

TXT, NE1? [published as The joy of text. *New Statesman*, Supplement on 'Our Mobile Future', 15 September, 16-17]

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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. And with mobile phones, where the small-screen technology is so constraining, the effects have generated one of the most idiosyncratic varieties in the history of language. I call it Textspeak.

Its chief characteristic is rebus abbreviation - forms made out of a combination of letters, letters representing syllables, and logograms (such as & and numerals), as seen in *NE1*, *2day*, *B4*, and *l8r* ('later'). Such forms are by no means restricted to Textspeak; they turn up in other electronic domains, such as e-mails and chatgroups. Indeed, rebuses have a much longer linguistic history. The Victorians played games with them, and children's Christmas annuals have long contained puzzles using them. But in Textspeak something more radical has taken place.

The nature of telephony, plus the on-screen limitation to 160 characters, has motivated a much more wide-ranging and innovative set of conventions. Textspeak has its own range of direct-address items, such as *F2T* ('free to talk?'), *PCM* ('please call me'), *MMYT* ('Mail me your thoughts'), and *RUOK* ('are you OK?'). Multi-word sentences and response sequences can be used, reduced to a sequence of initial letters. Typical examples are *SWDYT* ('So what do you think?'), *BCBC* ('Beggars can't be choosers'), *BTDT* ('Been there, done that'), *YYSSWW* ('Yeah, yeah, sure, sure, whatever'), and *HHOJ* ('Ha, ha, only joking'). Even more ingenious coded abbreviations have been devised, especially among those for whom argot is a desirable safeguard against unwelcome surveillance.

Users seem to be aware of the high information value of consonants as opposed to vowels, judging by such vowel-less items as *XLNT* ['excellent']. And there is ergonomic value in abbreviation, too, given that the number of key-strokes saved bears a direct relationship to time and energy - and (depending on your service-provider) maybe even the eventual size of your telephone bill. In a creation such as *ru2cnmel8r* ('Are you two seeing me later?'), the full form uses over twice as many key-strokes.

In 2002 I compiled a text-messaging dictionary, and - ignoring the difference between upper-case and lower-case usage - collected about 500 Textspeak abbreviations. However, only a small number of these actually turn out to be in regular use. The vast majority are there just to be 'clever', illustrating the possibilities of language play. *ROTFL* ('rolling on the floor laughing') may have had some use at the outset, but its later developments (such as *ROTFLMAO* and *ROTFLMAOWTIME* - 'rolling on the floor laughing my ass off ... with tears in my eyes') illustrate idiosyncratic communicative one-upmanship rather than genuine community usage. And I doubt whether many texters actually use such creations as *LSHMBB* ('laughing so hard my belly is bouncing').

The method isn't without its difficulties. Leaving out letters always runs the risk of ambiguity. From the receiver's point of view, a single sequence can have more than one meaning: *BN* - 'been' or 'being', *CID* - 'consider it done' or 'crying in disgrace', *CYA* - 'see you' or 'cover your ass', *N* - 'and' or 'no', *Y* - 'why' or 'yes'. If a message of transmitted love gets the reply *LOL*, it is up to you to decide whether the response was 'laughing out loud' or 'lots of love'. And you have to know your recipient before you decode *GBH*, which can be either a 'great big hug' or 'grievous bodily harm'. There are similar ambiguities in the Textspeak of other languages.

From the sender's point of view, there are also choices to be made. 'Good to see you' can be *GTCY*, *GTSY*, *G2CY*, or *G2SY*; 'I love you' can be *ILU*, *ILUVY*, or *ILY*; 'thanks' can be *THNX*, *THX*, *TX*, or *TNX*. I found a remarkable eight variants for 'talk to you later': *TTUL*, *TTUL8R*, *TTYL*, *TTYL8R*, *T2UL*, *T2UL8R*, *T2YL*, and *T2YL8R*, and there are probably others. Even more exist for 'what's up?' - depending on how many U's you bother to send: *WASSUP*, *SUP?*, *WU?*, *WSU?*, *WSUU?*, *WSUUU?*, etc. Doubtless text-messaging dialects are already evolving.

What is not clear is just how limiting this technology is, as a messaging system. There must be a serious limit to the amount of information which can be conveyed using abbreviation, and a real risk of ambiguity as soon as people try to go beyond a stock set of social phrases. The set of possible messages is really very small, and only a few abbreviations - such as *C* ('see'), *B* ('be'), *2* ('to, too, two'), *4* ('for, four, -fore'), and *U* ('you') - can be used in lots of sentences.

The constraints will become increasingly apparent as people try to adapt the technology to grander designs, such as Internet access. While it is possible in principle to download Internet pages onto our mobile phone screen or the display of our personal digital assistant, what do we lose, informationally speaking, when a graphically elaborate text is reduced to such a scale? What kind of

linguistic 'translation' needs to take place in order to ensure that the sentence structures used on the small screen are manageable and intelligible? It seems inevitable that sentence length will tend to be short, and that complex sentence structure will be avoided.

Will Textspeak have an effect on the language as a whole? This is unlikely. The whole point of the style is to suit a particular technology where space is at a premium; and when that constraint is dropped, abbreviated language no longer has any purpose. Its 'cool' associations amongst young (or at least, young-minded) people will allow some of its idiosyncrasy to achieve a use elsewhere, and there are occasional reports of Textspeak creeping into other forms of writing, such as school essays. But these are minor trends, part of the novelty of the medium. They can be controlled as part of the task of developing in children a sense of linguistic appropriateness - in the UK, one of the basic principles behind the National Curriculum in English.

Some people object to Textspeak. Some are bemused by 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 Textspeak, we are seeing, in a small way, language in evolution.