2.1 Technology and language change

Technology has had a huge influence on how the English language has changed over time. However we choose to define technology – as tools for communicating or as digital devices – it has influenced not only the language we use but how we use it. On a very simple level, technology has allowed us to move beyond face-to-face communication into forms that allow us to speak almost instantly to someone on the other side of the world, to 'write' on a screen and send those words to thousands of people instantaneously, and to move beyond the two dimensions of a sheet of paper into a world of interactive hyperlinks, online comments and pictures of Shiba Inu dogs captioned in strangely phrased English. Doge and LOL cat memes use deliberately odd English to create a voice for the animal in the picture and to be playful with language. What makes the language appear strange? (See Figure 2.1 for an example.)

Figure 2.1: Example of a LOL cat meme

Technology is one of the main influences on the ways in which language develops in the twenty-first century, bridging gaps between people but sometimes putting up walls between others. It can offer us new ways to use language while amplifying old problems and is at once optimistically democratic in its uses as well as being dangerously totalitarian. At the start of the twenty-first century, journalists were celebrating the potential of the internet to offer us unlimited access to news and views, giving a voice to the marginalised and voiceless, yet now we are deluged with 'fake news' and vile racist and misogynistic abuse.

Technology has also opened up fault lines between those who believe it can improve literacy and disseminate knowledge and those who see it as a force that dumbs down language and lowers attention spans.

One perspective that we will return to later is offered by Tom Chatfield:

> … many of the official intentions behind Standard English are already unofficially defunct. For the first time in history, we live in a culture not only of mass literacy (itself a relatively recent revolution), but of mass participation in written discourse. Online, reading and writing – which not so long ago were among the most costly and elite of human activities – are almost infinitely available at little or no cost. For better and for worse, we are no longer simply speakers of our own tongue: we are all becoming both authors and audiences. (Chatfield 2013: 3)

In this chapter, you will look at the ways in which technologies have influenced (and continue to influence) language, and the debates and arguments over the nature of those changes. As with the other chapters in this book, you will look at a range of different perspectives and will need to evaluate what you make of these ideas.

2.1.1 Writing technologies

All 'writing technologies', as linguist Dennis Baron refers to them, have caused some disquiet as they have developed.

> The World Wide Web wasn't the first innovation in communication to draw some initial scepticism. Writing itself was the target of one early critic. Plato warned that writing would weaken memory, but he was more concerned that written words – mere shadows of speech – couldn't adequately represent meaning. His objections paled as more and more people began to structure their lives around handwritten documents. (Baron 2009: x)

As Baron goes on to outline, the printing press was 'faulted for disrupting the natural, almost spiritual connection between the writer and the page' (2009: x), the typewriter was viewed as being too impersonal, too noisy and a bad influence on handwriting skills, while more recent technologies such as computers have been derided for 'speeding writing up to the point of recklessness, complicating it, trivializing it' and leading to too many people communicating about nothing.

Even the humble pencil was once viewed as a dangerous writing technology. Many of the arguments used by those on the prescriptive side of the debate have cropped up again and again for other technologies. Baron explains:

> Once people finally accepted the usefulness and authenticity of handwritten texts, or of words carved in stone, they balked at the new technology of printing, which threatened to both democratize reading and to depersonalize it. A few hundred years later, the typewriter upset our literary practices once again. It was bad enough that the clacking typewriter joined the equally noisy adding machine in the increasing mechanization that was permeating and, in the eyes of many, dehumanizing the modern

office of the early twentieth century. Typewriters also threatened to render handwriting obsolete. (Baron 2009: 14)

The mechanisation of writing technologies brought with it concerns about humans losing their jobs and humanity somehow being lost amid the machinery. Many of these concerns are echoed in contemporary articles about robots taking the place of humans in all walks of modern life, whether it's car assembly lines or paralegals at law firms. Language aside, technology on its own has the potential to cause concern and this is amplified when it is shown to affect language and perhaps shape our identities. Concerns have also been raised about people's (often young people's) ability to use older writing technologies, such as the pen. Some commentators have suggested that children are starting school unable to master the grip on a pen which children ten or twenty years ago would have done as second nature. Many of these worries echo the ones you will look at later in the section on texting.

2.1.2 Speaking technologies

Technology hasn't just affected how we write but also how we speak. The telephone (invented in the late nineteenth century) allowed people to communicate by speech over long distances (hence its etymology: *tele* = far and *phone* = sound). Early telephones – in fact almost all telephones up to perhaps the turn of the twenty-first century – bore no resemblance to the mobile devices almost 5 billion people now use around the world.

Most telephones were situated in offices, homes and telephone boxes, affecting how people in many developed countries worked, and telephones are widely credited as one of the great technological advancements of the last 150 years. Language use with telephones developed its own rituals and expectations. Are these still relevant to personal calls made and received on mobile phones?

- The person receiving the call would identify themselves or the phone number that had been called (e.g. 'Hello, Winterslow 446688, Terry Clayton speaking'.)
- The person making the call would identify themselves (e.g. 'Hello, it's Phil from the Haxby Bakehouse calling').
- The sign-off or farewell would often involve set phrases such as 'thank you', 'speak to you again soon' or 'all the best'.

The sociologist Emanuel Schegloff identified four distinct sequences in dyadic (two-way) telephone calls:

- **summons – answer:** for example, a phone ring and some kind of response is offered in answer

- **identification – recognition:** the participants in the call identify each other
- **greetings:** more interactional or social greetings are used
- **initial inquiries ('how are you?'):** opening questions and social interaction open up the topic for discussion. (Schegloff 1986)

Technology has affected much more than the vocabulary and grammar of spoken language, but also the discourse structure of turn-taking and even the social behaviour of many people. The ritualised exchanges of such calls became the norm for telephone users brought up with the 'landline' but all of that has changed with the advent of mobile telephony, caller display and personalised ringtones for individual contacts. And here is one of the reasons why some argue that technology is a problem: change frightens people. If you are brought up to view one form of behaviour as 'right' and then see that changing among younger generations, you might well feel that what they are doing is 'wrong'. And language is just another form of behaviour that is subject to these concerns.

ACTIVITY 2.1
Telephone use

Study all the different ways in which you, and those around you, use phones to speak to others.

- How many calls do you make (if any)?
- How long are these calls?
- What are the functions of these calls?
- How do these calls match Schegloff's outline?
- Are calls ever made on speakerphone or using FaceTime (or an equivalent app)?
- Does this vary depending on age and gender?
- Are there any types of phone use that you find annoying?

Consider as well, other forms of speaking technology such as radio and television. Not only have these media brought us new forms of language and allowed us to communicate to new and ever bigger audiences, but they have also shaped the ways in which we respond to the world, what we talk about and how we experience particular types of talk: the celebrity interview, the post-match chat and the straight-to-camera newsreader's delivery, for example. None of these would be as familiar to us if TV and radio had not been invented.

2.1.3 'Texting' technologies

One of the most interesting developments in technology has been the advent of what many call computer-mediated communication (CMC). Susan Herring (1996) refers to this as a form of 'communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of computers' (Herring 1996: 1). In essence, the computer (be it a PC, a laptop, a tablet or mobile device) sits in the middle, between the text producer(s) and the text receiver(s).

CMC blurs the lines between writing and speech and offers a new form of communication that allows language to take a visual form (read through the visual channel, as traditional writing would be) but offering many characteristics of the spoken mode (conversation-like turn-taking through near-instant exchange of messages, often ephemeral and largely social in function). CMC has often been referred to as 'texting' even when it is not associated with traditional SMS-style texts through a phone, and this broader term often encompasses forms such as online messaging, tweeting and messaging through apps such as Snapchat and WhatsApp.

While speech and writing have never been fixed binary opposites (think for example of messages written on a sticky note and put on the fridge door, quickly scribbled shopping lists and the complex rhetorical structures of politicians' speeches), CMC has made the continuum between them more interesting. Linguist Naomi Baron describes CMC as resembling:

> speech in that it was largely unedited; it contained many first- and second-person pronouns; it commonly used present tense and contractions; it was generally informal … At the same time, CMC looked like writing in that the medium was durable, and participants commonly used a wide range of vocabulary choices and complex syntax. (Baron 2008: 48)

Texting technologies have affected social behaviours including language. Many 'moral panics' – periods of raised media concern over the supposed ill-effects of a new phenomenon – have sprung up over texting. The issue of texting while driving had been on the front pages of many UK newspapers before legislation was passed to make it unlawful and texting while walking has led to concerns in the USA. Teachers regularly complain about students becoming distracted by their mobile devices in class and writers often spend too much time on Twitter when they should be finishing chapters of already-late books. Many concerns have been raised about the influence of texting on language skills and you will return to these later in the chapter.

ACTIVITY 2.2

CMC use

Log your own use of CMC in a given day. How much time do you spend messaging, checking Twitter, using Instagram or on similar social media apps? Do you send emails as part of your normal working/studying day? Do you notice any distinct language styles that differ from platform to platform or device to device?

If you keep track of your CMC messages and exchanges, you can build up a corpus of material to analyse in more detail as this chapter goes on or to use as part of a longer language investigation.

2.2 Technology and new words

One of the ways in which technology has made an impact on English is through its role in the creation of new words and repurposing of older words. As you have already seen in Chapter 1, attitudes to new forms of language vary enormously. On the one hand, new words are seen by many as being vital to describe and label new products and concepts, but on the other hand some object to new words, seeing them as faddish or throwaway and insignificant.

Many of the terms used to describe new technologies and what we do with them have given rise to debate and you will look at a few key examples in this section.

2.2.1 Lexical and semantic change

It is rare to see new words appear out of thin air and when they do they are generally termed neologisms. More often, new words are formed through various processes of combination: blending and compounding. For example, 'Facebook' is a compound of two existing words and gives each word a new slant. Is it your genuine 'face' that is presented through Facebook or a carefully curated version of it? Likewise, how is an online page really a 'book'? One of the most productive ways for technology to shape language is for it to invest old words with new meanings.

KEY TERMS

Blending: the process of word creation by combining two elements of other words (e.g. 'bromance' = *brother* + *romance*; 'brunch' = *breakfast* + *lunch*)

Compounding: the process of word creation by combining two existing words either as a new single word, hyphenated word or noun phrase (e.g. 'laptop' = *lap* + *top*; 'user-friendly' = *user* + *friendly*)

'Twitter' is similar. Once used as a common noun to describe the song of birds, the social media platform harks back to this meaning with its blue bird logo and allows millions of users to tweet their own 'songs'… or frustrated responses to international politics and football results.

Figure 2.2: Example of tweets

Other words have undergone similar processes of semantic change:

- 'Virus': originally used as a medical term to describe a body causing infection, the word is now used to describe programs that can interfere with the normal running of a computer.
- 'Zombie': used to describe a kind of undead spirit but is now also used to describe a computer that has been infected with a virus and is under the control of an outside force.

Think about the following words and how they have been used in new ways to describe new technologies or technological practices:

hack	follower
patch	desktop
forum	troll
menu	stream
mouse	save

While all these words exist in their older forms, their new technological meanings have taken on a life of their own. These double meanings are not always accepted. As with much semantic change, some prescriptivists argue that new meanings create confusion and should be avoided. But the nature of language is that it will generally change to fill gaps that we need. Allan Metcalf notes:

> It seems a basic principle of language that if an expression is widely used, that must be because it is widely useful. People wouldn't use a word if they didn't find it useful. (Metcalf 2016)

This fits with what has been described as the functional theory of language change: that language changes to suit the needs of its users. This does not necessarily mean that language is changing to become more efficient or less complex. However, language is a tool of communication and humans have many and varied needs: we use language in a transactional function to convey ideas and emotions, but we also use it in an interpersonal function to express solidarity, social distance and identity. It might follow then that language changes to suit the many needs of its users in many different directions at once.

Guy Deutscher (2006) refers to three overarching patterns in language change:

- **Economy:** that language changes to save its users time and energy (e.g. abbreviations in texting, ellipsis on Twitter).
- **Expressiveness:** finding new ways to express or emphasise meaning when old ways lose power or effectiveness (e.g. needing to find new ways to say 'good' or 'great': *awesome*, *terrific*, *amazeballs*).

- **Analogy:** that language changes in ways that match how other changes have taken place; that language changes because of cumulative changes made for similar reasons.

These forces pull in different directions. So, for example, while some changes brought about by technology might lead us to abbreviate and shorten aspects of words and syntax, other changes add new words and new meanings to our vocabularies. We are at once eroding language and building it anew.

2.2.2 Grammatical change

Functional shift or conversion can also take place to give older words new meanings and functions. One clear example of this is the use of the verb 'like' as a noun when referring to Facebook interactions. For example, a user might receive a number of 'likes' for a post, reflecting whether or not it met with approval from others. Another word, which seems to have undergone both a semantic and grammatical shift, is 'friend'.

KEY TERM

Conversion: the process of changing the grammatical function of a word (e.g. turning a noun into a verb or vice versa)

Tom Chatfield explains:

> The fact that a social network with around a billion registered accounts chose 'to friend' as its principal verb of interconnection has not so much shifted the older sense of the word as created an entirely new one – drawing attention in the process to both the social network's aspirations, and the gulf between its rhetoric and actuality. The word friend itself comes almost directly from the Old English verb *freond*, itself derived from the verb *freogan*, meaning to love or bestow favour upon. The idea of 'friending' as well as 'befriending' has been used as a verb for over half a millennium – but it wasn't until the public advent of Facebook in 2005 that its contemporary sense arrived. (Chatfield 2013: 201–202)

2.3 Attitudes to texting

Since the arrival of Short Message Service (SMS) or 'texting' in the late 1990s, the impact of this particular form of CMC has been discussed at length. Originally limited to 160 characters and expensive to use, texts often made use of the kinds of grammatical ellipsis seen in telegrams some 40–50 years previously ('Will arrive 4pm. Bring crisps') and what many saw as new forms of abbreviation ('C U L8er', 'thx m8' and 'wot u up 2').

These abbreviations were among the most contentious forms of language that texting gave rise to. The kinds of abbreviation often fall into particular categories:

- **Shortenings and clippings:** application – *app*, brother – *bro*, family – *fam*
- **Initialisms and acronyms:** *BRB* – Be Right Back, *IMO* – In My Opinion, *GF/BF* – girlfriend/boyfriend, *LOL* – Laugh(ing) Out Loud
- **Deviant spelling:** night – *nite*, light – *lite*, come – *cum*, over – *ova*
- **Letter and number homophones:** You – *u*, I see – *I C*, later – *l8er*, hater – *h8er*, too much – *2 much*

Much media attention was focused on these abbreviations, with a widespread belief that texting had 'invented' such a practice. Articles in UK newspapers in the early 2000s and in the USA a decade later often claimed that texting was rife with abbreviations and sloppy English. Writing in 2002, John Sutherland, Professor of English Literature at University College London, argued that texting 'masks dyslexia, poor spelling and mental laziness. Texting is penmanship for illiterates'; and journalist John Humphrys (2007) went much further when he described texters as 'vandals who are doing to our language what Genghis Khan did to his neighbours eight hundred years ago. They are destroying it: pillaging our punctuation; savaging our sentences; raping our vocabulary'.

But, as Crystal points out, texting did not invent these abbreviations.

> People have been initialising common phrases for ages. "IOU" is known from 1618. There is no difference, apart from the medium of communication, between a modern kid's "lol" ("laughing out loud") and an earlier generation's "SWALK" ("sealed with a loving kiss"). Texts omit letters too … But this isn't new either. Eric Partridge published his *Dictionary of Abbreviations* in 1942. It contained dozens of SMS-looking examples, such as "agn" ("again"), "mth" ("month") and "gd" ("good"), 50 years before texting was born. (Crystal 2008: 9–10)

While the need for concision was apparent and the desire to abbreviate understandable, texters were not generally creating new abbreviations but making use of old ones and showing a degree of creativity in adapting these to a new medium. Of course, many abbreviations have been invented as well (and not just as part of texting but in online gaming and instant messaging, for example) but the foregrounding of abbreviations as one of the main features of texting is perhaps misguided. Studies of text messages have usually shown a low proportion of abbreviations actually used when compared to words spelt in their more standard forms.

Various studies, including Thurlow and Brown (2003), Lyddy *et al.* (2014), Ling and Baron (2007) and Wood et al. (2011) (all referred to in Kaplan (2016))

have found that the percentage of abbreviations in text messages collected from people of various ages, from primary school to university student, ranges from as low as 3.2 per cent among American college students to 40 per cent among 8–12-year-olds in UK schools (but varying depending on age within that group). This could be because of changes in the technology itself (as you will see later), but could also be down to the users' needs and styles changing, or no actual problem in the first place.

Perhaps it is not the use of abbreviations that is the issue for those who complain about texting, but the supposed influence of texting on more formal kinds of writing. Many of the complaints about texting focus on how it leads to breaches of formality in communication between students and teachers, or workers and their employers.

An article by Krupnick in the *Seattle Times*, 'Texting slang invading academic work', likened such lapses in formality to wearing inappropriate clothing:

> Faculty members increasingly have expressed irritation about reading acronyms and abbreviations they often do not understand, said Sally Murphy, a Cal State East Bay professor and director of the university's general-education program. One e-mail to a professor started with, "Yo, teach," she said.
>
> "It has a real effect on the tone of professionalism," said Murphy, who also has seen younger instructors use the shorthand. "We tell them very specifically how this is going to affect them in life. It's kind of like wearing their jeans below their butt. They're going to lose all credibility." (Krupnick 2010)

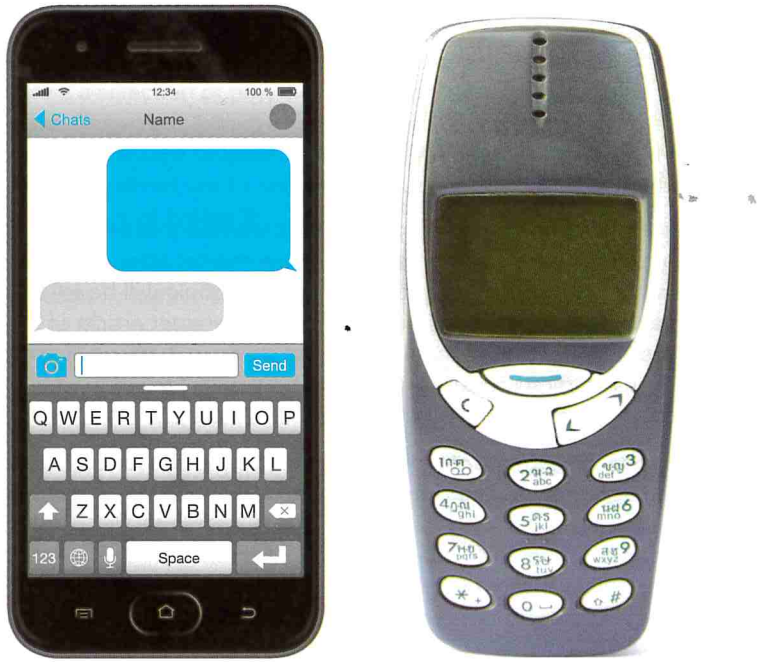
It could be argued that texting has an influence on perceptions of appropriate formality in different forms of communication but there is no clear evidence to suggest that it negatively impacts upon literacy. In fact, research into texting has generally suggested that it either has some benefits or no effect at all. Wood et al. (2011) discovered in their study that students who texted more had slightly higher scores on tests that measured phonological awareness and had no negative effects on other aspects of literacy. Plester et al. (2009) found that the earlier a child got their first mobile phone, the higher their literacy scores. This does not necessarily equate to a causal effect – i.e. that texting definitely improves literacy – but it does to some extent undermine claims that texting has to be bad for literacy.

As David Crystal says:

> Some people dislike texting. Some are bemused by it. But it is merely the latest manifestation of the human ability to be linguistically creative and to adapt language to suit the demands of diverse settings. There is no disaster pending. We will not see a new generation of adults growing up unable to write proper English. The language as a whole will not decline. In texting what we are seeing, in a small way, is language in evolution. (Crystal 2008)

Much of the debate about texting and literacy has moved on because texting itself has moved on. Texting is now linked to many other forms of messaging through mobile devices and the old predictive text programs that made it much simpler and quicker to abbreviate words have now been replaced.

Figure 2.3: Older phones made use of very basic predictive text while new phones are much more adaptive and intuitive



New applications can predict not just the word you are going to type next, but which word you would normally use after the last one that appeared. Apps like SwiftKey have been developed with the input of linguists and draw upon the language data of the user to predict a range of words that might appear next. By using a mini-corpus of language data for each user, the predicted text should be more personalised. But does this potentially run the risk of limiting users' vocabularies? If we are faced with predicted words that have been generated by a computer algorithm, will we just be satisfied with what is put in front of us, rather than think about a wider range of vocabulary that we might use? Will this shrink our vocabulary and make all communication a little more generic?

PRACTICE QUESTION

The impact of texting on literacy skills

Texts 2A and 2B put forward contrasting views about the impact of texting on people's literacy skills.

Analyse how language is used to present views about technology and language.

Evaluate the ideas in the sample texts and put forward your own case, based on your own study of English Language.

Text 2A

Michael Deacon believes that literature is likely to become as abbreviated as teenagers' attention.

Baroness Greenfield, the neuroscientist, is worried that sending text messages may cause young people to have shorter attention spans. If she's right, of course, none of those young people will be aware of this, because she expressed her views in a newspaper article of several hundred words, some of them long, all of them spelt correctly, and none of them using digits as substitutes for whole syllables. All terribly old-fashioned and out-of-d8. So they won't have read it.

In all probability, then, she's preaching only to the converted. None the less, I'm right behind her. Admittedly, I'm not in the least qualified to comment on whether text messaging can cause mental disorders, or whether predictive text – the ability of your phone to guess what you're going to say – will stunt your powers of self-expression, and make you less thoughtful and more error-prone. But I do know one thing. Reading text speak, or txt spk, makes my eyes water as if hit by a jet of lemon juice. And even if using text speak doesn't reduce your attention span, it suggests that you've already got a pretty damn short one.

What is the excuse for it? I know that keeping messages below a certain character count can make them cheaper, but anyone who has ever received a text from a teenage relative will know that, if brevity was their aim, they wouldn't insist on ending every sentence with a row of at least six exclamation marks.

Being the neurotic, prematurely aged pedant that I am, I always type out every word in full when I'm texting, as if I were going to submit the thing to a publisher rather than merely use it to let my girlfriend know I've caught the 18.46 from Victoria station. Unlike the teenagers relying on their predictive text (and substituting "book" for "cool" or "Smirnoff" for "poisoned", because the keys are the same), I even reread my texts to check for spelling and grammar errors.

Now, this may well make me a certifiable lunatic – indeed, Baroness Greenfield is welcome to use me as a subject for her next study of neurological disorders. But I still think what I do is better than inflicting such assaults on the English language as "ROFL" (Rolling On Floor Laughing) or "BBFN" (Bye Bye For Now) or "DMFYLOCIAIM" (Delete Me From Your List Of Contacts, I'm An Illiterate Moron).

And it's not as if all these jaunty acronyms are universally understood. A lot of people over the age of 30 seem to think that "LOL" stands for Lots Of Love, rather than Laughing Out Loud. Which creates all kinds of potential for inadvertent offence. ("Don't B upset, babe – UR new hairdo looks gr8. LOL.")

Mobile phone companies are only too delighted to indulge their customers' laziness. My own phone goes one better than predictive text and offers a selection of text message templates, so that I don't even have to bother typing out "I'm in a meeting" or "See you at…". There's even a template that says "Happy birthday". I wonder how little you'd have to think of a friend not just to send a text instead of a card, but to refuse to go to the effort of typing it.

Still, language is in a constant state of evolution. Perhaps text speak will seem perfectly normal in 50 years' time. Perhaps there'll be a 21st-century edition of Shakespeare's collected works featuring "2B/not 2B", and the *Oxford English Dictionary* will define "2thless" and "1derment". Perhaps misery memoirs will be written not in prose, but as a series of increasingly downcast emoticons.

But let's look on the bright side. If everyone in the world keeps texting, we'll all become as mentally stunted as each other, and so nobody will even notice that there's been a narrowing of the human attention span. Or, as it will surely become known, a10shn spn.

'Texting is making English a foreign language', Michael Deacon
(*The Telegraph*, 12 August 2009)

Text 2B

People have always spoken differently from how they write, and texting is actually talking with your fingers.

Texting has long been bemoaned as the downfall of the written word, "penmanship for illiterates," as one critic called it. To which the proper response is LOL. Texting properly isn't writing at all — it's actually more akin to spoken language. And it's a "spoken" language that is getting richer and more complex by the year.

First, some historical perspective. Writing was only invented 5,500 years ago, whereas language probably traces back at least 80,000 years.

Thus talking came first; writing is just an artifice that came along later. As such, the first writing was based on the way people talk, with short sentences — think of the Old Testament. However, while talk is largely subconscious and rapid, writing is deliberate and slow. Over time, writers took advantage of this and started crafting tapeworm sentences such as this one, from The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire: "The whole engagement lasted above 12 hours, till the gradual retreat of the Persians was changed into a disorderly flight, of which the shameful example was given by the principal leaders and the Surenas himself."

No one talks like that casually — or should. But it is natural to desire to do so for special occasions, and that's what oratory is, like the grand-old kinds of speeches that William Jennings Bryan delivered. In the old days, we didn't much write like talking because there was no mechanism to reproduce the speed of conversation. But texting and instant messaging do — and a revolution has begun. It involves the brute mechanics of writing, but in its economy, spontaneity and even vulgarity, texting is actually a new kind of talking. There is a virtual cult of concision and little interest in capitalization or punctuation. The argument that texting is "poor writing" is analogous, then, to one that the Rolling Stones is "bad music" because it doesn't use violas. Texting is developing its own kind of grammar and conventions.

Texting is developing its own kind of grammar. Take LOL. It doesn't actually mean "laughing out loud" in a literal sense anymore. LOL has evolved into something much subtler and sophisticated and is used even when nothing is remotely amusing. Jocelyn texts "Where have you been?" and Annabelle texts back "LOL at the library studying for two hours." LOL signals basic empathy between texters, easing tension and creating a sense of equality. Instead of having a literal meaning, it does something — conveying an attitude — just like the -ed ending conveys past tense rather than "meaning" anything. LOL, of all things, is grammar.

Of course no one thinks about that consciously. But then most of communication operates below the radar. Over time, the meaning of a word or an expression drifts — meat used to mean any kind of food, silly used to mean, believe it or not, blessed.

Civilization, then, is fine — people banging away on their smartphones are fluently using a code separate from the one they use in actual writing, and there is no evidence that texting is ruining composition skills. Worldwide people speak differently from the way they write, and texting — quick, casual and only intended to be read once — is actually a way of talking with your fingers.

All indications are that America's youth are doing it quite well. Texting, far from being a scourge, is a work in progress.

'Is Texting Killing the English Language?' John McWhorter (*Time*, 25 August 2013)

2.4 Attitudes to other forms of CMC

Many of the same arguments about texting are applicable to other forms of CMC. Indeed, 'texting' as a term is often loosely used to refer to many of these. Twitter had (at the end of 2016) 319 million active monthly users but has an influence way beyond those users, as many tweets are picked up in mainstream news publications, or tweets become news because of their controversial and/or provocative content or because of who has tweeted.

Twitter makes use of 140-character messages, so the need to be concise is paramount. However, users are not charged per tweet, as text messages generally were at the start of that technology. Twitter is also a potentially more interactive medium than texting because it allows online conversations to develop between multiple users. You do not need to 'follow' another user to be able to tweet them and while this has allowed more open discussion with users it has also led to unprecedented levels of 'trolling', where anonymous users (often described as 'eggs' because of the default Twitter egg icon used) can bombard others with abuse. This can range from the passive-aggressive process of 'sub-tweeting' or 'indirecting', which involves discussing or criticising someone without 'tagging' them in a tweet, to 'quoting' a tweet rather than replying to it (which allows some form of commentary on that tweet without it becoming part of a conversation between two users), through to direct confrontation by replying to another user.

Several high-profile cases in the UK have led to legal action being taken against the perpetrators of trolling and, in some cases, Twitter users have been jailed for their online actions. Some linguists and researchers have explored the role of online anonymity in shaping linguistic behaviour on platforms like Twitter and their findings are interesting to consider when thinking about the influence of technology on language use (and abuse). Has social media coarsened the standard of debate and led to instant, often angry, responses dashed off on a device without a thought for the recipient's feelings or the wider ramifications of the message that has been sent?

Claire Hardaker (2013) categorises a number of behaviours (that could be applied to a variety of CMC platforms such as online forums, Twitter and other social media) that might be identified by their recipients as 'troll-like', including deliberate digression from an agreed topic, aggression, antipathy and hypocrisy. These are not purely linguistic behaviours but are manifested through the medium of CMC so come under the remit of what is being explored here.

Is CMC, and Twitter in particular, degrading language? It might be part of a wider trend towards more confrontational and aggressive behaviour to strangers online, but that is perhaps more a social phenomenon than a linguistic one. When in 2011, the actor Ralph Fiennes complained that language 'is being eroded' by Twitter, his views were widely reported. But when linguistic studies have been carried out

(Liberman 2011, for example, in response to Fiennes' claim) tweets have not produced any evidence of language degradation – quite the opposite in fact:

> A person tweeting has no option but concision, and in a backward way the character limit actually explains the slightly longer word length we see. Given finite room to work, longer words mean fewer spaces between them, which means less waste. Although the thoughts expressed on Twitter may be foreshortened, there's no evidence here that they're diminished. (Rudder 2014)

In Chapter 4, you will look in more detail at some of the discourses around language change, but this discussion of social media 'eroding' language is certainly a good one to come back to and consider.

2.5 Emoji

One of the main ways in which CMC has changed language is in its ability to make written language (or at least, typed/swiped language) closer to speech. As discussed earlier, online communication is close to some forms of spoken mode communication in its use of almost-synchronous turn-taking and frequently social and phatic interaction.

In fact, the words we use to describe online communication often come from the domain of speech. We have *conversations* online, we *chat* and we hit *reply*. But one thing that most online communication still doesn't offer is the tone of voice we can pick up from a genuinely spoken conversation. Tone is something that helps construct meaning, just as much as the words or the syntactical structures that we use and in CMC this is often missing. Emails, texts and tweets often miss their intended target or provoke unexpected reactions because a certain tone – sympathy, irony, exasperation – is missing in the words used. It is this area – generally referred to as part of pragmatics – that CMC often lacks.

KEY TERMS

Phatic interaction: the type of exchange which is redundant in terms of meaning but socially significant; it includes 'friendly noises' like 'Morning', 'Nice day' and 'How's things?'

Pragmatics: the study of language as it is used in a social context

Linguist Caroline Tagg notes:

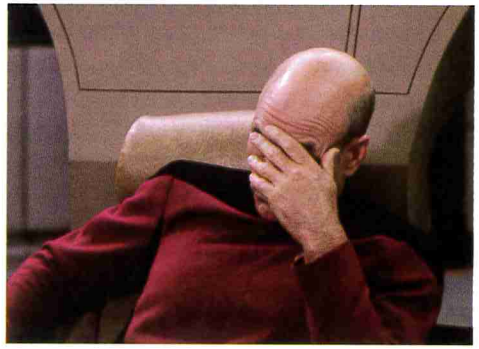
> … internet users do not typically have access to the paralinguistic features (tone of voice in which something is said, for example), or to the facial expressions, gestures and body language of their interlocutors. The implications of what is often thought of as 'impoverished' or deficient interaction are that people cannot express themselves as effectively as in spoken interactions; they are more likely to experience misunderstandings and they are more likely to feel less inhibited when it comes to confronting their unseen interlocutors. (Tagg 2015: 85)

For a while, emoticons offered a basic indication of tone. Simple punctuation marks could be used to signal:

- a smiling face :-)
- a sad face :-(
- a winking face ;-)

Punctuation can also be used in a non-standard way (!!!, ?!), caps lock used to sound louder (SEE YOU IN COURT!) and punctuation used to 'act out' certain words (*steps away from keyboard and weeps*). More recently, gifs (small, animated graphic files) memes (images, often accompanied with ironic or culturally-specific phrases such as "But the emails…" or "One does not simply walk into Mordor") and familar images have been used to signify reactions to others' online posts, with the 'facepalm' becoming a particular favourite to signal exasperation, incredulity or complete embarrassment at what someone else has just posted.

Figure 2.4: Jean-Luc Picard, the 'father' of the genre, shows the classic facepalm



Perhaps then, these visual images are a way of bridging the gap between CMC and true speech, providing tone and even a 'face' to online communicators.

Emoji (or *emojis*, depending on your preference) are another development in CMC and offer users the chance to add various facial expressions and small images. In their earliest incarnation, these were more developed, graphic

versions of emoticons, but have now become a more diverse set of images. In 2015, the social network app Instagram reported that over half of its messages contained emoji (up from 10 per cent five years previously). Writing in *The Independent*, Adam Lusher commented:

> Pessimists may conclude that technology merely allows us to regress to a form of pictorial language which has more in common with ancient hieroglyphics than the alphabetic writing system pioneered by the Phoenicians in about 1,200BC. (Lusher 2015)

However, Instagram's Thomas Dimson, who led the research, appeared to have few such reservations. 'It is a rare privilege to observe the rise of a new language,' he said. 'On Instagram, emojis are becoming a valid and near-universal method of expression in all languages.'

Figure 2.5: The 'Face with tears of joy' emoji was Oxford Dictionaries' Word of the Year for 2015.

Are emoji a new language, as some have said? Probably not. Emoji can definitely assist communication but can they function as a separate language in their own right? Linguists Tyler Schnoebelen (2016) and Gretchen McCulloch (2016) have both argued in various interviews and articles (see Wider Reading) that while emoji can be sequenced, to be a true language emoji would need to be organised syntactically in a way similar to other human languages (which they aren't) and would be able to communicate sophisticated and abstract ideas (which they can't in their current form). But equally, are emoji damaging language and reducing it to a series of caveman-like hieroglyphics? This is unlikely and reproduces one of the 'declinism discourses' you will look at in more detail in Chapter 4.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Researching emoji

Text 2C is taken from an interview with linguist Vyvyan Evans for *Huck* magazine about his work on emoji. Read the text and consider the different ideas put forward. How would you go about conducting an investigation into the ways in which emoji are used? Come up with a methodology for exploring emoji use and see if you can think of how to gather your data, analyse it and evaluate your main findings.

Text 2C

However, many have been critical of emojis, dismissing them as facile or adolescent and fearing for the future of communication because of them. Although most of us can quite happily construct a sentence without having to resort to smiling-cat faces and aubergines, commentators such as Jonathan Jones foresee us abandoning the literary genius of Shakespeare for these "brainless little icons".

But as Vyvyan points out, this purist view of language has existed for as long as language itself and he believes that these prescriptivist preconceptions are doomed to fail.

"There's a misconception that language is something that doesn't change," he says. "But we don't speak the same English as Chaucer and new word coinages only get off the ground when people use them. In this regard, language is the great leveller – it's a living breathing organism that's constantly evolving."

"The problem is people are responding in a prejudiced way because [emojis] are cartoon-like. It's a gut response that lacks foundation."

What must be remembered when looking at emojis is that they aren't a language, but a facet of communication; they nuance language, rather than replace it. But Vyvyan believes that given the staggering increase in use of emojis over only a few short years, their evolution could see them become a language all of their own.

"It is possible for emojis to become a functioning language," he says. "You can look at blissymbols as an example of how language can be visually based; it's a symbol-based language that allows people with severe speech and motor difficulties to actively communicate with purely representational symbols, it's been particularly useful for many people with cerebral palsy."

However, before you go ahead and burn your dictionary, Vyvyan feels that in their current incarnation, emojis will not become a language.

"Emojis as we know them today have only been available since 2012, so this is still very recent," he explains. "Yet in such a short space of time emoji has become the world's global form of communication. In Silicon Valley they're already experimenting with animated emojis, so without trying to predict the future, it seems we could be seeing the foundations of a new language."

Extract from 'No, emojis aren't making our generation stupid', Paden Vaughan (*Huck*, 16 January 2017)

Wider reading

You can find out more about the topics in this chapter by reading the following:

Baron, D. (2009) *A Better Pencil: Readers, Writers and the Digital Revolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Chatfield, T. (2013) *Netymology*. London: Quercus.

Crystal, D. (2009) *Txtng: The Gr8 Db8*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

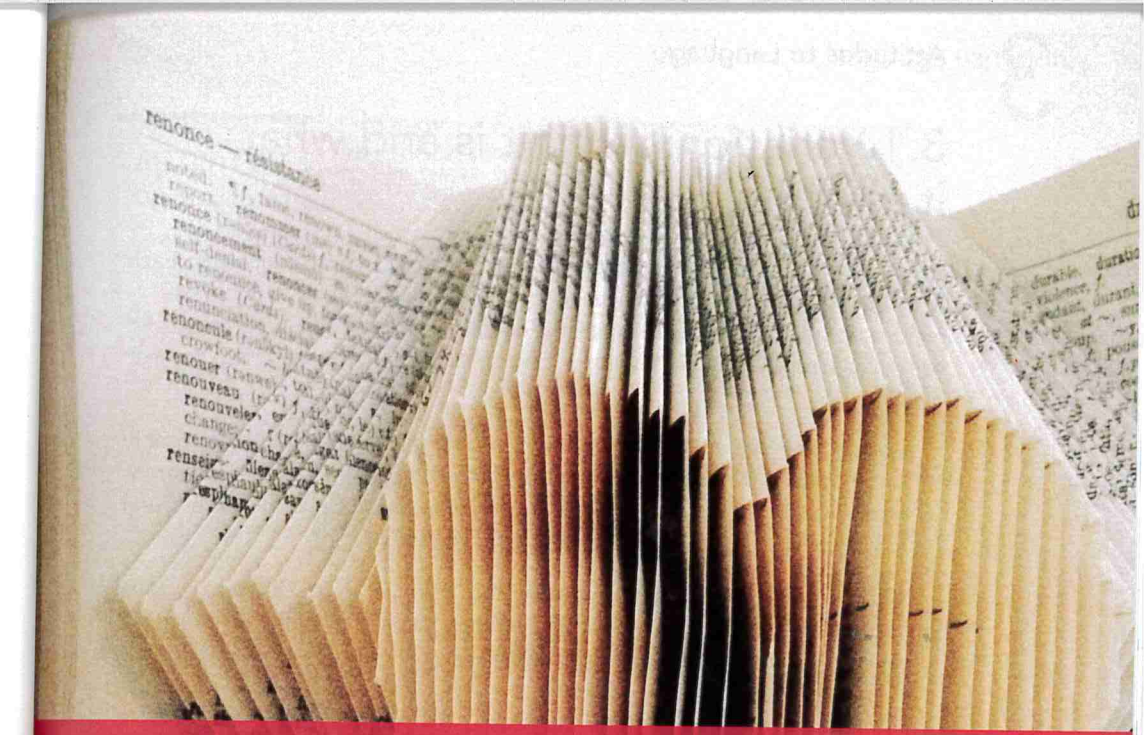
Kaplan, A. (2016) 'Texting makes you illiterate'. In A. Kaplan, *Women Talk More Than Men… And Other Myths About Language Explained*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tagg, C. (2015) *Exploring Digital Communication*. London: Routledge.

Gretchen McCulloch writes about emoji use in this Toast article from 2016: http://the-toast.net/2016/06/29/a-linguist-explains-emoji-and-what-language-death-actually-looks-like/

John McWhorter's TED lecture on texting provides a very useful overview: www.ted.com/talks/john_mcwhorter_txtng_is_killing_language_jk.html

Tyler Schnoebelen discusses emoji use in this 2016 interview on NPR: www.npr.org/2016/02/28/468483894/emojis-are-becoming-a-bigger-part-of-conversation



Chapter 3
Attitudes to language variation

In this chapter you will:

- Consider how regional and social variations in English are viewed
- Think about attitudes to non-Standard English
- Explore debates about these issues