

The Rise of Texts

by Coleman Gay

“OMG! I nd 2 go.”

“K ttyl but let’s deff hang out l8er.”

“Cnt w8 c ya thn.”

“YAyy.”

Text message conversations like the one above have countless conservative critics screaming; they say texting is diminishing the English language and fostering a generation of adults who are illiterate and incapable of writing sensibly. John Humphrys, a vehement anti-text commentator, wrote that texters are “vandals who are doing to our language what Genghis Khan did to his neighbors 800 years ago. They are destroying it: pillaging our punctuation; savaging our sentences; raping our vocabulary. And they must be stopped” (Humphrys). While Humphrys demonstrates his skill with alliteration in this quotation, he also demonstrates his ignorance of the facts. When truly examined, this revolution of texting—what people like Humphrys like to call “slanguage” and “digital virus”—is not bringing about a collapse in language. Contrary to popular belief, the purportedly radical and harmful abbreviations in texts are not dangerous. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that frequent texters have a *better* grasp of language than less frequent texters, and are even *developing* their linguistic knowledge through texting.

Change in language is unstoppable; language is like an organism, constantly evolving to meet the demands and requirements of the era. If a language did not evolve, it would soon be rendered obsolete, and would no longer be the most effective form of communication. However, there are always some dissenters who seem to think these inherent changes are alarming. People

have argued for centuries that new technology would be disastrous for language: the invention of the telegraph, telephone and radio were all bemoaned by linguistic conservatives (Crystal).

Contrary to purists' beliefs, change in language is not only irresistible, but necessary.

It would be a fallacy to define texting as a new, unforeseen virus as Humphrys does. There was nothing rapid about the popularization of texting; it certainly didn't develop overnight. David Crystal, an honorary professor of linguistics at Bangor University, states that point to point short message service (SMS), or "texting," was first discussed by mobile communication networks in the mid-1980s. In the early 1990s, texting finally became a reality—users were limited to 20 characters per text. Although the technology was out there, Crystal says, both the number of users and the number of texts sent per month were still low. In 1995, the average number of texts sent per month stood at a mere 0.4. Even by 2000, that number had only crawled to a measly 35 (Crystal). That number of average texts sent per month has continued to steadily rise, and today, for teens, stands at around 2,270 ("Americans Teens Sent"). Clearly, texting is not some unprecedented form of communication that materialized out of nowhere to plague our language. Text messaging is a form of communication that has been around for approximately two decades; the majority of our society has been socialized to the text and is aware of how to use it.

Abbreviation is another element of texting that, contrary to critics such as Humphrys, also hasn't taken anyone by surprise. If we take a look back through history, people have been abbreviating since language was invented (Crystal). When some started to write these abbreviations down, there were critics that vociferously announced their displeasure; this seems to be a common theme surrounding language change. In 1711, English essayist and poet Joseph Addison complained about the way words were being "miserably curtailed" through the use of

abbreviations. Anglo-Irish satirist Jonathan Swift went even further, labeling abbreviations as a “barbarous custom” (Crystal). Yet countless abbreviations, such as exam, vet, fridge, cox and bus, have been assimilated into the English language as words. Many English speakers probably do not know if these words were originally abbreviations. The point is that abbreviation is natural. Even in 1618 people were abbreviating “I owe you” as IOU (Crystal). No one, no matter how extensively history is searched, wants to create more work for themselves. Why write “three” when you could hastily scrawl “3?” Similarly, why type “talk to you later” when you could type “ttyl?” It simply makes more sense to shorten the time spent on spelling and grammar in order to increase the amount written or typed. It is clear that texting has not brought about the advent of abbreviation; rather, it is quite possible that abbreviation has brought about texting, in making it easier for texters to write concise, quick messages. The point of a text message is to deliver a brief message, not an essay—and abbreviations certainly aid in that regard.

Abbreviation has been around for centuries, and has not proved damaging or deleterious to language. In fact, abbreviations have time and again been incorporated into the vernacular in an effort to improve and modernize language.

Next, linguistic conservatives would voice the argument that abbreviations in texting aren’t the same as the abbreviations of previous times. They would say that people sacrifice the grammatical correctness of the sentence by abbreviating for expediency. This argument, however, is again flawed. Texting is a means of communication; texters know that the texts they send need to be comprehensible. Other people need to be able to decipher them - otherwise the money spent on the text would go to waste. As a result, the abbreviations most commonly used in texts are of the peripheral variety, abbreviations of words such as “you” and “be” (Crystal). Therefore, text abbreviations of today are not at all dissimilar to those of the past; only a handful

of words are abbreviated in a person's entire wordbank. The abbreviations that do appear are either commonly known or simple to figure out.

The second part of anti-texters' argument, that abbreviation will lead to illiteracy, is again downright false. It takes an extremely literate person to be able to know when and how to use abbreviations. And while naysayers might contend that children would grow up only capable of communicating via these abbreviations, this, again, is false. If a child didn't already know the basics of forming sentences and writing with grammar, he wouldn't be able to understand or apply the abbreviations. Crystal, in an excerpt from his book *Txtng: The Gr8 Db8*, provides confirmation:

Children could not be good at texting if they had not already developed considerable literacy awareness. Before you can write and play with abbreviated forms, you need to have a sense of how the sounds of your language relate to the letters. You need to know that there are such things as alternative spellings. If you are aware that your texting behaviour is different, you must have already intuited that there is such a thing as a standard. If you are using such abbreviations as lol and brb ("be right back"), you must have developed a sensitivity to the communicative needs of your textees. (Crystal)

As Crystal affirms, if a person uses abbreviations in texting, he is not only literate, but actually has a good grasp of language in general because he has to understand the language he's abbreviating.

However, *do* texts even have that many abbreviations in them? Is the idea that texts are riddled with these alleged "linguistic afflictions" even accurate? A glance at the statistics suggests that the critics who are making texting out to be crammed with abbreviations are simply

wrong. Research has refuted the initial belief that text messages contained predominately abbreviations. In one American study, less than 20% of the text messages observed had any more than 3 abbreviations. In a Norwegian study, that number was even lower—only 6% of messages had more than 3 abbreviations (Crystal). These statistics dispel the common claim that text messages are rife with abbreviations; in truth, people tend to use correct spelling and grammar in text messages most of the time.

Even though the majority of people do not use abbreviations in their daily texts, extensive research has shown that using abbreviations in texts improves literacy. That's right: texting with abbreviations actually *improves* literacy. A recent study by experts at Coventry University in the UK has “found strong positive links between the use of text language and the skills underlying success in Standard English in pre-teenage children” (Crystal). The more abbreviations the children used in their text messages, the higher they scored on reading and vocabulary aptitude tests. Also, interestingly enough, the age at which they received their first phone correlates with their aptitude test grades: the younger the child received the phone, the higher the grade (Crystal). Dr. Beverly Plester, a professor conducting the research at Coventry University, stated: “so far, our research has suggested that there is no evidence to link a poor ability in standard English to those children who send text messages. In fact, the children who were the best at using ‘textisms’ were also found to be the better spellers and writers” (“Children, Texts, and English”). The word “textism” simply refers to well-known abbreviations used in texting. Plester even goes on to say: “We are interested in discovering whether texting could be used positively to increase phonetic awareness in less able children, and perhaps increase their language skills, in a fun yet educational way” (“Children, Texts, and English”). Not only has the notion that texting is dangerous been disproved, but it has been replaced with the hope that texting could be used

“positively to increase phonetic awareness” (“Children, Texts, and English”). Texting has the potential be a teaching mechanism, not a destructive force.

“One of the joys of the English language and one of the reasons it has been so successful in spreading across the globe is that it is infinitely adaptable. But texting and ‘netspeak’ are effectively different languages” (Humphrys). Unfortunately, Humphrys is once more in the wrong. As the facts have shown, the abbreviations found in text language are not “effectively different languages.” In fact, the type of abbreviation found in texts is no different from the type of abbreviation found in 17th century journals. People have always done it. We abbreviate to save time: it’s natural. Sometimes these abbreviations become popular and find their way into dictionaries; thus, language evolves. Texting is not destroying language, nor is it putting language in grave danger as critics such as Humphrys contend. Instead, it is aiding language on its very natural and necessary progression, and even serving to improve linguistic skills as well.

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