

# The Text Generation: Is English the Next Dead Language?

Written by:  
Kristy Roschke  
Arizona State University  
TWC 501

July 2, 2008

# I.

## an introduction to computer-mediated communication

The English language has been evolving since its inception – one read of *Beowulf* or Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* is enough to be reminded of how far removed we are from the language of our ancestors. But in the wake of the technological explosion brought about by the Internet and mobile phones, a variety of computer-mediated communication forms have escalated the process by which language – in this case, written language – adapts to fit our needs.

The purpose of this paper is to explore how computer-mediated communication (CMC), specifically instant messaging (IM) and text messaging (or SMS), is effecting the way young people formally communicate in academic and business settings. Does so-called “text speak” really threaten traditional language rules and usage traditions held dear by high school English teachers and grandparents? Or is it time to move past

all the formality and accept the fact that the simplicity of text speak makes it the most efficient means of communication in a society that expects instant gratification?

The written word and its ongoing degradation have long been a topic of conversation among linguists, educators, and concerned adults. Rules of spelling and grammar are time-tested and have, for the most part, stood up to the introduction of popular slang terms and technological advancements. Casualties along the way are to be expected, the most recent being the near extinction of the hyphen as an important compound-word maker (New York Times, 2007). However, our society generally accepts certain guidelines for writing and has played along dutifully, with guidance from die-hard elementary school English teachers. In contrast to spoken language, written language is durable, thus leaving more of an impact, whether positive or neg-

ative. Because written language is subject to interpretation but not typically to reply (Baron, 2005), the ability to craft clear, unambiguous messages is paramount. However, advances in CMC are fundamentally changing the way we view written language, arguably for better and for worse.



*Americans  
send one  
billion text  
messages  
each day.*



The Blackberry from Research in Motion is so habit-forming among business professionals that it’s been dubbed the “Crackberry.” T-Mobile Sidekick is popular among young people who are avid texters. *Source: T-Mobile.com, Blackberry.com*

# II.

## cmc: the good and bad news

### The Good News: We are Writing More

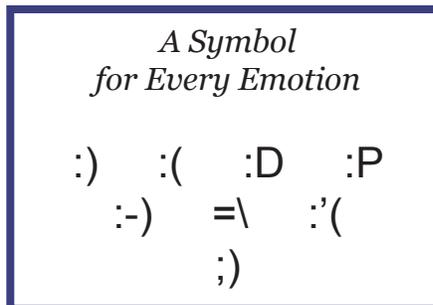
It all started with e-mail. What had been a voice-centric society since the propagation of the telephone began to see a shift back to the written word once e-mail became widely available for business and personal use. E-mail was truly a communication breakthrough, bringing people all over the world together through their personal computers. In the business world, it was revolutionary. Workers added another task to their multi-tasking baskets, as they were able to communicate, at times simultaneously, via telephone and e-mail. Today, an estimated 90 million Americans routinely use e-mail (Online NewsHour).

The ubiquitousness of e-mail in homes and offices across the country prompted a shift in communication from spoken to written communication that has continued as more people, particularly young adults and teens, have adopted IM and text messaging services (also known as SMS). Traditional e-mail was set up to emulate a traditional letter or fax situation, whereby users sent a one-sided message and then waited for a reply. IM and SMS, on the other hand, have created more of a dialogic atmosphere in which users engage in a two-way conversation. As usage of these tools becomes more prevalent, conversations that commonly occurred over the phone have be-

gun to take place through CMC, thus bringing about a resurgence of written communication.

### The Bad News: We are Getting Sloppy

One might think that the fact that we are writing more is good for the collective writing talents of our society; however this may not be the case, particularly with young people.



A study published by the Pew Internet & American Life Project found that although 85% of teens age 12-17 engage in CMC, only 60% of them think of these electronic messages as “writing” (3).

Teens see a clear distinction between the writing they do in school and the personal communication they partake in using IM and text messaging. And while they recognize that the informality of text speak is inappropriate for formal writing situations, 64% say that it occasionally finds its way into school assignments. Hardest hit are the conventions of capitalization and punctuation, as 50% of teens say they sometimes use informal writing styles rather than the established rules in writing assignments (Pew Internet & American Life Project). Additionally, 38% say they have used text shortcuts such as LOL (laugh out loud), and 25% have used emoticons (symbols like smiley faces) in school work (Pew Internet & American Life Project).

### *The Pew Internet & American Life Writing, Technology and Teens Project at a Glance*

- 85% of teens age 12-17 engage in some form of CMC
- 50% of teens say they sometimes use improper capitalization and punctuation in their school assignments
- 38% of teens say they have used text shortcuts like ‘LOL’ in their school assignments
- 25% of teens say they have used emoticons in their school writing
- 83% of teens say there is a greater need to write well today than there was 20 years ago.

# III.

## the evolution of 'text speak'

Although it may seem that the text speak that has sprung from CMC is irreparably damaging young people's writing skills, several studies have recorded contrary positions. One study of 71 teens conducted by researchers at the University of Toronto found that use of IM and SMS may actually help students gain a firm command of the language (Alcoba & Leong, 2006). Likewise, researchers at Coventry University in the UK found that text messaging may be positively linked to academic achievement (Smith, 2006). Specifically, the study found that students who used text messaging jargon such as phonetic spelling were better at spelling and writing in traditional contexts.

Much of the text speak language was invented out of necessity. IM situations are generally treated more as verbal conversations; therefore people using IM are more likely to

write as they talk. Space is also a consideration when using CMC. Most mobile carriers allow SMS messages of 160 characters, forcing users to be concise in their communication. Using the text speak "LOL" for the term "Laugh Out Loud" saves texters nine characters; compound this over an entire message and the sender may be able to convey much more than if using traditional language.

Like it or not, language adapts to fit the medium (Green, 2007), and with 12 billion IM messages (Quon-Haase, 2008) and one billion text messages (Gerson, 2008) being sent each day, this medium is clearly responsible for much of our daily communication. According to Wikipedia (2008), the objective of text speak "is to use the fewest number of characters needed to convey a comprehensible message." Therefore it's no surprise that grammar, punctuation, and

spelling are often ignored for the purpose of keeping a message brief. The question then becomes whether or not this purposeful adaptation of the language is destroying young people's ability to write using proper language conventions, and whether or not it even matters anymore.

All aspects of American society have become increasingly informal in recent history. As telephone and e-mail conversations replaced formal letters, and as Silicon Valley dot-com companies introduced Casual Fridays to the rest of the week in the late 1990s, modern conveniences have helped us to turn our backs on the traditional standards of etiquette popularized by Emily Post. Baron (2007) describes this blasé attitude toward language as "linguistic whateverism" (p. 15), and although the prevalence of CMC certainly plays a role in this attitude, it is

Table 1  
Differences between American Text Messaging and IM (Ling & Baron, 2007)

Feature	Texting	IM
<b>Length</b>		
transmissions (in words)	7.7 words	6.0 words
transmissions (in characters)	35 characters	29 characters
one-word transmissions	3.7% of messages	18.8% of messages
multisentence transmissions	60% of messages	34% of messages
sentences per transmission	1.76 per transmission	1.27 per transmission
<b>Emoticons and lexical shortenings</b>		
abbreviations	3.2% of words	0% of words
contractions	84.7% of potential	68.1% of potential
apostrophes	31.9% of contractions	93.9% of contractions

# IV.

## where do we go from here?

not the lone cause. Greater societal factors also have an impact.

Written language was created as a means to record spoken language – it did not begin to have any real clout on its own until the invention of the printing press. This marked the widespread advancement of literacy and boosted written language to a new level of importance in its own right. However, in the past fifty years, as education has become more student-centered and educators pay less attention to the formal rules of written expression, it is no wonder that young people are less inclined to concern themselves with the intricacies of these rules (Baron, 2007). Additionally, as attention spans have decreased and the need for instant gratification has grown, the writing process has been whittled away accordingly: proofreading is now synonymous with spell check. This may be cause for concern as CMC becomes even more prevalent, as these forms of communication do not even offer spell check. One possible ramification of this is that written language will once again be relegated to simply a means of recording what we speak (Baron, 2007). As of yet, however, research has not found that young people are entirely ditching what they learned in school in favor of text speak.

A study by Baron (2004) showed that university students used fewer abbreviations and other text speak in IM than what had been reported by the media; Thurlow reported similar findings related to SMS (as cited in Quon-Haase, 2008). Baron found that of 1718 words studied, 31 were

abbreviations, 90 were acronyms, and 49 were emoticons. These findings indicate that audience still plays an important role in written expression, which should make language preservationists breathe a sigh of relief. For it is the understanding of one's audience that enables proper language usage: Just as people are more inclined to speak casually to their peers while keeping it formal with their superiors, people typically choose their written words based on what is appropriate for the person receiving the message.

### **It's All About the Audience**

Teens have always peppered their conversations with slang and improper grammar techniques, however that has not typically translated into their writing. And before teens communicated with their friends through CMC, they were passing hand-written notes in class – documents they were not likely to proofread before sending. The idea that using acronyms like WBS (for Write Back Soon) when writing notes to friends would have a lasting effect on the language is unfounded, yet many see CMC as a threat to the established principles of writing. Although teens have more opportunities to write in a casual manner than ever before, they have not lost their ability to adjust their language according to audience or situation (Quon-Haase, 2008). On the contrary, it may be that this increased level of written activity is making all CMS users more flexible, as they recreate spoken conversations in written form (Quon-Haase, 2008).

### *Text Speak*

101

- lol - laugh out loud
- jk - just kidding
- idk - I don't know
- idc - I don't care
- btw - by the way
- omg - oh my God
- wbu - what about you
- nm - not much
- k - okay
- whatev - whatever
- cuz - because
- ppl - people
- r- are
- u - you
- y - why

# IV.

## where do we go from here?

Apple is launching a 3G version of its popular iPhone in July, 2008. The new phone will be able to access the Internet and email twice as fast as the first-generation iPhone, making it even easier to engage in CMC. *Source: Apple.com*



plete conversation (Mitchell, 2008).

As more businesses become open to the idea of utilizing IM and SMS as a means for internal and external communication, the use of related jargon will undoubtedly increase. Therefore, business people must learn to adopt these methods or risk becoming obsolete. Employers recognize the importance of good writing skills (Collier, 2007) and this often plays into hiring decisions. However, it may be that the ability to utilize both traditional communication and CMC in the appropriate settings is the real skill.

Educators cannot afford to ignore the popularity and prevalence of CMC. It is already quite obvious how CMC affects the lives of their students, but it creates a generation and knowledge gap if educators are unfamiliar with how to use it. Although it may seem detrimental to students' ability to strengthen their formal writing skills, educators should acknowledge CMC as a valid form of communication alongside others taught in the classroom. Incorporating CMC into existing curricula will not only help better prepare students for the demands of the modern workplace, but it will also provide educators an opportunity to effectively teach the difference between formal writing and CMC. Students already learn the importance of audience

### Utilizing the Power of CMC for Good

Much of the focus on the increased use of CMC relates to its negative effect on traditional written language, but there is much more to the story. CMC offers people a means to instantly communicate virtually anything at any time, which makes it a good fit for business communication, where function often rules over form. The business world has typically been quick to harness the power of technological advances – the typewriter changed company communication (Baron, 2003) while the personal computer, the fax machine, and the Internet enhanced the functionality

of written communication by making it even faster and easier. Employers and employees alike recognize the advantages to always being connected, and because IM and SMS are unobtrusive and instantaneous, workers can increase productivity through advanced multitasking. The disadvantages to instant communication can be serious – absent-minded comments that can't be taken back, sloppiness in form, foolish mistakes made by not paying attention – however, the modern business environment demands peak output. IM, in particular, can be very useful as it allows for quick answers to questions without the demands of a com-

and tone in written communication; how this applies to CMC is a necessary component (Collier, 2007). Incorporating CMC into classroom activities may also help actively engage students, making them more likely to comprehend and apply what they have learned.

### Final Words

Problems with students sneaking slang or colloquialisms into their formal writing did not begin with CMC. Nor is this language that has developed in order to aid in efficient CMC used solely by young people. That younger people are the fastest to pick it up is understandable, as they tend to be on the cutting edge of most trends. And while adults may be quick to point out that they already fully understand proper writing etiquette thanks to years of experience, young people are also learning those rules. It's the adults – educators, parents, employers – who must work together to ensure their younger counterparts put these rules to work. When a 15-year-old includes text speak in a job application (Friess, 2003), a parent or potential employer should step in to explain why it is inappropriate and then model a better approach.

CMC creates a 'gray area'— communication that falls between formal and informal, such as sending an IM to a professor or texting a boss. These situations can be confusing for adults and young people alike, and how an individual handles them depends as much on knowledge of social etiquette as knowledge of writing conventions.

Trying to keep young people from using abbreviations, acronyms, and emoticons is as impossible a task as asking them to give up CMC altogether. This form of expression is simply the latest addition to an ever-evolving language and it will continue to change, no doubt creating newer jargon.

Chaucer was able to take certain liberties with written language in his *Canterbury Tales* because such prescribed rules did not yet exist and people weren't stuck in their ways (The Economist, 2008). Text speak is built on that same pioneering spirit. IM and SMS are entirely new vehicles for communication, so it seems only natural that an entirely new set of conventions would accompany them. Is it trendy? Sure, it is. But oftentimes the trend becomes the norm, and based on the fact that our society keeps rushing through life ever faster, this trend is here to stay. As mobile devices continue to permeate every aspect of life, CMC and its corresponding jargon offer a means for quick and effective communication that can be positively utilized by both young people and adults.

# VI.

## references

---

- Alcoba, N. & Leong, M. (2006). Instant messaging gets bad rap, linguists say. *National Post*. Retrieved June 23, 2008, from <http://www.canada.com/topics/technology/story.html?id=ee3c3bc5-c782-413c-8bfc-17bef2d8fc49&k=33268>
- Baron, N.S. (2003). Language of the internet. *The Stanford Handbook for Language Engineers*. Stanford: CSLI Publications, 59-127.
- Baron, N. S. (2005). The written turn. *English Language and Linguistics*, 9, 359-376.
- Baron, N.S. (2007). Whatever: Is the internet destroying language? Lecture given at University of Karlstad, Department of English, Karlstad, Sweden, October 5.
- Collier, L. (2007). The shift to 21st-century literacies. *The Council Chronicle*, 17(2), 4-8.
- The Economist (2008, April). Homo mobilis. Retrieved June 25, 2008, from [http://123hints.com/other\\_media/mobility/Economist-Mobility-Homomobilis.pdf](http://123hints.com/other_media/mobility/Economist-Mobility-Homomobilis.pdf)
- Friess, S. (2003, March). 'Yo, can u plz help me write English?'. *The USA Today*. Retrieved June 23, 2008, from [http://www.usatoday.com/life/2003-03-31-chat\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/life/2003-03-31-chat_x.htm)
- Gerson, M. (2008, January). Texting the English language. *The New York Sun*. Retrieved June 23, 2008, from <http://www.nysun.com/opinion/texting-the-english-language/70048/>
- Green, J. (2007). Intrtxtlty. *Critical Quarterly*, 49(3), 124-128.
- Ling, R & Baron, N.S. (2007). Text messaging and IM: Linguistic comparison of American college data. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*. 26(3). 291-298.
- Mitchell, D. (2008, June). Keep it short, make it instant. *The New York Times*, 5.
- Online NewsHour (2003, January). You've got e-mail. Audio transcript retrieved June 24, 2008, from [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/science/jan-june03/email\\_1-6.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/science/jan-june03/email_1-6.html)
- Pew Internet & American Life Project. (2008). Writing, technology and teens.. Retrieved June 25, 2008, from [http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP\\_Writing\\_Report\\_FINAL3.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Writing_Report_FINAL3.pdf)
- Quon-Haase, A. (2008). Instant messaging on campus: Use and integration in university students' everyday communication.. Bloomington, IN: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading English and Communication. *The Information Society*, 24(2), 105-115.
- Smith, A. (2006, September). Texting slang aiding children's language skills. *The Guardian*. Retrieved June 23, 2008, from <http://education.guardian.co.uk/schools/story/0,,1869915,00.html>
- USA Today. (2006, November 13). Officials: Students can use 'text speak' on tests. Retrieved June 25, 2008, from [http://www.usatoday.com/news/offbeat/2006-11-13-text-speak\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/offbeat/2006-11-13-text-speak_x.htm).
- Wikipedia. (n.d.) Retrieved June 25, 2008, from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Text\\_speak](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Text_speak)