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Ways Texting Is Ruining Changing English

Yesterday, I graded a practice SAT essay containing the following:

"Can good and bad choices both lead to negative consequences? im not sure that they can -- u should know if a decicion u make today could lead to a bad outcome tonite:)"

The student received a score of 2 out of 6. Not a 1 though: it got a bit better, and hey, at least they attempted an argument.

We've all heard the stories about how texting has impacted our kids... and now this, among my own students.

Is text messaging ruining English? Debatable, as we shall see. **But is text messaging** (along with other forms of digital communication) *changing English*? U btrr beleve it.

1) New Words: Webster, WTH!?

Look in the big dictionary at the library: "SMS" and "LOL" are already there. "OMG" and "sexting" are entries on dictionary websites. It's only a matter of time before "LMAO" infiltrates children's literature. Maybe it already has.

New technology spawns new words, just like all new culture does. But to argue that this is a bad thing is to deny the very flexibility that makes language useful. Just ask two guys who probably added more words to the English language than anybody, William Shakespeare and Noah Webster.

Is text messaging going to contribute some neologisms to our language? Of course it will ("Text message" went into Webster's a long time ago). Is every stupid thing kids put in their texts going to become a word? Of course not. Thk GOD.

2) Brevity

How many times have you had a 180-character thought that needed to be pared down into a 160-character text or a 140-character Tweet? And though silly abbreviations and truncated spellings are two solutions to this problem, so are eliminating superfluous words and not rambling on. Or in other words, being a better writer.

The SAT and ACT (and other tests) are *huge* on concise writing and grammatical brevity, and as someone who is involved in education, I have to say this is one area where I think texting is actually helping kids' writing. One thing high school kids suck at most is padding up their essays' word counts by repeating the same things over and over again, and finally I have a way of relating this to them (other than saying "don't do this or you'll be working at Arby's your whole life").

Yes, there's the short-attention-span thing, but one could argue kids had that problem way before they ever got cell phones. And to those who argue that texting, while discouraging wordiness, also encourages simple sentences with limited vocabulary, I'd like to point to another type of writing that strictly limits the number and types of words people can use. It's called poetry.

Cramming a verbose thought—even if it's just about what a jerk your BFF is being—into a terse text message requires the ability to manipulate language. And isn't that all writing is?

3) Spelling/Reading/Writing

We've all heard it: texting is making kids terrible spellers/writers/readers/human beings/etc. A recent *New York Times* study showed that while American students' math scores have increased significantly in recent years, their reading scores have barely improved at all. Could texting be to blame?

Maybe. But don't we still have kids winning spelling bees and getting into Harvard? Do the results above show that we're doing something wrong in reading, or something *right* in math? The reading scores are still *improving*, after all. At least texting encourages kids to read. If you can call that reading.

True, kids write some atrocious non-English in their text messages. But that doesn't necessarily mean they don't know how to spell correctly in other situations. As that *Boondocks* episode with Samuel L. Jackson likes to point out, "the absence of evidence is not the evidence of absence." Just because a kid texts "CUL8R" doesn't mean he or she doesn't know the grammatically proper version would be "I will see you later." It might mean they simply chose not to use it, given their medium and audience.

"But what about your own example, above!?" you scream, in the comments. Yes, but I think it's only fair to point out that this kid was kind of a moron (he didn't do so well on the SAT's math portion, either). Yes, I've read some terrible essays where tons of words are spelled incorrectly. But I've also read some amazing essays, where no words are spelled incorrectly. And trust me, *all* these kids text.

Then there's the possibility that texting actually *helps* writing skills, as this study suggests, by raising literacy and phonological awareness. Having to encode and decode acronym-laden texts reminds me of those puzzle games as a kid where you had to figure out what "88 Ks on a P" stood for (88 Keys on a Piano). And those were supposed to make you smarter, right? Maybe texting is turning kids into better problem solvers! Maybe *that's* why our math scores are higher!

Despite all my defense, I will still say I think texting *does* have a slightly negative effect, on spelling at least (if for no other reason than the non-incentive it provides to practice spelling

words correctly, especially advanced words). And some words get spelled wrong so often (tonite/tonight) in texting that students really are starting to lose track of which way is correct.

But to the clamorers who say that texting is ruining kids' language skills, I ask, "Compared to when?" Compared to the 1960's, when every kid was a reading/writing dynamo? Ask your parents if this was true. A lot of teenagers are just idiots, in any generation.

Conclusion

In the end, the best way to think of text messaging is not as a degradation of English, and certainly not as an improvement of it, but rather as a separate language entirely. Good students today are effectively bilingual: they turn on the Textese when conversing with their friends, then turn it off when it's time to write a paper. Students who can't dance nimbly between the two fall behind, just as non-adaptive kids have always done.

Will future English be altered by text messages? Yes; cell phones are not going out of style anytime soon. Will it ever be acceptable to write "OMG, IM totes rite 4 ths j0b!!1!!" in a resume? No, because of the slow-changing, selective nature of formal language. Young people will continually push for changes in language, and older people will continually resist these changes -- that's just how humans work. Most new variations of English will fall by the wayside; those that strike a deeper resonance and actually improve language will stick around and may eventually become formal. Sort of like new English memes trying out for a talent show; those that are best and most appropriate rise to the top and join the professional ranks. Sort of like *American Idol*. "LOL" is the new Kelly Clarkson.

Now there's an analogy young people can get behind.