

Textspeak Is Modernizing the English Language (*English)

LAUREN COLLISTER

Librarian, linguist, and scholar Lauren Collister, born in 1983, is the Director of the Office of Scholarly Communication and Publishing at the University of Pittsburgh. After growing up in Ohio, she earned her BA at Ohio State University and her MA and PhD at the University of Pittsburgh. Collister's work has appeared in *The Washington Post*, *The New Republic*, *Salon*, *Business Insider*, and other publications. As a scholar, in her words, she strives to “further the scholarly understanding of digital societies by researching how language is used as a social tool in online environments.”

In the following essay, which appeared in *The New Republic* in 2015, Collister considers how the language of our digital lives has influenced the ways that we write and speak when we are in *offline* environments, as well. She provides perceptive historical context, too, including the centuries-long tradition of people claiming that language is in decline. She argues that “textspeak” is not harmful to our language, as so many complain, but is instead a source of renewal and vitality.

WRITING TO DISCOVER: Do you write differently in emails, text messages, and online posts than you do when you write academic essays—or even when you answer a writing prompt for class, like this one? If so, what do you think accounts for the change in your writing style?

txt msgs r running language

*ruining

^lol, jk!! :)

In many casual discussions of language and the internet, it's not uncommon to hear about how such “textspeak ruins language”—how technology has made everybody lazy with their speech and writing. Major media outlets such as the *Los Angeles Times*, the *BBC*, and the *Daily Mail* have all bemoaned the ways in which people communicate through technology.

Of course, language does change when it's used to text or write messages on the internet. It's even become the focus of the field of linguistics known as Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC). Although it specifies computers in its name, CMC refers to the study of interaction facilitated by technology like computers, mobile phones, and tablets.

And contrary to the idea that these innovations are corrupting language, they actually demonstrate a creative repurposing of symbols and marks to a new age of technology. These evolutions of language are swift, clever, and context-specific, illustrating the flexibility of the language to communicate nonverbal meaning in a nuanced, efficient manner.

CHANGE DOESN'T MEAN DECAY

It turns out that people have been complaining about language being “ruined” for as long as they’ve been writing and speaking.

In a TED Talk, linguist John McWhorter shared stories of people complaining about language change through the ages. For example, in 63 AD a Roman scholar groused that students of Latin were writing in an “artificial language”—a language that would become French!

And an 1871 quote from Charles Eliot, the president of Harvard University, might sound familiar:

Bad spelling, incorrectness, as well as inelegance of expression in writing, ignorance of the simplest rules of punctuation . . . are far from rare among young men otherwise well-prepared for college studies.

Young Theodore Roosevelt—a student at Harvard in the 1870s—was possibly among those young men being described. As historian Kathleen Dalton observed in her biography of Roosevelt, the future president would eventually support the revision of American English spelling rules, many of which we still use today, like changing -re endings to -er in words like *center* and changing -our to -or in words like *color*.

THE EMOTICON: MORE THAN A FACE

Today, people are able to communicate rapidly through a range of mediums—and perhaps no linguistic development better indicates changes in the ways we communicate than the ubiquitous emoticon.

The emoticon :)—a colon followed by a parenthesis—is a visual representation of a smiley face turned sideways. Although an emoticon may look like a smile, a frown or any number of facial expressions, it doesn’t represent a face, as many internet users assume. It’s actually intended to convey a feeling (“I’m happy,” or “just joking”).

This meaning is evident even in the first emoticon, credited to Scott Fahlman at Carnegie Mellon University. In a 1982 e-mail, Fahlman suggested :-) as a “joke marker” to indicate wisecracks or sarcasm in text communication. In this legendary e-mail, he also used the first instance of the frown emoticon :-(.

Words that represent these feelings are what linguists call *discourse particles*, or little pieces of language that convey information about the tone of the statement. Folklorist Lee-Ellen Marvin called them the “paralanguage of the internet, the winks which signal the playfulness of a statement over the seriousness it might denote.”

In a study of instant messaging, scholar Shao-Kang Lo describes emoticons as “quasi-nonverbal cues”—something that looks like a

word, but performs the functions of a nonverbal cue, like a hand gesture or nod.

In fact, the variations in how you construct this emoticon can imply something about your identity, just like whether you use a soda, pop or Coke can suggest what part of the United States you come from. For example, as linguist and data scientist Tyler Schnoebelen pointed out in a 2012 study, people who put a “nose” in their emoticons tend to be older than non-nose emoticon users.

Though emoticons have been the subject of numerous studies, individual symbols—which serve a different purpose than emoticons—can add meaning to a message or express meaning all on their own.

FLUID CONVERSATION AND CLARIFIED MEANING

Have you ever seen someone fix a typo in a message with an asterisk? (*asterisk)

The asterisk signals a repair of an error in language. Conversational repair, or the act of correcting ourselves or others in spoken language, has been discussed for decades by conversation analysts in spoken language. Saying “sorry, I meant to say” or “er, I mean” can be awkward and interrupt the dynamics of a spoken conversation.

This conversational move has made its way into online written language, where that awkwardness is reduced to a single symbol. Instead of saying “oops, I misspelled ‘asterisk’ in my previous sentence,” people can avoid a conversational detour by simply typing an asterisk before the word: *asterisk.

That’s not the only use of the asterisk. A pair of them around a word or phrase can indicate emphasis. This style has gradually given way to words in all caps and repeated letters to show intensity and emphasis, as linguist Deborah Tannen and communication scholar Erika Darics have noted. Tannen provides an example of a text message that uses multiple styles to convey an intensely apologetic, sincere tone:

JACKIE I AM SO SO SO SORRY! I thought you were behind us in the cab and then I saw you weren’t!!!! I feel sooooooo bad!
Catch another cab and ill pay for it for youuuuu.

Meanwhile, punctuation marks like hyphens and periods suggest a change in voice and tempo. One example is the ubiquitous ellipses. Traditionally, this mark has been used in text to denote deleted text. Now, it can also indicate a tone of voice that’s trailing off or hesitating, such as the

following example from a conversation in the popular online role-playing game *World of Warcraft*:

So...since we live in the same city, do you wanna like...meet up sometime...?

This use of the ellipses adds that extra meaning to the text and it can also do the work of denoting someone else's turn in the conversation.

It's even been incorporated into user interfaces. In instant messaging and chat programs like Skype, an ellipsis is used to show that the other party is typing.

A SINGLE SYMBOL CONVEYS A COMPLEX MESSAGE

A single symbol can also be an entire message on its own. In her contribution to the book *Discourse 2.0: Language and New Media*, Susan Herring describes how a single question mark can be an entire message that indicates that the user is "confused or does not know what to say."

In other words, a question mark does the job of asking for clarification in a single keystroke. Similarly, a single exclamation point as a message can illustrate surprise and excitement. You can repeat either of these symbols as a superlative to show a greater level of surprise. Consider this exchange in which B uses nothing but symbols to express reactions to A's statements:

A: So I have some good news.

B: ?

A: I got a raise today

B: !

A: And it came with a promotion

B: !!!

These two aren't the only punctuation that can stand on their own as a message. In my 2012 study of *World of Warcraft* players, I found that in this community, and others, the carat (^) can stand alone as an entire message that indicates agreement with another person. Meanwhile, an arrow-shaped symbol (<-) signaled volunteering for a task, like raising a hand in the classroom. Here's a hypothetical interaction:

A: I am so ready for vacation.

B: ^

A: Who wants to go to Florida with me?

B: <-

Far from crippling language, these examples indicate how people can now communicate complex feelings in a streamlined manner—perfect for our modern, fast-paced world.

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT THE READING

1. When was the first emoticon used, and who invented it?
2. According to Collister, “smiley” emoticons do not actually represent faces. What does she think they “convey” (8)?
3. What is a “discourse particle” (10)?
4. What is the purpose of Collister’s first paragraph? Why is it important to both her purpose and her argument?
5. Collister claims that people have been complaining about the decline of language for a long time. What evidence does she use to support this claim? Do you think that language is in decline?

LANGUAGE IN ACTION

Collister performs a rigorous and revealing analysis of different elements of textspeak, such as emoticons, asterisks, question marks, and exclamation points. Indeed, she looks at shades of meaning and tone in much the way a literary critic might analyze a poem. Do you think your own text messages or other electronic communications would reveal a similar complexity? Pull up a recent text conversation between yourself and a friend, family member, or significant other. In these text messages, try to identify the following elements that Collister describes: “discourse particles,” “conversational repair,” and “quasi-nonverbal cues.” Are there other patterns or elements that you notice in your text conversation? In groups of three, share your analyses with your classmates.

WRITING SUGGESTIONS

1. In paragraph 12, Collister writes, “In fact, the variations in how you construct this emoticon can imply something about your identity, just like whether you use a soda, pop, or Coke can suggest what part of the United States you come from.” Does your use of language include any markers that suggest where you are from? Do you use any terms, phrases, or expressions that mark your regional identity? Choose a specific characteristic of your language—a particular word, for example—and explain how it reflects your origins or time in a specific place. You might also explore your relationship with the language of your region. For instance, if you have a recognizable accent, do you *like* it? Do you avoid using regional expressions? Do you embrace them? You may find it helpful to read Richard Lederer’s essay “All-American Dialects” (pp. 187–192) before starting to write.
2. Collister believes that the influence of “textspeak” is ultimately positive. In her conclusion, she claims that this language allows us to “express complex feelings in a streamlined manner—perfect for our modern, fast-paced world.” But she concedes that others disagree. While Collister does not

address counterarguments from specific writers, she alludes to anti-textspeak articles in publications such as the *Daily Mail* and the *Los Angeles Times*. Academic researchers have studied the effects of texting, too. In a 2012 article in the academic journal *New Media & Society*, communications theorists Drew P. Singel and S. Shyam Sundar found a “general negative relationship between the use of techspeak in text messages and scores on a grammar assessment.” What do *you* think? Has textspeak influenced your writing, for better or worse? Do you agree with Collister that textspeak is a good thing, or do you agree with critics who argue that it is harmful to grammar, uses too many abbreviations, or fosters lazy writing habits? Write a brief essay in which you take a stand on this issue. Feel free to draw on both your personal experience and outside sources.



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