

# Txting: frNd or foe?

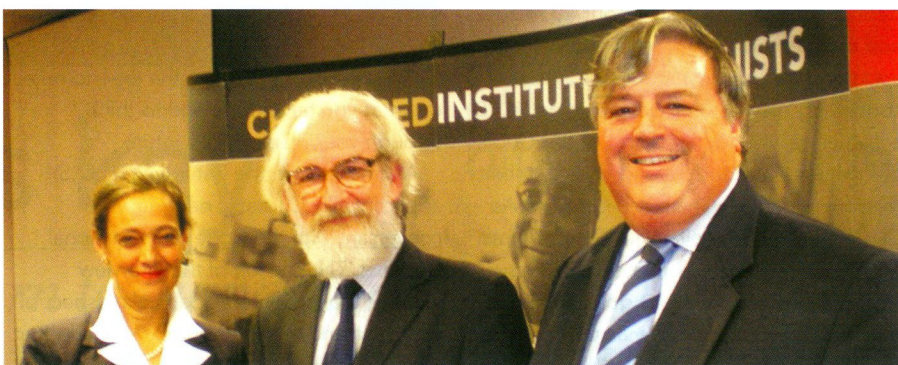
*Texting has been blamed for a decline in literacy, but it can actually improve writing skills. David Crystal challenges our beliefs about SMS messaging*

Here are four headlines taken from a literacy research website in 2007: "Texting Fogs your Brain like Cannabis", "Texting does not Influence Literacy Skills", "Texting Helps Shy Teenagers Communicate", and "Texting Linked Positively with Literacy Achievements." We seem to have a problem. Has there ever been a linguistic phenomenon that has aroused such curiosity, suspicion, fear, confusion, antagonism, fascination, excitement and enthusiasm all at once? And in such a short space of time? Less than a decade ago, hardly anyone had heard of it.

The popular belief is that texting (or SMS, the "short-messaging service") has evolved as a 21st-century phenomenon, with a highly individual graphic style full of abbreviations, used by a young generation that doesn't care about standards. There is a widely voiced concern that the practice is fostering a decline in literacy. People believe that its distinctive forms ("textisms") are being found in schoolwork and examination scripts. And some even think it is harming language as a whole.

In 2007, John Humphrys exploded in the *Daily Mail*. In an article headed "I h8 txt msgs: How Texting is Wrecking our Language", he uses some of the most apocalyptic language I have ever read to condemn it. Texters are: "vandals who are doing to our language what Genghis Khan did to his neighbours eight hundred years ago. They are destroying it: pillaging our punctuation; savaging our sentences; raping our vocabulary. And they must be stopped."

The end is nigh! If I had a pound for



*People have swallowed whole the stories that youngsters use nothing but abbreviations when they text*

every time I heard someone predicting a language disaster because of a new technological development, I would be a very rich man. If I were a time traveller, my bank balance would have started to grow with the arrival in the Middle Ages of printing, thought by many to be the invention of the devil. It would have increased with the arrival of the telegraph, telephone and broadcasting, each of which generated fears that the fabric of society was under threat. And I would have been able to retire on the profits from text messaging.

All the popular beliefs about texting are wrong. It isn't just used by the young generation: the vast majority of texts circulating in cyberspace are among adults, especially by and to institutions (such as the stock-market, colleges, and TV programmes). Barack Obama is one of the latest to see the communicative potential of the medium.

Only a very tiny part of text messaging uses a distinctive orthography. The abbreviations are not a totally new phenomenon. Young people don't use them in essays, nor in exam scripts. And the research is piling up that text messaging helps rather than hinders literacy. Texting has, indeed, added a new dimension to language use, but its long-term impact on the already existing varieties of language is negligible. It is not a disaster.

The popular impression is quite the opposite. People think that the written language seen on mobile phone screens is new and alien. It has been labelled "textese", "slanguage", and even a "digital





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virus". It has been described as "foreign" and "outlandish".

However, in any collection of text messages, it is the combination of standard and non-standard features that is the most striking characteristic – and with good reason. Although many texters like to be different and enjoy breaking linguistic rules, they also know they need to be understood. There is no point in paying for a message if it breaks so many rules that it ceases to be intelligible. There is always an unconscious pressure to use the standard orthography. Here is a small selection of messages illustrating the range of styles people use:

U 2. Glad journey OK. x  
 what R U saying?  
 Landed safely. On way to town. xxx  
 i'll b there by 7  
 we've just had a drink with Jon!!!!

All these texters are literate people; they know how to spell "are", "you", "seven" and so on. The fact that some choose not to use the conventional spelling therefore needs explaining. What are texters doing when they write in this way?

When messages are longer, containing more information, the amount of standard orthography actually increases. Many texters alter just the grammatical words (such as "you" and "be"), as in "if u cn send me the disk by post i'll get it copied. make sure u get a receipt 4 it."

As older and more conservative language users begin to text, an even more standardised style appears. Some people refuse to depart at all from traditional orthography – but they still text. Their texts may use quite informal

language, but they are, nonetheless, spelt, capitalised and punctuated conventionally: "I'll pick up your mum on the way to your place, OK?"

Conventional spelling and punctuation is the norm when institutions send out alert messages, such as the texts that radio listeners are invited to send in to programmes or this university text to students: "Weather Alert! No classes today due to snow storm." These institutional messages now form the vast majority of texts in cyberspace – and

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*There are several features of texts that give the impression of novelty, but some date back 100 years*

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several organisations forbid the use of abbreviations, knowing that many readers will not understand them. Bad textiquette.

Research studies have made it perfectly clear that the early media hysteria about the novelty (and thus the dangers) of text messaging was misplaced. In one American study, less than 20 percent of the text messages showed abbreviated forms of any kind – about three per message.

And in a Norwegian study, the proportion was even lower, with just six percent using abbreviations. In my own text collection, the figure is about 10 percent.

#### REVERSE CALL

David Crystal is pictured (far left; centre) with IoL president, Lady Brewer, and chief executive, John Hammond, shortly before delivering the Threlford Lecture in which he argued that, although young people enjoy playing with language when they send text messages (left), they have a good grounding in the English language

People have been conned. They have swallowed whole the stories suggesting that youngsters use nothing but abbreviations when they text. The most famous case is a story, widely reported in 2003, claiming that a teenager had written an essay so full of textspeak that her teacher was totally unable to understand it. An extract was posted online and quoted incessantly. However, as no one was ever able to track down the entire essay, it was probably a hoax, or at most a case of a student "trying it on" – the linguistic equivalent of walking into class wearing a hoodie.

There are several distinctive features of the way texts are written that combine to give the impression of novelty, but none of them is in fact linguistically novel. Many of them were being used in chatroom interactions that predated the arrival of mobile phones. Some can be found in pre-computer informal writing, dating back 100 years or more.

The most noticeable feature is the use of single letters, numerals and symbols to represent words or parts of words, as with "b" for "be" and "2" for "to". These logograms – or rebuses – go back centuries. Adults who condemn a "c u" in a young person's texting have forgotten that they once did the same thing themselves (though not on a mobile). In countless Christmas annuals, they solved puzzles such as this one: "YY U R YY U B I C U R YY 4 ME" ("Too wise you are...").

Similarly, the use of initial letters for whole words ("n" for "no", "gf" for "girlfriend", "cmb" for "call me back") is not at all new. People have been



initialising common phrases for ages. "IOU" is known from 1618. There is no difference, apart from the medium of communication, between a modern kid's "lol" ("laughing out loud") and an earlier generation's "SWALK" ("sealed with a loving kiss").

Texts omit letters too. We find such forms as "msg" ("message") and "xlnt" ("excellent"). Almost any word can be abbreviated in this way, though there is no consistency between texters. But this isn't new either. Eric Partridge published his *Dictionary of Abbreviations* in 1942. It contained dozens of SMS-looking examples, such as "agn" ("again"), "mth" ("month") and "gd" ("good"), 50 years before texting was born.

Texters also use deviant spellings – but they know they are deviant. They would not be able to use the mobile phone technology at all if they had not been taught to read and write, and this means they have all had a grounding in the standard English writing system. They are by no means the first to use such non-standard forms as "cos" ("because"), "wot" ("what") and "gissa" ("give us a"). Several of these are so much part of English literary tradition that they have been given entries in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. "Cos" is there from 1828 and "wot" from 1829. Many can be found in literary dialect representations, including those by Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, Walter Scott, D H Lawrence and Alan Bleasdale ("Gissa job!").

Why abbreviate? The usual answer is that abbreviations help to speed things up. That's one of the reasons, certainly. Sending a message on a mobile phone is not the most natural of ways to communicate. The keypad isn't linguistically sensible. No one took letter frequency into account when designing it. For example, key 7 on my mobile contains four symbols: "p", "q", "r" and

"s". It takes four key-presses to access letter "s", and yet "s" is one of the most frequently occurring letters in English. It is twice as easy to input "q", which is one of the least frequently occurring letters. It should be the other way round. So any strategy that reduces the time and awkwardness of inputting graphic symbols is bound to be attractive. That is why predictive texting evolved, whereby the phone matches our keystrokes to an electronic dictionary to anticipate the words we are trying to input. But less than half the people who have predictive texting on their phones actually use it.

Abbreviations are a natural, intuitive response to a technological problem. And the amazing thing is that they appeared in next to no time. Most people had never heard of texting ten years ago. It happened so quickly, I believe, because texters already had an instinct about the value of shortening words to speed up communication, so they simply transferred (and then embellished) what they had encountered in other settings. We do not have to go back into history to learn that, if we are in a hurry and want to leave a

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written message, we are likely to abbreviate. We have all left notes in which we have replaced "and" by "+", and "three" by "3", for example. Anglo-Saxon scribes used abbreviations of this kind.

But the need to save time and energy is by no means the whole story of texting. When we look at some texts, they are linguistically quite complex. So why do texters put more effort into texting than they need to? Another factor is involved: the human ludic temperament. In short, it's fun.

There are an extraordinary number of ways in which people play with language – creating riddles, solving crosswords, playing Scrabble, inventing new words... Professional writers do the

same, providing catchy copy for advertising slogans, thinking up puns in newspaper headlines, and writing poems, novels and plays. Children quickly learn that one of the most enjoyable things you can do with language is to play with its sounds, words, grammar – and spelling.

The drive to be playful is there when we text, and it is hugely powerful. Even the super-pedants who condemn texting cannot resist it. John Humphrys concludes his rant by saying: "But at least I have not succumbed to 'text-speak'." Yet he ends his article with the words: "To the editor of the *OED* I will simply say: For many years you've been GR8. Don't spoil it now. Tks." A playful ending, which does exactly what texters do, and for the same reason.

The ludic drive is illustrated in the various text-messaging poetry competitions all over the world. To celebrate World Poetry Day in 2007, T-Mobile tried to find the UK's first "Txt laureate" in a competition for the best romantic poem in SMS. They had 200 entrants and, as with previous competitions, the entries were a mixture of unabbreviated and abbreviated texts. The winner, Ben Ziman-Bright, wrote conventionally:

*The wet rustle of rain  
can dampen today. Your text  
buoys me above oil-rainbow puddles  
like a paper boat, so that even  
soaked to the skin  
I am grinning.*

The runner-up did not:

*O hart tht sorz  
My luv adorz  
He mAks me liv  
He mAks me giv  
Myslf 2 him  
As my luv porz*

But what is significant about the runner-up is not so much the style as the person who produced it. She was Eileen Bridge, a grandmother aged 68. She is not alone. The oldest texter I know is 86.

The length constraint in text-poetry fosters economy of expression in much the same way as other tightly constrained forms of poetry do, such as the Japanese haiku or the Welsh englyn. To say that a poem must be written within 160 characters at first seems just as pointless as to say that a poem must be written in three lines of five, seven and five syllables. But put such a discipline into the hands of a master, and







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the result can be poetic magic. Of course, SMS poetry has some way to go before it can match the haiku tradition; but then, haikus have had a head-start of several hundred years.

Text messaging becomes even more interesting when we adopt a multilingual perspective. It was difficult obtaining examples of text message abbreviations in other languages, chiefly because young people around the world use so many English forms, a reflection of the "cool" status of the English language. Textisms such as "lol", "u", "brb" ("be right back"), and "ily" ("i love you") turn up everywhere.

English letters turn up in languages that don't routinely use them, such as *ke* for *che* ("what") and *anke* for *anche* ("also") in Italian. Also common is the replacement of parts of a word by the equivalent English abbreviations, as in Dutch "2m" for "tomorrow" (*morgen*) and "2d" for "today" (*vandaag*). More complex code mixing can be seen in German "mbsseg" for "mail back so schnell es geht" ("...as fast as you can").

But with persistence it is possible to collect a corpus of textisms in languages other than English. And the result is clear: all the languages I've analysed do the same sort of thing as English does. The logogram equivalents to the English "2day" and "b4" can be seen in the German use of *acht* in *gn8* (for *gute Nacht*; "good night"), Spanish use of *dos* in *sl2* (for *saludos*; "greetings") and French use of *sept* in *k7* (for *cassette*; "cassette"). A more complex sequence can be seen in the French *koi29* (for *quoi de neuf*; "what's new"). The Japanese 39 is more subtle:

the combination of *san* (3) and *kyu* (9) produces a sequence that sounds like the English "thank-you", and is used thus by Japanese texters.

The abbreviated equivalents of English "ily" and "msg" can be seen in the Spanish *tq* (*te quiero*; "I love you"), French *stp* (*si'il te plait*; "please") and German *aws* (*auf*

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*wiedersehen*; "goodbye"). There seem to be some language-specific tendencies, though in the absence of corpus-based frequency counts it is difficult to be sure. Italian, for example, seems to avoid end vowels, as seen in *sl* for *solo* ("only") and *smp* for *sempre* ("always"). By contrast, Spanish favours end vowels, as in *nka* for *nunca* ("never") and *qndo* for *cuando* ("when"). German has a penchant for pronounceable words, as in *bihoba* for *bis hoffentlich bald* ("see you soon, hopefully") and *tabu* for *tausend Bussis* ("thousand kisses").

The most noticeable feature in non-English texting is the universal trend to drop diacritics. So we find Czech *č*, *ě*, *š* and *ž* appearing as "c", "e", "s" and "z", and the tilde disappearing or being replaced in

#### FROM TELEGRAMS TO TEXTS

*Texting is not confined to the young; many older people enjoy sending messages on their mobile phones (left). The furore surrounding texting is nothing new; when telegrams (far left) were invented there were fears they would have a negative impact on language*

Portuguese, so that *não* becomes *nao* or *naom* (I have the impression that the former is European and the latter Brazilian). The glottal stop in romanised Arabic uses a numeral whose shape echoes that of the Arabic letter, so *insha'llah* ("God willing") becomes *insha2llah* (although it is normally abbreviated to *isa*).

When I researched my book *Txtng: The Gr8 Db8*, I tried to find examples from as many languages as possible, and ended up with reasonable samples from 11 languages. I would have liked to use more, but it was extremely difficult to find the data. It is surprising how reluctant people are to share their text messages with an inquiring linguist. People are remarkably proprietorial. That, I suspect, is why so little material on texting is publicly available – a situation I hope will change. In the meantime, if you have the opportunity to compile a corpus of text messages, I hope you will do so, for it is valuable data. And who knows how long the phenomenon will last? Texting may still be with us in 50 years. Alternatively, it might by then seem as archaic as the hieroglyphic.

Some people dislike texting. Some are bemused by it. Some love it. I am fascinated by it, for it is the latest manifestation of the human ability to be linguistically creative and to adapt language to suit the demands of diverse settings. In texting, what we are seeing, in a small way, is language in evolution.

*This is a version of the Threlford Memorial Lecture 2008, delivered by David Crystal in September. His Txtng: The Gr8 Db8 was published in July by Oxford University Press.*