

Can u txt?

Text A

John Sutherland asks what texting is doing to the English language – and finds it all a bit :-)

As a dialect, text (“textese”) is thin and – compared, say, to Californian personalised licence plates – unimaginative. It is bleak, bald, sad shorthand. Drab shrinktalk. This, for example, might be a pick-up between a contemporary Romeo and Juliet:

Rom: RUF21? [Are you free to talk?]

Jul: OK [Make your move]

Rom: Bf? [Do you have a boyfriend?]

Jul: No [Liar]

Rom: CUA3 [I’ll see you, any time, any place, anywhere]

Jul: @club? [At the club?]

Rom: OK [Thinks, I’m on, “gr8 6 Znite” – great sex tonight!]

The dialect has a few hieroglyphs (codes comprehensible only to initiates) and a range of face symbols. Its “little language” (as Swift called his private letter-talk to Stella) awaits its Harold Pinter (the only dramatist I can think of who might be interested). Linguistically it’s all pig’s ear.

Why then has texting taken off so explosively? And why here? Wood-headed educationists will point out that it’s a forgiving system: it masks dyslexia, poor spelling and mental laziness. Texting is penmanship for illiterates. Technologically, texting is the result of cordless phone meets computer. Smarter gizmos are in the pipeline. If you don’t text now, it’s not worth learning: in a couple of years voice recognition systems will kick in. Human beings will use any medium to communicate and to make records. We can go back to the Incan “quipa”



ner, left, the melancholy prince of Denmark: “2B or 2b (not) =?” It would, I suppose, be possible to text the whole of Hamlet – though it’s hard to imagine Sir Laurence rolling his thespian chops round it. Unpoetic it may be, but texting is quick. And hurry sickness is the epidemic of our times. None of the dictionaries I have looked at has caught up with the verb “to text”. Mobile phone users have, however. There are, it is estimated, 1m text messages transmitted every hour in the UK. And rising.

It’s nice to know that the word “text”, etymologically (as those slow-coach dictionaries tell us) originates in the Latin for “tissue”. It’s writing on Kleenex. One blow, then throw. Snot-talk, if one wants to get nasty about it. Texting is a tightly circumscribed short message service (SMS) range-bound to 160 characters, including spaces. Unlike the long-ago telegrams which charged by the word (max 10 letters: hence “Comquick Allover MumDad”), doubledacking doesn’t work. Abbreviation is the essence of texting.

Texting is predominantly a European practice in which the UK is the acknowledged world leader. America (conditioned into using the land line phone, without hurry, by free local calls) hasn’t picked texting up at all eagerly. They still think it’s good to talk. Sociologically, texting consolidates sub-communities (homebound women are currently the ground-breaking texters in the laggard US). Each subgroup will have its own identifying styles, codes and shibboleths (try texting that one). Over here the vanguard texting subgroup is the young and minimally educated.

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Turn over

Source: JOHN SUTHERLAND, *Cn u txt? (The Guardian)* 11 November 2002 © John Sutherland

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110 century, probably less than one-tenth of 1% of Europeans worked in scriptoria (writing shops). Now, thanks, more than three-quarters of the population (including children) have their personal scriptorium – and a delivery system to go with it. We are all scribes now. As Roger Fischer puts it in his *History of Writing*, “An ever increasing number of people are spending more hours per day using written – that is keyboard – language rather than spoken language. We have redefined the very meaning of ‘writing.’” You’re right, Roger. Let’s, for a year or two (max), call it *txing*.

110 (mnemonic string knots), Sumerian clay pots, medieval tally sticks. In my own lifetime I have seen, sadly, the decay of the lavatory wall dialect. Who remembers those classic scrawls: “A Happy Xmas to all my readers”, “You are holding the future of England in your hands”, “Please do not drop dog ends in the urinal as it makes them soggy and impossible to smoke”, and – following a line of arrows to the far corner of the latrine – “You are pissing from a quite extraordinary angle”. Alas, bog-Shakespeare has been flushed away by history.
105 What is most striking is the fact that writing (traditionally the “R” most thought to be under threat) is taking over from speech. Big time. In the 13th

Texting 'is no bar to literacy'

Lucy Ward, social affairs correspondent
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It's gr8 news 4 skools. Claims that the explosion in text messaging among children is eroding youngsters' literacy skills appear to be unfounded, according to research.

A study comparing the punctuation and spelling of 11- and 12-year-olds who use mobile phone text messaging with another group of non-texters conducting the same written tests found no significant differences between the two.

Both groups made some grammatical and spelling errors, and "text-speak" abbreviations and symbols did not find their way into the written English of youngsters used to texting.

According to the author of the research, the speech and language therapist Veena Raval, the findings reflect children's ability to "code switch", or move between modes of communication - a trend familiar to parents whose offspring slip effortlessly between playground slang and visit-the-grandparents politeness.

But the study did find that the pupils familiar with text messaging wrote significantly less when asked to describe a picture or an event than those who did not use mobiles, potentially fuelling concerns that the quality and expressiveness of children's writing could be at risk even if their spelling is not.

The study, conducted at the the department of communication and science at City University in London, comes amid growing concern in some quarters over the potentially damaging effects of new technologies on children's ability to communicate effectively using conventional means.

According to the mobile telecoms consultancy Mobile Youth, 700,000 (20%) of primary school children own mobile phones and the under-10s are the fastest-growing section of Britain's mobile phone market.

The leap in the popularity of mobiles and text messaging among children and teenagers over the past five years has prompted concern that pupils' literacy skills could suffer.

Texting puts a premium on speed and concision, leading to the creation of a host of abbreviations and acronyms incomprehensible to the untrained reader, together with symbols or "emojicons", such as smiley faces, to express emotions.

Chief examiners' reports on trends in public examinations have begun to note instances of texting language in exam scripts. Some cases - including a 13-year-old Scottish pupil who wrote an entire description of her summer holidays in text-speak - have provoked concern among some teachers.

But despite widespread speculation there is little research into the potential influence of texting on children's writing.

According to Mr Raval's small-scale study, which focused on 20 youngsters, children have developed an ability to switch between two forms of language when texting or writing standard English.

Pupils were given a spelling test and conducted two writing exercises designed to replicate situations where they might normally text, such as describing something they had done the previous day, held in formal classroom conditions.

Mr Raval said: "The fear that has been put across in the media is that children don't understand the need to code switch - that is, switch between standard English grammar for an exam or essay and what is acceptable when you are communicating on a social level. In fact, they are capable of that switch, just as bi- or tri-lingual children might speak English at school and a mother or father tongue at home."

While the text-experienced children wrote much less than those without mobiles, concision was not necessarily a bad thing, he argued. "Whether that is a positive or negative effect is up for debate. It depends on the situation or the subject studied. A science exam might require brief answers which might not be appropriate in a literature exam."

A spokesman for the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, which oversees public examinations, said the authority was interested in the research, and believed more investigation was necessary into the effect of texting on written communication.

It was important that children could communicate in a range of ways "depending on the communication channel they were using", he said.

A National Union of Teachers spokeswoman welcomed the research, saying abbreviation used in texting could even boost literacy skills by helping children to learn about how words divide into syllables.

SMS: A textbook case

Part of an essay written by a Scottish 13-year-old secondary school pupil - and its translation My smmr hols wr CWOT. B4, we used 2 go 2 NY 2C my bro, his GF & thr 3 :-@kds FTF. ILNY, its gr8. Bt my Ps wr so {-/ BC o 9/11 tht thay dcd 2 stay in SCO & spnd 2 wks up N. Up N, WUCIWUG -- 0. I ws vvv brd in MON. 0 bt baas & vvvvvvv.

My summer holidays were a complete waste of time. Before, we used to go to New York to see my brother, his girlfriend and their three screaming kids face to face. I love New York, it's a great place.

But my parents were so worried because of the terrorism attack on September 11 that they decided we would stay in Scotland and spend two weeks up north.

Up north, what you see is what you get - nothing.

I was extremely bored in the middle of nowhere. Nothing but sheep and mountains.