



Topic 12 TXTNG: definition, features, myths, benefits and more

In our exploration of texting (TXTNG) we return to David Crystal, the founder and principal advocate of Internet linguistics, a relatively new domain of linguistics. Internet linguists are language specialists who study how language is used on the Internet. They investigate linguistic changes that have emerged in response to new communication tools and norms brought about by the digital age. Of the four interrelated and connected perspectives of the Internet linguistics identified by Crystal,² (sociolinguistic, educational, stylistic and applied) we focus, in this Topic on the *educational* domain which investigates how digital communication tools, such as texting create new language varieties. Our main point of reference will be Crystal's 2008 groundbreaking book, entitled **Txtng: The Gr8 Db8** (image on top left). We begin with four terms:

texting - action: composing and sending electronic messages (aka: *Netspeak, messaging, mobile messaging, thumbspeak, digital chatting, fingered speech and digital dialect*)

textese - style: the language used in text messages

textism - components: individual parts of text messages: abbreviations, emojis, short words

texter - users participants of texting.

What is texting?

- a digital communication tool;
- a visual representation of spoken language;
- a digital language, a unique (third) medium, that is separate from speech and writing, closer to writing, yet able to do what speech or writing cannot do;
- emerged in response to new communications norms brought about by the digital age;
- a hybrid of written and spoken language;
- main function: coordinating, scheduling, sharing and planning with others;
- a major form of communication and connectivity used by younger generations;
- viewed by young texters as a natural, creative and playful use of standard language;
- texting differences have been reported between the sexes, and
- texting happens instantaneously using a cellular network via satellite or Internet connection,



Linguistic features of texting in English

- **acronyms** (also referred to as abbreviations) include initial letters of words or terms and are pronounced as a single unit: LOL (laugh out loud); BTW (by the way); BRB (be right back); OMG (Oh my God); IDK (I don't know); TTYL (talk to you later); JK (just kidding); TBH (to be honest); NVM (never mind) and RN (right now);
- **abbreviations, reductions and phonetic spellings** that expand into full phrases: *tmrrw* (tomorrow); *onmyway* (on my way);
- **omission** of pronouns, articles: *going home, need coffee*;
- **alphanumeric substitutions**, or replacing letters with numbers or symbols that look or sound similar to the original: gr8 (great); u (you); 2 (too/to); 4 (for); c (see); r (are); b4 (before);
- a small percentage (less than 10%) of words in an average text message are abbreviated;
- text messages mostly use **lowercase** letters;
- **CAPS** used in texts express shouting or high priority;
- **punctuation** in texting is used to express tone and emotions;
- **dropped vowels** are found in single words and in entire sentence: *txt* (text); *ppl* (people);
f u cn rd ths thn wats th problem? (If you can read this then what's the problem?)
ths sntnc hsnt gt ny vwls (This sentence hasn't got any vowels.)
- **emojis** or graphic images and symbols that express non-verbal parts of digital conversations are widely used to replace body language;
- the term **emoji** comes from the Japanese: **e** = picture and **moji** = character;
- four widely used emojis used in English and also in other languages: thumbs up (approval) 👍; face with tears (grief, feelings) 😭; red heart (love, romance) ❤️; fire (something exciting) 🔥, and
- **repeated letters** (*yeahhhhh, soooooo glad*) signal emphasis or enthusiasm.

Texting is not linguistically novel

The main features of English language of texting (as listed above) have *well established antecedents* (Crystal 2008:46) documented in linguistic history: in symbols, characters or scripts developed in early civilizations, and also in early word puzzles, riddles, rebuses, pictograms and word games where pictures, symbols, numbers and letters represent words, parts of words, or phrases. Also, non-standard spelling, abbreviations and omissions found in texting, can be found in the works of authors such as Emily Bronte, D.H. Lawrence and Charles Dickens.

Texting is creative and novel

“...kids are turning the language in fresh directions”
(Crystal 2008)



try2doht <i>Try to do that.</i>
hldmecls <i>Hold me close.</i>
cu2nite <i>See you tonight.</i>
iowan2bwu <i>I only want to be with you.</i>

Table 1
Examples of Textese followed by
Standard English

The creativity and novelty of texting, according to Crystal, lies in the different ways texters modify, transform and extend established speaking and writing rules, processes and techniques to *outdo what has been done before*. Within a constrained texting environment, they formulate context dependent messages that include unique combinations of letters, numbers, images, abbreviations, tone indicators, secret codes and other texting options.

Texting myths and misconceptions

Common texting myths suggest that texting is ruining language and literacy. Spread by disinformation and lacking evidence, these myths depict texting as a non-serious, addictive, negative and slang-filled activity. Here are the most common myths about texting:

- responsible for the decline of standard language;
- used only by teenagers;
- abbreviations are a modern, overused invention;
- delays and negatively affects language development;
- kills proper grammar;
- promotes lazy and inaccurate spelling;
- emojis are primitive and infantile;
- causes a *spillover*, that is texting habits are extended to academic and professional writing;
- creates short attention spans and superficial communicative behaviours, and
- creates long-term reliance on shortened word forms.

In contrast to the view that texting is responsible for the decline of language Professor Crystal sees much that is noteworthy, creative and positive in texting practices and behaviours. This places him squarely on the *richness*, rather than on the *ruin* side of the texting debate. What follows are Crystal's explanations of how digital language is a natural evolution of language and a creative extension of established linguistic rules and norms.

Texting skills

With developed skills in reading and writing, texters understand and manage the following aspects of texting:

- platform and device functions;
- the integration of texts and multimedia;
- message management: content, tone, images;
- how to formulate clear and concise messages that include letters, numbers and visuals;
- the role of punctuation;
- the high information value of consonants and the low information value of vowels;
- vowels omission;
- how to maintain meaning with omission of sounds;
- deciphering textisms and filling in vowels to consonant skeletons (people - ppl) and
- understanding how sounds relate to letters.

Benefits of texting

- increases literacy engagement, provides constant practice with reading and writing;
- develops *register awareness* or understanding the difference between texting and standard language;
- helps navigate and separate two registers (texting and standard language) and ensures that texting does not spill over into school assignments;
- increases phonological awareness, or the mapping of sounds to letters;
- proficient texters develop cognitive advantages similar to bilinguals: they navigate two registers: (a) informal digital codes and (b) formal language;
- encourages problem solving, language experimentation and creative play;
- keeps the mind engaged, and
- increases feelings of accomplishment.

Current studies on texting

Since the early 2000's research interest in texting has increased. Internet linguists are building on the foundational work of Crystal, refuting the idea that texting is an abbreviation-ridden threat to standard language. They are characterizing texting as a unique and innovative activity, a merging of written and spoken language, and a playful and efficient communication with its own rules. Internet linguists are turning their research attention to the following topics:

- more inclusive definitions of texting;
- texting as a full semiotic (signs and symbols) system;
- texting as a global communicative resource;
- the role of emojis and omissions;

- how the brain processes texting;
- exploring the cognitive benefits (such as register and phonological awareness) of texting;
- texting as a separate *language* from formal writing;
- texting behaviours;
- texting and generational groups of texters;
- texting rules and guidelines;
- how texting shapes language, and
- what can be learned about language from texting.

Texting Commandments of txtng

(Silver, 2006)

1. **u shall luv ur mobil fone with all ur hart** (You shall love your mobile phone with all your heart.)
2. **u & ur fone shall neva b apart** (You and your phone shall never be apart.)
3. **u shall nt lust aftr ur neibrs fone nor thiev** (You shall not lust after your neighbor's phone nor thieve.)
4. **u shall b prepard @ all times 2 TXT & 2 recv** (You shall be prepared at all times to text and to receive.)
5. **u shall use LOL & othr acronyms in conversatns** (You shall use LOL and other acronyms in conversations.)
6. **u shall be zappy with ur astrsks & exc! matns!!** (You shall be zappy with your asterisks and exclamation marks)
7. **u shall abbrevi8 & rite words like theyr sed** (You shall abbreviate and write words like they are said.)
8. **u shall nt speak 2 sum1 face2face if u cn msg em insted** (You shall not speak to someone face-to-face if you can message them instead.)
9. **u shall nt shout with capitls XEPT IN DIRE EMERGNCY** (You shall not shout with capitals except in dire emergency.)
10. **u shall nt consult a ninglish dictnry** (You shall not consult an English dictionary.)



FINAL THOUGHTS

Some people dislike texting.

Some are bemused by it.

Some love 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 demand of diverse settings. In texting we are seeing, in a small way, language in evolution.

(Crystal, 2008: 175)

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