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MiTech

Let's Talk about Text: Toward a Descriptive Grammar of the Lowly SMA

If there is one complaint that I hear among English teachers and professors, it is that texting is having a ruinous effect on the language. Some gripe when text abbreviations such as 2 and 4 creep into formal writing; others are affronted by the casual spelling and syntax of text messages. Most of us do not accept text messages from our students, figuring that student email is bad enough. Indeed, one of my colleagues claimed she would “rather have molten lead poured in [her] ear” than receive texts from students.

And yet, we know that text messaging—or using a Short Message Service (SMS)—is the primary way students communicate today. A 2010 Pew Internet and American Life report concluded that over 75 percent of teenagers own cell phones, and of this group, 88 percent send text messages. The popularity of texting is higher among girls, who send nearly three texts for every single text sent by boys. Perhaps the most startling statistic is the one in three American teenagers send over 300 text messages per day.

The texts themselves are nothing remarkable, unless we begin to look at them from a linguistic perspective. Doing so may involve jumping off the English teacher bandwagon for a moment, or at least stifling our desire to circle spelling errors with a red pen. Just remember: Cormac McCarthy doesn't like apostrophes, either, and he's written some pretty good stuff. Instead of complaining, we might begin by establishing a descriptive grammar of the text message—one that encompasses the context in which texts are sent, as well as the syntax and the lexicon of the typical text message.

To begin this kind of analysis with our students, we might ask when a text message is appropriate and when it is not. Most students would agree, I think, that texting is not a good way to communicate a serious matter. True, breakups have occurred via text message, but even the most insensitive among us would not relate the death of a loved one with the following text: “@hospital. Dad just died.” And despite their cultural currency, texts have fairly limited purposes: they are chiefly utilitarian, meant to share information quickly between friends. When they do tell a story, they do so in a condensed fashion that hits the basic plot points without elaboration.

Then there is the all-important issue of audience. My college students tell me that texts are most suited to communicate between equals: friend-to-friend, boyfriend-to-girlfriend, brother-to-sister. When texting goes vertical—that is, when a subordinate texts his superior—the trouble begins. Some of my students are comfortable enough with me to text me, but most look just a bit uncomfortable when I offer my cell phone number. That is probably a good thing.

My students also insist on differences in register within texting itself. They use more textisms with their peers and fewer with their parents, which makes sense to me. One student was a bit shocked when her dad texted her with “How r u?” How would Romeo text Juliet? How would his register change if he were texting Lady Capulet? Would he text Lady Capulet to begin with, or would email be a better choice?

But what irks English teachers the most, of course, is the disregard texters seem to have for conventional English. For many, textese represents language in decline: the constant abbreviations, shortened spellings, truncated syntax, and missing punctuation signify a new low for literacy, and by consequence, for civilization itself. Jonathan Swift, after all, didn't text “A Modest Proposal,” though one can imagine this: “Eat poor babies. JK. LOL.”

What we should do, however, is think about the way textese works, again attempting to describe it in linguistic terms. Asking students to compile these rules that govern the syntax and spelling of a text message might be a good lead-in to more traditional, prescriptive grammar. Delineating the grammar of a text message might also raise some interesting questions: What does it say about the way we read, for example, if a text message can exclude all vowels and still make sense? Why do certain words and phrases translate readily into text abbreviations, while others do not? “I don't know” is often rendered in a text as “idk,” but I have yet to see “ik” for “I know.” Does the fact that “ur” can stand for “your” or “you're” in a text suggest that we might be able to simplify the traditional punctuation?

I wonder, too, if English teachers might see some value in the sheer economy of the text message. We harp on wordiness. Excising dead wood from sentences is one of our most sacred editorial duties. It might cheer us to notice that students have already mastered the most concise form of written communication—the lowly text message. Instead of writing “wordy,” in the margins, we might simply write, “txt this.”

There is a cultural lament about the decline of the English language, and text messaging is often blamed for the seeming illiteracy of the younger generation. With every text, however, teens are using a complex form of written discourse—one that we can examine together, as lovers of language and literature. Words are flying through the air.

Robert Rozema teaches English at Grand Valley State University. The author of multiple articles on educational technology, he texts frequently—if slowly.