Texting

David Crystal

Introduction by Jill and Charles Hadfield (series editors)

Texting is a startling modern phenomenon, one that 'has gripped the imagination of the UK in a very short space of time and already has its own language, its own etiquette and its own humour' (Baker 2002). Text messaging was never originally envisioned as a means of communication between individuals, certainly not one that would rival or replace voice messages. It was originally conceived as having commercial use, or possibly as a service for mobile phones to signal the arrival of a voicemail message. The first text message was sent in December 1992. The message, which seems today strangely unabbreviated, read 'Merry Christmas'. The service gradually became available commercially during the 1990s. Between then and now its huge surge in popularity has taken everyone by surprise. Recent text use in the UK alone has averaged over 4 billion messages a month with an annual total of around 45 billion messages (source: Mobile Data Association). Textspeak is largely the language of the young—and a lively controversy has sprung up around its use—mainly from the older generation who seek variously to analyse, interpret, or decry its use. John Sutherland, for example, finds the language of texting, 'thin and unimaginative . . . mask[ing] dyslexia, poor spelling and mental laziness', and concludes it is 'penmanship for illiterates' (Sutherland 2002) while Crispin Thurlow finds it 'communicatively adept' having 'linguistic creativity' and a 'robust sense of play' (Thurlow 2005).

Our commentator on the language of text messaging needs no introduction. Professor David Crystal is an eminent linguist and the author of over 100 books on language. A new book *Txting: the Gr8 Db8* will be published by Oxford University Press this year. He comments below on two poems by the text poet Norman Silver.

The texts
Txt commndmnts Langwij by Norman Silver

txt commndmnts

1   u shall luv ur mobil fone with all ur hart
2   u & ur fone shall neva b   apart
3   u shall nt lust aftr ur neibrs fone nor thiev
4   u shall b prepard @ 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 theyr 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 ninglish dictnry

Norman Silver: *Laugh Out Loud :-D txt café*. 2006.

langwij
langwij
is hi-ly infectious

children
the world ova
catch it
from parence
by word of mouth

the yung
r specially vulnerable
so care
shud b taken how langwij
is spread

symptoms include acute
goo-goo
& the equally serious ga-ga

if NE child
is infected with langwij
give em
3 Tspoons of txt
b4 bedtime
& ½ a tablet of verse
after every meal

Norman Silver: *Age, Sex, Location txt café*. 2006.

Language notes	&	and
	@	at
	2	to
	a ninglish	an English
	abbrevi8	abbreviate
	aftr	after
	ast*r*sks	asterisks
	b	be
	b4	before
	capitls	capitals
	cn	can
	conversatns	conversations
	dictnry	dictionary
	em	them
	emergncy	emergency

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equllay	equally
exc!matns	exclamations
face2face	face-to-face
fone	phone
hart	heart
hi-ly	highly
insted	instead
langwij	language
LOL	laughing out loud
luv	love
mobil	mobile
msg	message
NE	any
neibrs	neighbour's
neva	never
nt	not
othr	other
ova	over
parence	parents
prepard	prepared
r	are
recv	receive
rite	write
sed	said
shud	should
sum1	someone
theyr	they're
thiev	thieve
Tspoons	teaspoons
tXt, txt	text
u	you
ur	your
xept	except
yung	young

Commentary   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.

Textspeak is characterized by its distinctive graphology. Its chief feature is rebus abbreviation. Words are formed in which letters represent syllables, as seen in 'b', 'b4', 'NE', 'r', 'Tspoons', 'u', 'ur', 'xcept'. Use is made of logograms, such as numerals and symbols, as seen in '&', '@', '2', 'abbrevi8', 'b4', 'face2face', and 'sum1'. 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.

Such forms are by no means restricted to Textspeak; they turn up in other electronic domains, such as emails, chatgroups, and blogs. 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. The only type of traditional rebus that does not appear in Textspeak is the use of pictures – such as a bee representing the word 'be'. 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. 'LOL' is used in the poem, and is explained in the title of the book in which it appears; other examples are 'SWDYT' ('So what do you think?'), 'BTDT' ('Been there, done that'), and 'YYSSWW' ('Yeah, yeah, sure, sure, whatever'). Even more ingenious coded abbreviations have been devised, especially among those for whom argot is a desirable safeguard against unwelcome surveillance.

Texters seem to be aware of the high information value of consonants as opposed to vowels. It is fairly unusual to lose consonants, unless the words are likely to be easily recognized, as in the case of 'hi-ly' and 'rite'. But there are lots of instances where one vowel is dropped ('aftr', 'capitls', 'cn', 'emergncy', 'hart', 'insted', 'mobil', 'nt', 'othr', 'prepard', 'theyr', 'thiev', 'txt', 'yung'), or two ('conversatns'), or three ('dictnry'), or four ('recv'). 'Neibrs' is an interesting example, losing two consonants and two vowels (only one in American English, of course). 'Msg' loses three vowels and one consonant. 'Equllay' seems to be doing something different—making a word look strange for its own sake (the standard spelling contains the same letters, 'equally'). 'A ninglish' is also different: by moving the position of the word-break, the spelling suggests a non-standard pronunciation—though in fact running the 'n' into the 'e' of English is a perfectly standard practice.

Texters also seem to be well aware of the low information value of punctuation marks. There is no sentence punctuation at all in the poems, with the exception of the double exclamation-mark in the sixth commandment, and apostrophes are dropped in 'neibrs' and 'theyr'. On the

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other hand, certain punctuation marks are given new functions, being used ludically in 'ast*r*sks' and 'exc!matns', and there is a contrastive use of space (in the second commandment), type-size (in the fifth and seventh), and colour ('hart' in the first and 'XEPT IN DIRE EMERGNCY +' in the ninth are printed in red). Hyphens are sometimes respected (three uses in the 'langwij' poem). Capital letters are conspicuous by their absence at the beginning of sentences, but are often used for effect—in the ninth commandment, for example, and also in some of the acronyms (such as 'LOL').

Why abbreviate? There is ergonomic value in abbreviation, given that the number of key-strokes saved bears a direct relationship to time and energy – and formerly (depending on your service-provider) 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 2004 I published *A Glossary of Textspeak and Netspeak*, 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 it means 'laughing out loud' or 'lots of love'. It could make a big difference to an emerging relationship. 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.

No texter is entirely consistent, and no two texters use identical conventions. While a few abbreviations are widely (possibly universally) used, such as 'txt' and 'msg', others are not. I have seen texters write 'shl' or 'shll' for shall', but Silver doesn't. Some would write 'consult' as 'cnsult' or 'cnslt'. The seventh

commandment is only partly respected, in these poems: 'em', 'fone', 'langwij', 'luv', 'parence', 'sed', and 'shud' are indeed quasi-phonetic representations of the way these words are pronounced, presumably in Silver's accent. (That the spelling reflects a particular accent is clear from such words as 'neva' and 'ova', where there is no 'r'. A West-Country speaker would presumably not want to leave the 'r' out—nor, for that matter, would most Americans.) But other words are not given a phonetic form. The full standard English spelling given to 'infectious', 'children', 'vulnerable', 'symptoms', 'serious', and so on indicates that we are dealing here with a literary genre, not a real text situation at all.

To my mind, this is one of the most interesting things about the way texting has evolved. It is a new genre. It began to be used in poetry very early on, in *The Guardian*'s text-messaging poetry competitions. It was only a matter of time before a texting poet arrived on the scene, and a website (www.txtcafe.com) where doubtless the genre will be fully exploited and explored as time goes by. Text-message stories—even novels—are also already being circulated.

The Silver poems illustrate the strengths of texting, and also its limitations. The more unusual the word, the more it needs to be spelt out in full. 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.

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. The genre could gain strength from its literary applications, but it is too soon to say whether these have a long-term future.

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—and young human ability, at that—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.

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