4	Before
@	at
R	Are
&	and
2	To, too, two
Sum1	Someone
Lol	Laugh out loud

Punctuation marks and letters are adapted to express attitudes (the so-called smileys, or emoticons), as seen in the ':-D' after the title Laugh Out Loud—you have to read the symbols sideways to see the point" (2008, 80).

Crystal explains that textspeak is like decoding a message; they require a different interpretation of the language because of the technology and the speed that messages can be delivered. There is a different adaptation of symbols and punctuation that the traditional language does not use, and it's a whole new way of thinking about language that has never been used.

Crystal also states that "a new medium for language doesn't turn up very often, which is why the linguistic effects of electronic communications technology have attracted so much attention" (2008, 80). The nature of new technology is so innovative and an entirely new experience that in the world of computers, the Internet, and cell phones, there is a lot of focus and debate over how it has impacted the English language. Because of the drastic nature of the change, there is a whole new set of rules and concepts that are associated with "textspeak". The poem "txt commndmnts" by Norman Silver explores these new rules in a satirical sense, reflecting on both the nature of texting and the impact it has had thus far on society:

1 u shall luv ur mobil fone with all ur hart
 2 u & ur fone shall neva b apart
 3 u shall nt lust afr ur neibrs fone nor thiev
 4 u shall b prepar@d all times 2 tXt & 2 recv
 5 u shall use LOL & othr acronyms in
 conversatns
 6 u shall be zappy with ur ast*r*sks &
 exc!matns!!
 7 u shall abbrevi8 & rite words like they
 sed

8 u shall nt speak 2 sum1 face2face if u cn
msg em insted

9 u shall nt shout with capitls XEPT IN DIRE
EMERGNCY +

10 u shall nt consult a nenglish dictnry

The style of the piece reflects the character of a text message, and though it is dramatized in the poem, it is a rather accurate display of texting culture and language. Most importantly noted in the style are the uses of abbreviations and acronyms, the use of certain punctuation marks and the noticeable lack of other punctuation marks, the meaning that capital letters convey, and the numerous misspellings. These changes are certain to drastically influence the future of the language, and are having a dramatic impact on the language presently.

While these changes are beginning to reoccur and take a semi-permanent hold on the norms of the English language, these changes cannot yet be deemed as permanent, as they have not existed for long enough. Certain variations are becoming increasingly common and are integrated more frequently into formal writing than others, such as "to" for "too", or even "2" for either "to" or "too". Other forms of abbreviations aren't used as frequently, such as long acronyms that have not yet found their way into everyone's language yet. However, the trends in "textspeak" are now becoming in themselves a new language, or a variation of the English language that a new generation is being introduced to and becoming more fluent in at an increasingly younger age. This new spin on written language, when applied to the original and traditional form of English, is enabling youth to apply their translating skills to other aspects of language.

For example, the article titled "Txt msg n school literacy: does texting and knowledge of text abbreviations adversely affect children's literacy attainment?" by Plester, Wood, and Bell details a study preformed in regards to children's knowledge of texting abbreviations and their performance on English testing, and found the following conclusions:

Those with the higher spelling scores were more likely to adopt the casual youth code language for texting, which entails using non-conventional spellings that are related to pronunciation. Had the children not been aware of the boundary conditions for the two codes of language and used similar language in their formal English

assessments, they were unlikely to have scored as highly in the KS2 English scores as most of these participants did. It may be that experience with texting raises awareness of the variety of language registers available to them" (2008, 143).

The language of texting enabled the students to apply the translating skills that are used in foreign language classes to improve their proficiency with the English language. There is a process of code-switching that is involved when translating between two languages, and this same process is beginning to show up in translating between texting language and English. Furthermore, the study concluded that "these early studies have shown no compelling evidence that texting damages standard English in preteens, and considerable evidence that facility with text language is associated with higher achievement in school literacy measures" (2008, 143). The study, while not as involved as it could be because the developments and changes are so new, has shown that texting is similar to its own language, and because of this allows children to develop new skills and perform better on tests. Once the changes become more clear and permanent, then the data will be more conclusive in showing just how much texting language has changed the English language and how much it is helping children to develop new reading, writing, and translating skills.

In fact, the differences between the English language and texting languages have raised the debate that texting can be viewed as its own language, simply because of the vast amount of differences between the two of them, and the translation that is required when switching from one language to the other. The article entitled "Language Intrtxtlty" by Jonathon Green describes how texting has become its own language, with its own set of rules and commonalities that set it apart from Standard English. He notes that "standard English dictionaries, especially those aimed at the college market, like to lard their latest edition with the announcement of a smattering of smart new words (2007, 125). Because there are so many new words that are being integrated into our language, literally through being introduced into the dictionaries, texting has allowed us to develop a new set of words for communication when our messages are limited to 160 characters. Our mind learns to interpret these

words phonically, and the result is a new set of abbreviations that we adjust to and treat as a normal way of communicating. Green elaborates on this interpretation as well in his article. "Driven by the need to render smaller, our acronyms and abbreviations exist usefully only in the screen's pixellated [sic] characters. One reads them as the words they were when committed to the technology. One may type l8r but we 'see' and read 'later'" (2007, 127). The advances in technology have not necessarily forced us to type in this "textspeak", but they have certainly encouraged and created more practical means for using these abbreviations. For example, some cell phones come with "quick texts" already programmed into the phone, some of which are common text abbreviations such as "whacha doin?" or "c u soon". These quick texts and character limit per text persuade users to stray away from traditional grammar and spelling rules to make their texts briefer and more precise.

In other parts of the world, we are already beginning to see a development in the differences in language between texting and speaking. The article "Mobile Language Choices—The Use of English and IsiXhosa in Text Messages (SMS): Evidence from a Bilingual South African Sample" by Deumert and Masinyana explains the culture of text messages in South Africa in reference to bilingual individuals, relating their written second language texts to text messaging culture in America. The abstract by the authors explains that "the English-language SMSes produced by these bilingual speakers share many of the features which have been reported for English SMS communication internationally (abbreviations, paralinguistic restitutions, non-standard spellings), and provide evidence for what one might call a global English SMS standard" (2008). Therefore, the trends that are present and developing in SMS or text messages in the English language are very pronounced. Coming from individuals who are familiar with translating between two languages, they determined that the English text messages involve similar patterns that a language of its own possesses. From the extensive study of the two different languages and the two different cultures of texting, Deumert and Masinyana were able to conclude that:

The bilingual writers [use] two different sets of communicative norms: When writing English they employ a range of global non-standard features which allow them to

achieve brevity of expression, to optimize speed of communication, and to indicate emotional states; when writing isiXhosa the maxims of brevity and speed are suspended, emotional states are expressed verbally and texts close to the standard norm are produced. The category of mixed messages [...] conforms to both norms: containing abbreviations of the English material, [...] yet conforming at the same time to the norms of written Xhosa in the relevant switches (2008, 140).

This means is that in order to translate between the languages of English and isiXhosa, translating to English is easiest if done with more abbreviations and non-standard language, much like the language of texting. What this means for the future of our language is that when words are translated to English, because of the ease of translating to "textspeak", more and more sources from around the world will begin to develop this new variation, therefore making the breadth of the effects of textspeak vaster than just texting alone.

While this new language of texting is becoming widely adopted by those who use it, not necessarily everyone does, nor does everyone use abbreviations or variations of textspeak the same way. As Green explains, "texting would appear to be a mixture of abbreviations and acronyms, all very much at the user's discretion" (2007, 127). Yes, a majority of those who text use some combination of abbreviations and acronyms, but not all texters use the same combinations. Some people may even express their thoughts differently depending on who they are texting, what the context of their text is, and how they want the tone of the speech to be conveyed. In order for the language of texting to develop into its own language, though, the abbreviations, acronyms, and other means of communicating electronically must unify to create a set of standard "rules" for the language, similar to that of English. For example, in order for this "texting language" to succeed, a constant set of abbreviations would need to be in use. Acronyms such as "lol" for laugh out loud are universal within our culture, and phonically-developed shortcuts such as "r" for are and "u" for you are also uniform among most of the population. Other abbreviations that aren't as common would need to develop and spread throughout the culture before the language of texting can be adopted as its own and have its

own rules. Also, in order for the language to be deemed its own, more words would need to develop into "textspeak". Punctuation and grammar have adapted, and perhaps once more nouns stray away from the traditional form, then the language of texting will develop as its own.

Culture is constantly morphing every aspect of our lives, including, or rather especially, language. Slang phrases of the decades are constantly introduced, some linger for ages while others fade with time. Because technology has such an enormous impact on the culture of today's era, it is unquestionably reaching to our language. Whether or not these changes will stay with our language or be replaced by a new fad is difficult to determine definitely, but based on the changes that it has had thus far, and on the other changes in our language that have stayed for decades, the effects are most likely to be lasting. It is possible that these changes could create an entirely new language of just "textspeak", but the changes are most likely not vast enough for this to occur or last for a while. It is much more likely, though, that the developments of language from texting through abbreviations and acronyms will lead to permanent changes in the English language itself.

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