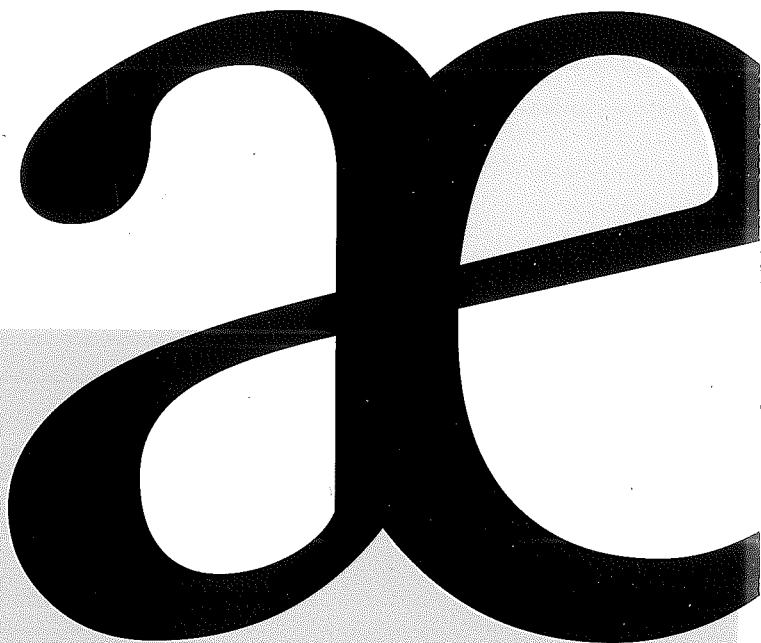


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*2txt or nt 2txt? Ttxtin: a WOT?
Possible Pedagogical Uses of Text-English*

According to figures released by the Mobile Data Association in December 2005, person-to-person texting in Great Britain rose by 23% (an average 93 million messages a day)¹. Although few would dispute the fact that it has become a continually growing phenomenon, opening new layers of communication between people never previously imagined², many feel concerned about the possible deleterious effects texting may have on the language standards of young children. The case of the thirteen-year-old Scottish schoolgirl who wrote an entire essay about her summer holidays in Text-English³ is inescapably referred to whenever indignation towards this technological mode of communication is aroused.

However widespread such animosity may be, a recent small-scale experiment was unable to reveal significant levels of

¹ *The Guardian*, December 21, 2005, p. 30.

² www.britishcouncil.org/russia-trenduk-december-2005-texting-for-all.htm reports cases of lecturers texting revision tips to their students and www.news-record.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20050925/NEWSREC0104/509250306 notes the beneficial uses of texting in parent-adolescent child relationships, where the latter reveal considerably more willingness to communicate since the language is on their level. www.britishcouncil.org/russia-trenduk-december-2005-texting-for-all.htm also reports the example of lecturers and staff at Wolverhampton University sending students revision tips, timetables, appointment times and coursework feedback through mobile phone texting.

³ *The Guardian*, "Texting 'is no bar to literacy'", December 24, 2004. Though it may be pertinent to suggest that the child's essay itself was not composed without irony or provocation.

deterioration in the language performances of children who are mobile phone users as opposed to those who are not⁴. The experiment merely confirmed the unremarkable factor that children have a natural ability to "code switch", in the light of which David Crystal's recent warning that: "[...] text messaging abbreviations perform a useful function where space is tight and speed is critical, but not elsewhere"⁵ would be no more than self-evident. For just as children know very well the difference between playground slang and the polite talk reserved for formal visits to relatives, they are equally aware that pressing a dozen or so keys on a mobile phone and producing a set piece of written classroom work are two very different activities with distinct codes and conventions. Furthermore, the vital factors of space and speed condition text messaging to a degree that presupposes certain linguistic skills on the part of the user. Text-English is precisely a code-form in which language is at the service of the medium and not vice-versa. Until recently at least, the speed of transmission of all technologically communicated messages depended on the user's ability to condense words and phrases, so as to reduce costs (dictated by space in texting, and time in e-mails). Nowadays, of course, with the advent of broadband and the numerous mobile phone discount offers, not to mention the increasing replacement of ABC modes by T9 predictive modes, such space and time factors have been reduced to an almost insignificant level. Yet, granted that most texters (particularly adults) may prefer to use plain English and that predictive text allows them to key complete words using single key strokes for each letter, Text-English has, not surprisingly, taken on an established form all its own (witness The Collins on-line Texting Dictionary, which currently contains over fifty pages of definitions of the most commonly used expressions among English-speaking texters).

⁴ What the experiment does reveal is a tendency in these children to write significantly less when asked to describe a picture or an event than those children who are not mobile phone users.

⁵ David Crystal, *The Language Revolution*, Cambridge, Polity, 2004, p. 81.

Since language reflects and informs a continually changing reality, the constant transformations by which it is marked will always elude proscriptive efforts to bring it to heel, let alone purist attempts to stifle its various forms. This is true for Text-English as for any other of the currently existing forms of the language. Poor spelling, for example, is invariably cited as one of the main negative manifestations of texting, as a consequence of its dominant use of abbreviations. Yet this criticism surely overlooks the important function abbreviations have always performed in the language (PS, NB, eg, etc!) and that with the evolution of technology they will surely become more and more vital in future communication.

Alongside abbreviations, the lexicon of Text-English displays an obvious predilection for monosyllables. In this respect, Melvyn Bragg reassuringly underlines a sense of historical continuity with the development of the English language in general: "[...] the latest specialist, most technologically driven of written languages is still founded on the word-hoard brought across to England from Friesland more than fifteen hundred years ago"⁶.

Furthermore, this technological language strives for a concision of expression that is reflected in often surprising and imaginative combinations that recall the creative use of compounds in Old English texts, except for the fact that, from a structural point of view, the words of a text message are set out consecutively without space breaks in between, whether they be abbreviations or whole expressions. Thus, for example *dict8* = dictate; *BthD8* = when were you born (in which the un-used compound "birth-date" is recognisable); *ActLikeUMEnIt* = Act like you mean it or *BeTaLckNxtTIm* = Better luck next time. Certain nouns undergo such minimal morphological transformations that they are immediately recognisable. Thus, for instance, *boTl* = bottle; *chocl8* = chocolate; *cupl* = couple or *MunE* = money. Others, such as *b/f* = boyfriend; *czin* = season, *X!* = typical woman or *Y!* = typical man,

⁶ Melvyn Bragg, *The Adventure of English*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 2003, p. 311.

are not so easily decipherable⁷. From these few examples it is plain to see that Text-English exploits the same rhetorical features of inference and ellipsis that characterise everyday discourse to the point that a fundamental aspect of texting is surely a witty and imaginative understanding of the way language works.

Since texting has become a normal part of many people's daily lives, and the principles that lie behind its use are, in reality, no different from those of other levels of language communication⁸, there is no reason why Text-English should not be incorporated in an English as a second language syllabus. Indeed, decoding text messages may not only prove to be a stimulating and enjoyable way of learning the language, but can also reinforce students' sense of its relevancy to their immediate needs. Furthermore, the psychologically positive effect that the use of Text-English can have on the students is not a factor to underestimate, for it would no doubt be interpreted as an acceptance of their own communicative dimension, a factor which, in itself, could prove to be vital in facilitating their interrelations with the teacher.

Since inference plays a significant part in decoding a high frequency of text messages, the degree to which non-native students are aware of the various levels at which the code works will necessarily vary according to their knowledge of the language and culture. To arrive at an understanding of *cing*, for instance, involves a process of decoding whereby the letter *c* must be recognised as a homonym for the verb "see", whereas *someX*, on the other hand, involves the semantic transfer of *X* as a mathematical symbol for multiplication (hence the transferred meaning "times"). The elliptical *Lngwdd*, on the other hand, involves a more complex level of decoding which depends on the detection of the omission of vowels in the words "(l(o)ng

⁷ All examples are taken from the Collins *Texting Dictionary*, Collins Word Exchange-Word Tools, www.collins.co.uk

⁸ Newspaper headlines are another, albeit more sophisticated instance, of the practical function of such rhetorical features as ellipsis and inference referred to above.

wind(e)d". As is evident, the high degree of inference required in texting also depends on the fact that decoding heavily relies on a recognition and appreciation of homonyms and puns. But through forcing students to engage in these concise and elliptical constructions as much as possible, their awareness of the background linguistic components that are being abbreviated will inevitably increase. As Erin Janson has pointed out, the challenge for educators is not that of seeking to overcome the abbreviated language of Text-English, but to find creative ways to use it⁹. This explains why text language has been variously accepted by teachers in the writing of first drafts of creative essays since it is seen as an aid in getting thoughts and ideas quickly onto paper. Naturally, the teacher's responsibility is to assure that pupils then translate or convert text shorthand to formal standard English.

In the context of teaching English as a foreign language, comparative analyses of text abbreviations against their "complete" or "standard" versions may be usefully incorporated as part of an intra as well as inter-lingual translation activity. The very fact that the same rhetorical features of ellipsis, punning, inference etc are used by Italian texters (eg. *TVB* = *ti voglio bene*) *dove6?* = *dove sei*; *xche* = *perché* *ke* = *che*; *Cm* = *come* etc) assures the relative non-existence of cultural-linguistic barriers in exercises involving the use of Text-English. The students, already equipped with the necessary interpretative strategies for translating text code, can therefore use their skills working both within the source language as well as from source to target language. Selectivity on the part of the teacher is of utmost importance in a didactic approach of this type. There are only so many words and expressions that a person may realistically need to use from the numerous (but by no means exhaustive) examples currently available in a texting dictionary. Not only, but those among them which may be considered of a relatively high frequency in the source language (including culture-bound expressions) may be meaningless to a

⁹Erin Jansen "British Educators Angered by 'Texting' I say 'don't get mad, get creative!'", www.netlingo.com.

non-native. It is up to the teacher to use a sensible approach and intuition as far as possible those deemed useful for the learner. Thus, for example, whereas a number of common idioms such as: "as far as I know", "as far as you're concerned", "in my opinion", "on the other hand" etc. could be learnt through a decoding of their abbreviations in text form, others of a decidedly low frequency such as "all and sundry", "back of the envelope calculation", "choking the chicken" or "geezer" need not even be taken into account, particularly at a beginners or intermediate level. Naturally, a sensitive cultural-linguistic awareness, not to mention flexibility, is required in the language teacher who, while moving between various linguistic levels and semantic directions, must always ensure the priority of linguistic appropriateness.

Thus, rather than being considered a pernicious tool deliberately fashioned to exterminate the linguistic abilities of its users, Text-English should be recognised for what it really is; a useful device for brief and effective communication. Used creatively in language teaching, it can prove to be both stimulating and rewarding for teacher and student alike.