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Abstract
The paper argues that Short Message Service (SMS) technology and the associated phenomenon of ‘txting’ (abbreviated language typified by extensive use of acronyms and minimal punctuation) are contributing factors to declining literacy. It is readily acknowledged that English should not be viewed as rigid or fixed, but rather has been characterised by both change and development, which can be traced back (at least) as far as the middle ages. This process is demonstrated through relevant research, as well as by way of practical examples. The paper’s primary contention is that while ‘txting’ certainly represents language change, the other necessary criterion, development, is, if not halted, then seriously curtailed. This is again demonstrated through practical examples, and through actively contesting contrary arguments in relevant literature, including reported findings that students are generally capable of distinguishing appropriate settings for the use of ‘txt’, and the charge that declining literacy is nothing more than moral panic. The paper in no way advocates that society should abstain from the use of new technologies, but does advise conscious action and a degree of caution with regard to the ways in which such advances are taken up.

Key Terms

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2939 words
There may be a Ghost in the Machine, but it can’t Spell or Punctuate.
SMS txting as a Contributing Factor to Declining Literacy.
(or wotz rong w my splng? y do u care?)

In an age where technology is advancing at an exponential rate, and we are increasingly in pursuit of the latest, fastest or most compact electronic marvel, it is sometimes too easy to forget that, for all of the benefits, there may be downsides as well. In particular, this paper proposes to examine the possible detrimental effects that SMS (short message service) technology and the related phenomenon of txting (Carrington, 2005: 161) (abbreviated language that originally emerged to make most effective use of this service) have had on literacy.

From the outset, it needs to be clear that there is no viable argument supporting the notion that language should remain stagnant, fixed in time as perfectly formed in some idyllic and arbitrary golden age. Such a conception was perhaps an idée fixe of the high brow literary canon, as espoused by the likes of Eliot, Leavis and so on in the early to middle decades of the twentieth century (see, for example Eliot’s Notes Towards the Definition of Culture (1948) or, for a succinct overview, Turner’s British Cultural Studies. An Introduction (1990: 42-4)). To backtrack a little, the initial efforts to standardise and concretise English language can be traced to the emergence of the first dictionaries in the early 1600s (World Book, 2008: 194). Elaborating further on this historical lineage, Baron notes that the process of standardisation …

… was a slow one, with different components of the language standardised at different times. The core of a written standard was established in the mid-fifteenth century, adoption of the modern set of punctuation marks was in place by the early seventeenth century, while consistency in spelling took many more decades. The notion of standardised pronunciation was even longer in coming. For the next two centuries, an increasingly normative approach to grammar resulted in volumes of usage dos and don’ts, some of which reflected prevailing usage among the upper classes and some of which were simply made up (cited in Snyder, 2008: 17).
Thus, language is ever-evolving, and will (and, indeed, *should*) change and develop in response to context. This is both natural and to be expected, otherwise we would all still be speaking in Shakespearean, Chaucerian, or some other, even earlier dialectical form of English. Change *and develop*; for the purposes of this discussion, the second term is crucial. The evolution of English language can be seen as one whereby meanings become more precise, more defined, as nuances of spelling and grammar are pinned down over time. Now, although English as it currently stands is far from perfect in this regard, with a great many words relying on context for their meaning to be fully apprehended (the *light* shining down, for example, is of an entirely different order to the *light*-headed feeling that results from too much wine, or to *bear* the load as opposed to a *bear* in the woods), the language has nonetheless progressed a long way from the internal inconsistencies that prevailed in, say, the time of Chaucer (some 250 years prior to those early dictionaries).

To provide a couple of practical examples, Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Book of the Duchess* contains readily identifiable internal grammatical / spelling inconsistencies: On line 71, the word ‘her’ is used (Benson, 1987: 331), a mediaeval equivalent of the current word, *their*, while on line 182, the same word is reproduced as ‘here’ (Benson, 1987: 332). Likewise, on line 924, the word ‘roode’ appears (Benson, 1987: 341) (which means *cross*, believe it or not), while in an almost identical grammatical context, the same word is reproduced as ‘rode’ on line 992 (Benson, 1987: 342). Now, while it may be argued that this is quibbling over pedantry, such as whether or not to include the *u* in colour and flavour (the version of Microsoft Word I’m using rejects such spellings, by the way), it is argued here that one letter can indeed make a difference, and should not be dismissed out of hand. For example, there is all the difference in the world between *wed* and *weed*, or between *wad* and *wade*, to invoke some similar phonetic constructions.
So, why should we care about all of this? The problem, fundamentally, is that the process of language development just described, through dictionaries, high modernism and so on, appears to have halted, or at least to have taken a serious retrograde step. Further, it is the primary contention of this paper that the current crises surrounding declining standards of English should, at least partially, be laid at the feet of technological advance. Now, while none would argue that we should abstain from SMS or from use of the internet, perhaps a degree of caution or concern is called for.

w8 l sec wotz rong wit dis y u care bout my splng? c u l8r. There have been a plethora of articles in the press – both reputable and otherwise – in recent times expressing concern over declining literacy of this kind. While I do not propose to pass off journalism as academic research, a few titles are nonetheless illustrative: consider ‘SMS Spells End for English’ (Livingstone, 2007: 18), ‘The write stuff is so hard to find’ (Lawrence, 2007: 41), or ‘Shocking result of our spelling survey betrayal of kids’ (Lawrence, 2006: 11).

In academia, responses to such alarming tales have been somewhat more tempered, but it is still possible to take issue with some of the findings that have emerged. For example, ‘Mildred Rojo-Laurilla, an assistant professor at De La Salle University … [in] Manila, asked a group of undergraduates, both mobile phone users and non-users, to sit grammar and spelling tests … [She] found that there were “no statistical differences in the grammar and spelling scores of both cellular phone owners and non-owners”’ (North, 2003: 22). Now, while this appears to be good news, the proposed explanation for the findings is more troubling. Rojo-Laurilla suggested that ‘because these students are in college, they might no longer be malleable to change in terms of competencies acquired in elementary or high school … These competencies in grammar and spelling have been acquired at an age before they even acquired their cellular phones’ (North, 2003: 22). Detailed study is not required to establish that it is now the norm for high school students to have mobile phones (in Australia, at very least), and neither
is it unusual for primary school children to be provided with mobiles by their parents, generally in the interests of security. Thus, if Rojo-Laurilla’s supposition proves true, then the implications for students currently working their way through the primary and secondary systems are considerably more dire.

In a similar vein, the findings of a study conducted by Adams in 2006 are also open to question. She concluded that ‘It appears as if teachers may be more worried about the potential impact of Instant Messaging than their students are’ (2006: 41). In response to this, one need only point out that students may not be the ones best positioned to know if their literacy is suffering, especially if it is. Surely the opinions of educators – trained experts in their field – are more reliable in this regard.

To take issue with one further study, ‘Ylva Hard af Segerstad, a researcher at the linguistics department of Goteborg university in Sweden, [argues as follows:] “I don’t see why SMS should damage a person’s learning of English at all. Language use in SMS builds on the language skills that one already masters, and one does not exclude the other”’ (North, 2003: 22). But what of punctuation? Characteristically, SMS does indeed largely exclude it; the work at hand fails to see how repeated practice in *not* using an integral element of English language communication could fail to be detrimental to one’s overall literacy.

One of the more lucid arguments against declining literacy concerns framing the debate in terms of discourse surrounding moral panic. A common approach taken by such arguments is to engage in particularistic language analysis, with a view to unpacking, and thereby discrediting, reports of literary decline, largely, it seems, on the grounds of emotive language. For example, in one paper of this kind, Carrington argues, with reference to a related radio interview and BBC article, that…

The use of the term ‘addicts’ is interesting. There is almost the unspoken comment here that recreational use of texting may ultimately lead to addiction and a lowering of an individual’s ability to shift between text types according to social context – that increasing mastery and use of txt must ipso facto lead to
withering skills around other text forms embraced within the parameters of Standard English (Carrington, 2005: 167).

Whether one concedes that ‘addicts’ is an emotive term or not, the work at hand cannot agree with the sentiment expressed. As noted just above, it is difficult to understand how punctuation could not decline were it not used. In later pages of the same article, discourse analysis of this type becomes even more explicit:

This invisible layer of meaning could be seen in the use of terms[: …] ‘addicts’, ‘hieroglyphics’, ‘easier’, ‘declining standards of spelling and grammar’, ‘normal writing’, ‘succumb’, ‘travesty’ – that positioned both txt and txt users as deviant in relation to the established model of literacy practice (Carrington, 2005: 169).

This argument is quite compelling, not least because, in the course of its being made, it incapacitates its detractors, virtually stripping them of their capacity to speak. Any alternative positions can likewise be broken down on a semantic level, the various components of their arguments categorised, codified, identified as discourse and thereby dismissed. Looking over the work at hand, it could be argued that there is emotive, perhaps even ‘loaded’ language to be found (the use of ‘decline’ in the title, for example; phrases such as ‘serious retrograde step’). However, assuming that one possesses proficient language abilities, why not engage fully with the nuances of the written word, and utilise the phrasing deemed most appropriate to the case being made? If not this, then what? I might as well use txt. OMG!

Condensed and abbreviated language, intended to save time and space in SMS messages, has indeed led to written language practices that are highly questionable. The use of (the sounds of) numbers to stand for words, or of letters to stand for words, dropped letters, substituted letters, and a general lack of punctuation, can all be identified as retrograde steps, precisely because meaning is becoming less clear as a result, and considerably more dependent on context for intended meaning to be attained. This is not rhetoric, nor is it constructed discourse designed to incite moral panic. The decline is demonstrable. C U? When positioned together like this, the fact that the letters represent the phrase See you (as opposed to Sea you, See ewe or
perhaps *Sea ewe* is clear. However, it didn’t used to be necessary for context to drive meaning to this degree; each of the whole words above carries clear meaning in its own right, as an individual unit that contributes to the meaning of the sentence in which it appears, not one that relies on the sentence for meaning to be reached. To reiterate a point, this is not to suggest that such dependence on context does not occur in English on a regular basis, but it is still contended here that these newer forms are (anti-)grammar of an entirely different order, and their overall effect is to the detriment, rather than the development of language. Put simply, where once there was more clarity, now there is less. Likewise, grammatical devices such as capital letters and apostrophes operate as signifiers of the commencement of ideas, of ownership, of the relationships between things, and so on. These are the finer nuances of language, and the removal of such signposting is to be lamented.

Importantly, perhaps the greatest problem with texting is that, at least so far, it has no standard form. While a Google search for ‘txt dictionary’ turns up a range of contenders, none have achieved recognition as a definitive form (except by their own proclamations), and there are considerable discrepancies, not only between, but also within them. For example, the text message dictionary to be found at Webwasp.co.uk contains four entries for the word ‘Thanks’ (‘THN’, ‘THX’, ‘TNX’ and ‘TXS’) and two for ‘Thank you’ (‘THANQ’ and ‘TY’). Similarly, the website claiming to contain ‘The Largest List of Text Message Shorthand’ (www.netlingo.com) purports that the shorthand expression explored just above, *C U*, can also, under some circumstances, stand for the expression ‘Cracking Up’. These examples are indicative of a readily evident trend and are also, I suspect, somewhat of an understatement of the actual case: *wot or wat or wht, or da or d or th* (What the *#!?). The permutations are, if not infinite, at least profoundly disturbing. It appears that we are in danger of regressing, back beyond the dictionaries of the 1600s, to something akin to (or worse than?) Chaucerian grammatical irregularities, when we all had heavier linguistic *roodes* (or is it *rodes*) to bear.
Now, perhaps none of this would matter, if such linguistic gymnastics were limited to text-messaging, where brevity is the order of the day, because shorter is generally cheaper, and where senders and receivers are usually known to one another, meaning that particular individuals can become used to one another’s grammatical foibles. Unsurprisingly, and perhaps inevitably, however, this is not the case; texting inconsistencies are finding their way into other, more traditional language contexts. With regard to students’ own perceptions of whether texting was affecting their academic performance, one study found that ‘The individuals in the focus group all agreed that typically these [such] errors are caught before a published or final copy is turned in for a grade’ (Adams, 2006: 39). If I might refute this from personal experience of teaching a large first-year media and communications unit, it must be said that this is simply not the case. Texting errors certainly do appear in academic writing from time to time and, if a lack of, or poor, punctuation is taken into account, then a strong case might be mounted for SMS as at least contributing to declining literacy standards.

To conclude with one further personal observation / anecdote, I received a thank you email from a student earlier this year with the subject line ‘u rok:-)’. A nice sentiment, to be sure, and it’s a prime example of how texting is making meaning less, rather than more clear. For whatever it’s worth, I’m not sure whether ‘I rock’ or whether ‘I am okay’ – either way is alright with me, but that’s not really the point. In any case, the body of the email was also replete with texting abbreviations. The frightening thing is, the student in question received 85% on her final assignment. That is to say, she can write well, but actively chooses not to. From a single example, of course, it’s not possible to extrapolate what the sociological implications of this might be, but they don’t seem particularly encouraging.

In a sense, this is a paper without a conclusion, or perhaps a story in which the ending is not yet known; a problem has been identified, but no real attempt has been made to suggest a solution. Nonetheless, to raise awareness of an issue, in forums such as this, is perhaps a first
step in that direction. Clearly, a lack of engagement with technology is not a solution, but perhaps a greater and more deliberate consideration of the actual forms of that engagement would yield positive results.

References


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There is always the possibility that the lady in question cheated on her final assignment, and that it was not her own work. In some ways, given the alternatives, I find this scenario the most appealing.