

## ENTREVISTA

# THE JOY OF TXT YOUNG PEOPLE: HOW DOES TEXTING AFFECT THEIR USE OF LANGUAGE?<sup>1</sup>

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### Resumo

*A alegria de escrever mensagens de texto. Jovens: em que medida escrever mensagens de texto afeta o seu uso da linguagem?* Nesta entrevista a Mike Pilewski, o renomado linguista David Crystal, Professor Emérito da Universidade de Gales, responde a questões cruciais sobre como a tecnologia afeta a nossa linguagem. Ele afasta o alarmismo e considera que, diante da tela de um computador, jovens e adultos estão a ler, nada menos que ler, ler e ler. Quando os jovens enviam as suas mensagens, na verdade estão a escrever, o que pressupõe indispensáveis conhecimentos de ortografia. Como a tecnologia é recente, ainda é cedo para tirar conclusões, menos ainda catastróficas.

**Palavras-chave:** Tecnologias da informação e comunicação; Escrita; Leitura.

### Abstract

The renowned linguist David Crystal, Emmeritus Professor at the University of Wales, in this interview to Mike Pilewski, provides answers to crucial questions on the technologies' impacts on our language. Banishing every kind of alarmism, he regards

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that youths and adults read when they are in front of the computer screen. Furthermore, when young people send their text messages, in fact they are writing. They would be unable to do it if they had not acquired a relative domain of orthography. As this technology is recent, it is too early to draw conclusions on their impacts on language, in particular to reach catastrophic inferences.

**Keywords:** Information and communication Technologies; Writing; Reading.

### Language Text Messaging

Language has always been changing and will continue to change — and David Crystal is there to document it. The honorary professor of linguistics at the University of Wales, Bangor, wrote the *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*. More recently, as the author of *Language and the Internet*, Crystal has kept his eye on the way new technology is affecting our use of language. His latest subject is texting, or text messaging. In *txtng: the gr8 db8*, Crystal looks at the strange and wonderful possibilities that telephone keypads offer, from textonyms (words produced by pressing the same sequence of keys) to textisms (words or abbreviations invented for use in the medium). The book's 240 pages also include a glossary of text-message abbreviations in 11 languages. Crystal's central theme, though, is how and why people are writing text messages and what effect this might be having on language. *Spotlight* asked him what he's discovered.

### What is The “Great Debate” About Texting?

“Debate” is probably the wrong word for it, because a debate is usually two sides arguing about a particular point where there's some basis in fact. Here we have a situation where the debate is based entirely on an urban myth that started soon after texting arrived.

Now, texting is less than ten years old. Suddenly this phenomenon arrived, and it generated an extraordinary reaction — a moral panic, almost — about the nature of this beast. In Britain, a media piece appeared around 2003, describing an essay supposedly written by a schoolchild entirely in abbreviations of the text-messaging kind. She passed it to her teacher, who couldn't understand a word of it. The report then said that this shows how modern children are incapable of using standard English, how it's a breakdown in the educational system, how children will grow up not knowing

how to spell, how they will fail their examinations. They will become adults who will not know how to use the language, and eventually the English language and other languages will go down the drain, and it'll be an absolute disaster. Well, nobody ever questioned that essay, which turned out to be a complete hoax. Nobody has ever found the teacher or anything. It was a myth. But that's what people believe, and if you asked all your readers of *Spotlight* or any newspaper, "Do you believe this?" people would say, "Yes, I believe this. I believe that text messaging is full of abbreviations and that it's a disaster for literacy." Now, I wrote my book because I never believed that. You can demonstrate quite clearly that all those things are wrong.

### **How do You do This?**

First of all, text messaging is not full of abbreviations. Ninety per cent of the words are in perfectly standard English, standard German, standard whatever. That's because, when you're sending messages, you want to understand each other, and abbreviations will only take you so far in that direction.

Second, the abbreviations that are used are not novel. They're not invented by the children. Most of the abbreviations that are used in text messaging, like "c u l8r" (for "see you later"), have been around for hundreds of years, and there's nothing new about them at all. People have always abbreviated in English and in German. You can find abbreviations going back centuries, right to the beginnings of English in Anglo-Saxon times.

Third, most of the text messages in the world are not written by children, but by adults and institutions: the stock market telling everybody about the latest stock messages; universities telling their students about class changes; radio and television organizations sending out messages; Barack Obama sending out text messages to all his supporters. Eighty per cent of the text messages in the world are between adults now, and in perfectly standard language.

When one sees that most text messages are standard, then it follows that the more children text, the more practice they're getting in reading and writing. The more you text, the better your literacy scores are: that's actually what the research is now showing over and over again. Texting is good for your education, not bad. That's what the debate is showing: that the mythology is a complete nonsense and that all the negative things about texting are actually positives.



### How does one Prove This?

It's not easy research to do; it's difficult data to get hold of. When I started working on this, I would ask a lot of people, "Will you let me see your texts?" "No," they would say. "No, no, no, they're mine! I'm not showing you my texts. They're private. They're intimate." But with persistence, you can start collecting examples and generally get enough information to see what's going on.

I'm not the only person who's done this. Over the past five years, researchers in several countries have collected large numbers of text messages – several hundred, sometimes a thousand or so – and the results are the same wherever you look. The same processes of abbreviation are turning up in the different languages. So "c u 18r" in English, with the 8 replacing the sound "eight", has its parallel in German with "*gute n8*", where the 8 replaces the *acht* of *Nacht*. For the book, I collected about a dozen or so languages and found the same sort of abbreviatory process turning up in all of them.

### Does the Short-message Format Make us Focus our Thoughts More Generally?

Everybody realizes that they have to reduce their message to a limited scope, so there is a kind of ability to summarize which is becoming routine, which never used to be.

The other thing is that once you get a discipline of this kind, you start to play with it – you start to use it artistically. One of the earliest things that happened with text messaging is that people started to write poems in it, and still do. Text-messaging poetry competitions have produced poetry of really quite stunning effect.

Now, people ask, "How can that be?" But it's not the first time that people have used a discipline in order to develop a new genre of poetry, and the haiku is a perfect example. It's three lines of fixed-syllable length, but once you are asked to do it ... We have a thousand years of haiku producing some wonderful, aphoristic poetry. Text messaging has been going only a few years, so it'll take a while before it becomes as powerful a genre of expression as the haiku is; but I believe it will happen one day. Text-messaging poetry will produce *gems* of expression that are as attractive, elegant, aesthetic and meaningful as haiku is.

### **Will Second-language Speakers Have Difficulty With This?**

The total amount of novelty that you get in any of these new technologies is actually very small. If you ask how many new words have come into the English language as a result of the internet over the past 20 years, the answer is in the hundreds, not in the thousands. We're talking about a relatively small development, given that English has a million words or more. You learn bit by bit by bit, and gradually you learn the new words, as always happens.

Hardly any changes in grammar have taken place as a result of the internet - one or two slight differences exist here and there, stylistic differences: sentences becoming more succinct and things like that – but not new grammar. In spelling and punctuation, yes, a few new opportunities exist there with styles: omitting punctuation marks and not capitalizing and doing that sort of thing. The effect would be more marked in German, of course, where you use capitals more than we do in English, but still it's not a big deal. The effect is minimal, really.

When you add up all the changes that have taken place so far, we're talking about a tiny, tiny fraction of the language, and so I don't really think that second-language people are going to have much of a problem with it.

### **What About Future Generations?**

There's always a certain amount of difficulty interpreting the past. You only have to go back 30 or 40 years in Britain, and you find slang and terminology being used that is no longer in use now. If you go back 200 years and then 300 years, of course there's always a certain amount of language change that causes difficulty. Go back as far as Shakespeare, and we're talking about, oh, about five per cent of the vocabulary that's different between Shakespeare's time and now. Ninety-five per cent of Shakespeare is perfectly understandable to any modern English user – but still: five per cent is five per cent.

Now, the internet is definitely speeding up the processes of language change. If a new word comes into the language, it can be around the world within seconds, whereas in the old days it would have to get into the newspapers and on to the radio stations and it would take months and sometimes years for a new expression to become world-aware. But with the internet, that's all changed, and so there could be a



case for saying that as the years go by, people will find it increasingly difficult to understand the language of the past at a level that we haven't seen before.

It's so difficult to predict. There has never been an internet, and we don't know what the effect of all this on language. All we know is that it's just unbelievably huge: the internet now has more written language on it than in all the libraries of the world combined. The size of the internet is doubling every week or so at the moment. It's just extraordinary, and nobody knows what the impact is going to be on language, except one can sense that it is making language change faster than ever before.

That's a problem for mother-tongue speakers as well as for foreign-language learners, and we have to learn to manage it somehow. We do that by monitoring it and, you know, writing dictionaries and getting the facts. You see, that's why I wrote the book: to get the facts out there, rather than to have the myths in everybody's head.

### **Is The Language of Texting More Like Speech or Like Writing?**

This is a question I ask of all the genres of internet communication, and the answer varies, depending on the genre. With things like the World Wide Web, we're talking about something that is much more like written English. With things like instant messaging, that is much more like spoken English. Blogging is something in between, with some characteristics of speech and some characteristics of writing.

It takes a while for a genre to develop the characteristics that will ultimately define it. Texting is still evolving as a medium, and it's less than ten years old, so it's too soon to say whether it will eventually be more towards the spoken end of the spectrum or the written end of the spectrum. At the moment, it's both.

So kids chatting to each other will just send very abbreviated, almost instant messaging-type exchanges, which make it very much a conversational medium. On the other hand, when Barack Obama sends out his texts explaining party policy, that's very written language. So there is this *array* of different situations; and, of course, whether texting will be around long enough for a genre to develop permanently is anybody's guess. Will we still be texting in 50 years' time? Perhaps not. It may simply be a transient linguistic phenomenon due to the nature of the technology. It may go out of fashion.

### So There's no Decline in Linguistic Standards?

I go around to schools quite a lot, and I ask the kids, "Would you use text-messaging abbreviations in your school work?" They look at me as if I'm mad. They say, "Why would you do something as stupid as that? Text messaging is for texts. Why would we put it in school work? We'd get poor marks." The children are intelligent. They know this. So it is a pure adult fantasy that there is this kind of usage.

The question of a decline in standards is quite separate. If there is a decline, there is a decline. If you're a bad speller and you just have trouble spelling, you're a bad speller. If you're a bad speller, actually, you won't text message. To text message, you've got to be a good speller. If you're leaving letters out because it's cool to do so, you have to know that the letters are there in the first place.

People say, "But the technology is making it worse, because kids aren't reading, books any more. Therefore they don't know how to read." But what do you do when you look at a screen all the time? You read and read and read and read – all the time. So there's a great deal of computer literacy that is replacing traditional book literacy. I hope a balance will be retained between these things; but there is no evidence that the children are using the language less as a result of the new technology.

A few years ago, people said, "Diary-writing used to be such an important genre. Letter-writing: so important. Look at Jane Austen and all her lovely letters! Oh, the children these days: they don't keep diaries any more. They don't write letters any more." But what do they do now? They write blogs, which are diaries, and all the rest of it. In fact, they're writing more than Jane Austen could ever have done.

### Alguns livros de David Crystal

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