

THE UNBELIEVABLE ABBREVIATRON



YOU WON'T BELIEVE
YOUR EYES AS THIS MYSTIC
MACHINE MAGICALLY WRITES
TWICE AS MUCH IN HALF THE TIME!

David Crystal—linguist, writer, lecturer and Honorary Professor of Linguistics at the University of Wales, Bangor—dials in on whether “text-speak” and the language of online communication is really undermining the English language.

HOW DOES
IT DO IT?!



About 30% of English language teachers surveyed thought that “text-speak” is having a negative impact on the quality of how learners communicate in English.

“Contrary to critics’ claims, the research showed that there was a positive correlation between the ability to text using abbreviations and the ability to spell. The better you are at texting, the better you are at spelling!”

THE RISE OF THE ABBREVATRON

Once upon a time, before the Great Abbrevatron came among us, everything that we knew about language was much clearer. There was spoken language, there was written language, and everyone knew which was which. Then along came the Internet, and **everything that we thought we knew about the way the English language worked in speech or in writing had to be reinterpreted**. All of the old certainties about usage, frequency, context and style had to be rethought with the emergence of electronic communication. One big question that the Internet brought with it was, “Is this an acceptable evolution of language or a bastardisation of it?” Many people had a kneejerk reaction and assumed the latter. Were they right? To really answer the question, we first need to consider how the language of online communication has evolved.

Back in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when people first started visiting chat rooms, texting and sending emails, they also started to abbreviate in ways that they hadn’t done before. Essentially, they began to use a written medium as a way of expressing themselves in speech. The informal, loosely constructed sentences and the colloquial vocabulary common in speech suddenly appeared as writing on the screen, and this looked rather odd to some people. As with many new things, it was technology geeks who started this trend, breaking the rules by writing things such as “c u l8ter” and other shortened forms of language.

Many new abbreviations were the result of practical constraints. Originally, electronic messages had to be very short. With the rise of mobile phone-based messaging in particular, the screen size created a serious space constraint in terms of how much you could write. Add to this a financial constraint (you often had to pay by the character), and the result was a system of communication where it made sense to abbreviate as much as possible. Although some of these constraints have gone away, others remain. Twitter, for example, still requires that you use no more than 140 characters in a tweet.

A more general reason for the rise of abbreviations is that they showed that someone was an Internet insider and “one of the gang.” As a general rule, whether it’s a group of journalists, doctors, lawyers, students or Internet enthusiasts, people tend to develop a specific style of communication, a “slang” that is unique to that group. In fact, there are differences in Internet slang across the various mediums—chat rooms, texting, blogs and social media—all have their own slang and unique (and constantly evolving) ways of framing communication. Blogs are particularly interesting in this regard because they actually have very few constraints and exhibit a more relaxed and “naked” use of language and personal style without much need for abbreviation of any kind.



WHY THE FUSS?

Change is difficult for some people, and because language is such a pervasive and integral part of our lives, people with a conservative mindset often show a great reluctance to accept changes in this area. Despite the fact that **some of the abbreviations used online have been in the language for centuries** (the phrase “IOU” has been around for 200 years!), some people found (and still find) their use difficult to swallow. Given how rapidly technology has changed the linguistic landscape, this is probably not a surprising reaction. However, the negative reaction goes beyond taking exception to spelling and abbreviations. Online communication seems to threaten all aspects of language, including vocabulary, punctuation, capitalisation and all of the other traditional and formal rules of grammar and diction. To listen to some of the prophets of doom, the very fabric of civilisation is at risk from the Most Terrible Abbrevatron!

A RESPONSE TO THE NAYSAYERS

Because of this alleged threat, in the early 2000s linguists like myself started analysing what was actually going on with regard to English online. In fact, it turned out that the innovations of the Internet were not nearly as dramatic as the critics had expected or believed! People had noticed some anomalies and novelties, and then mistakenly assumed that the entire Internet was like this. This turned out not to be the case at all, and the research debunked many of these myths about the use of English on the Internet. Because these myths still persist today, it is worthwhile repeating some of the more significant findings:

- **Abbreviating in texts is exaggerated** When people actually started to collect a corpus of abbreviations from the Internet, they found that only about 10% of the words in text messages were being abbreviated.
- **Abbreviations are nothing new** The researchers also found that most of these abbreviations were not invented by the (mostly) young texters. A few were new, such as LOL (Laughing Out Loud), but the use of “u” for you, “c” for see and the number 8 as a syllable in “later” had actually been in the language for a century or more. Lewis Carroll, for example, often used these abbreviations in his letter writing, and even Queen Victoria used to play shortened-form word games with her children and grandchildren.
- **Spelling skills aren’t declining** Contrary to critics’ claims, the research showed that there was a positive correlation between the ability to text using abbreviations and the ability to spell. The better you are at texting, the better you are at spelling. After all, in order to abbreviate a text message, you have to know which letters to abbreviate! So it turned out that text messaging is good for you after all. Also, literacy is a matter of practice, and the ubiquity of text messaging and the Internet means that young people are reading and writing more than they ever used to. In this sense, rather than dumbing down our children, the dreaded Abbrevatron is actually helping them to learn!

- **Informal texting doesn't affect classwork** There's simply no evidence to suggest that students are taking this informal style of text writing into their more formal work at school in any widespread or threatening way. On the contrary, students generally know the difference between formal and informal writing and are intelligent enough to be aware that they would be marked down for using abbreviations in their coursework. There's also evidence to suggest that as they get older, young people actually start to use abbreviations less (perhaps partly because their parents have also started to use them, which makes it less cool!).

WE'RE ALL ABBREVIATRONS NOW

Because it has so much variety and is evolving all the time, **it is dangerous to make generalisations about language on the Internet**, especially when it comes to assigning certain types of language to specific groups. Individuals within different demographic groups may adopt new technology platforms at different times. Adults were the original users of Twitter, but it has gradually become more popular with younger people. Conversely, Facebook started off as a very young person's platform, but then skewed older as time went by. The increasing age variation on the Internet has translated into a greater diversity in styles, and this heterogeneity has made it even more difficult to stereotype a specific language style in any particular Internet-based medium. However, it's also important to point out that **it's not the case that anything goes on the Internet**. Some of the rules governing usage in chat rooms and other forums are in fact just as strict as the rules we would traditionally teach; they just may not be standard English in the traditional sense.

THE IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

The Internet is here to stay, and for teachers of English as a second language, **it is absolutely essential to build into syllabuses a strong element of Internet activity**, as this reflects the real world that students will grow up in and will need to navigate. For these students, the screen is going to be a central part of their lives, and if you can't beat them, then you have to join them. There's absolutely no point in a teacher trying to ignore the Abbrevatron in the room!

In this context, teachers must keep in mind that it is futile to limit students' awareness to the grammatical rules, types of vocabulary, spelling and punctuation they are familiar with in traditional standard English because students will spend a lot of time online and will always find people who are not following a particular rule. It's important not to exaggerate: The vast majority of the language we see online is exactly the same as we saw in pre-Internet days. But the minority variations are nonetheless there and are increasing. Also, it won't just be kids "breaking" these rules—students will find well-educated adults from different backgrounds who speak different (but still correct) "versions" of English using language that strays from the rules that have been taught in class. Of course, students will still need to pay attention to the constraints of the examination system and everything else that they have to be aware of in order to get their qualifications, but at the same time **it will be very beneficial for them to develop a sense of the variety of language out there**.

Finally, for teachers, as a result of the Internet, **there's also now a big difference between teaching language production and teaching language comprehension.** As far as production is concerned, not much has changed—a student who is taught British English in class will likely continue to speak and write that way. However, regarding listening comprehension and reading comprehension, everything has changed in terms of the diversity that one needs to understand in order to interact successfully with the modern world.

THE UNBELIEVABLE ABBREVIATRON IN BRIEF

The nefarious effects of the internet are not nearly as dramatic as the critics had expected or believed! Because it has so much variety and is evolving all the time, it is dangerous to make generalisations about language online. The internet is here to stay, and for teachers of English as a second language, it is absolutely essential to build into syllabuses a strong element of Internet activity, as this reflects the real world that students will grow up in and will need to navigate.