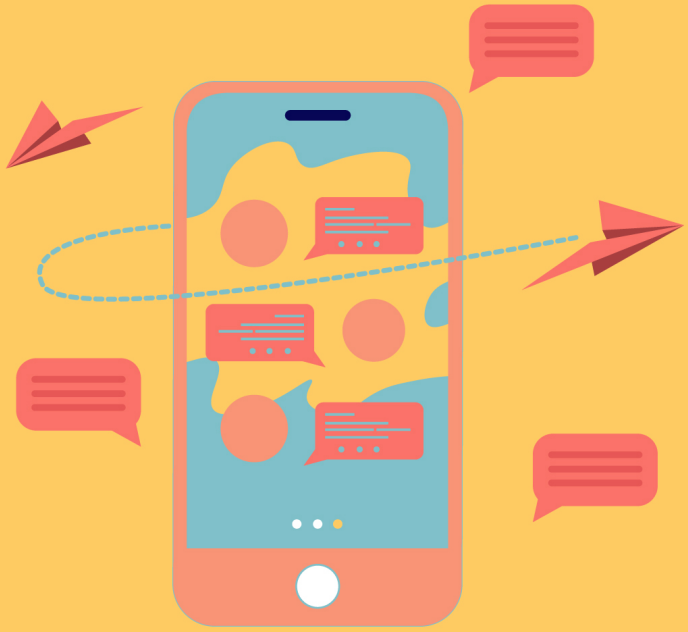
SUMMARY

TXTNG

DAVID CRYSTAL



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Summary of “Txtng” by David Crystal

Written by Alyssa Burnette

Engage with the debate about texting and social media.

Introduction

I recently watched a show in which a teenaged character remarked, “I honestly think calling someone is one of the worst things you can do to them!” And I was surprised to find that I agreed! Texting, quite simply, just seems easier. Unlike a phone call, which requires you to stop what you’re doing and engage in an audible conversation with someone in real time, I can text while going about my daily routine with little to no interruptions. In fact, when my mother asks to call me, I instinctively find myself asking if something is wrong; texting has become so commonplace that a phone call feels like something that would be necessitated only by an emergency.

Unsurprisingly, however, this can be a divisive opinion. While many members of the younger generations are even more supportive of texting than I, that view isn’t shared by everyone. In fact, many people still seem to have a rather Victorian approach to technology, reminiscent of the world’s first telephone owners who jumped and screamed a little every time the phone rang and referred to it as “that infernal machine.” Many are still confused by texting and unwilling to adapt and learn how it works. Still others ardently affirm that text abbreviations and social media slang are destroying the English language. (Remember when we all used to type stuff like “gr8” and “c u later?”) But which opinion is the right one? Is texting truly destroying our language? Over the course of this summary, we’ll take a closer look at the texting debate and find the answers to these questions.

Is Texting a Threat to the English Language?

Language is never static. By their very definition, all languages are fluid and constantly evolving in response to the needs of their speakers. For example, just consider the prose employed in medieval writings. Most of the spellings used in these texts are almost unrecognizable when compared to the spellings we use today, even if they are the exact same words! Just look at the differences between logique (logic), warre (war), sinne (sin), toune (town) and tru (true)! The same is true of det (debt), dout (doubt), sissors (scissors), iland (island) and ake (ache)! Obviously, the spellings shown in parenthesis are the standards we use today, but the standardization of the English language didn't begin in earnest until the nineteenth century when we developed the study of phonetics and Noah Webster wrote the world's first dictionary. (Fun fact: he's part of the reason why we have the Merriam-Webster dictionary today!)

But before Webster published his dictionary in 1806, people were more or less free to spell anything in the way that sounded best to them. There was no real standardization, no way of saying, "This is the correct or incorrect way to speak or spell," and so you might find dozens of different spellings for simple words like "color" or "egg." Since then, new words have evolved and been added to the dictionary all the time. In fact, even as recently as April 2020, we've added a host of new words to the English lexicon, including such terms as "fan-art, deepfake, contactless, social distancing, herd immunity, and self-isolate." Some of these words indicate a shift in the concerns of the era; words like "contactless, herd immunity, and social distancing," have of course sprung up in relation to the global pandemic and our Coronavirus anxiety. The same is true of abbreviations such as WFH (working from home) and PPE (personal protective equipment) which are commonly used in texting and social media and which have also been added to the dictionary.

So, what can we learn from these examples? And what do they have to do with our analysis of texting? The author points out that the most obvious

takeaway can be found in our brief overview of the evolution of the English language. Put simply, because language is constantly evolving along with humanity, the advent of text lingo can be viewed as a natural progression of that evolution rather than a mutation. To prove this point, the author invites us to consider these examples from The Guardian's 2001 "SMS Poetry Competition." Back in the day where text messages were confined to the parameters of 160 characters, The Guardian orchestrated a creative writing contest, inviting contributors to write a poem in the standard 160 characters or less. The resulting 7,500 submissions produced some gems which were written almost entirely in text abbreviations.

Although she didn't win the contest, one young poet named Julia Bird was particularly creative in the way she manipulated text abbreviations to express herself. Julia's submission-- entitled "14: a txt msg poM"-- included such gems as "my @oms split/ wen he :)s @ me." While it might be a bit confusing to parse through the text lingo at first glance, the evocative beauty of the line "my atoms split when he smiles at me" is undeniable. And the fact that Julia was able to marry words, symbols, and emojis to create a mashup of poetic representation was so impressive that it earned her a special commendation and a prize for "Most Creative Use of Abbreviations." The winner of the contest was a girl named Hetty Hughes, whose piece was a 160-character critique of both text lingo and the pressures of standardized spelling. She wrote: "txtin iz messin/ mi headn'me englis/try2rite essays/they all come out txtis. /gran not plsd w/ letters shes getn/swears I wrote better/ b4 comin2uni./&shes african."

So, from these examples, we can see that text lingo can easily be a form of poetry and creative self-expression. But we can also see that it doesn't inherently delete an individual's ability to express themselves through standardized or "more correct" forms of speech! In fact, it's almost the same as speaking two different languages; the brain learns to adapt and people develop the ability to eloquently express themselves in different ways.

Texting Isn't As New as we Think

If you've ever heard someone rant about labor-saving devices or the flaws of millennials or "how lazy kids these days are," then you've probably inferred the core assumption these arguments are based upon. Each of these complaints are predicated on the premise that the traits they dislike evolved in response to new technology; put simply, the world is faster than ever and we're ruder or lazier than ever. And on the surface, that makes sense, right? After all, we now have technology that our ancestors could only dream of; it's understandable that baby boomers might consider their generation to be a simpler time. But would it surprise you to realize that as long as humans have existed, we've been abbreviating our words? It might not have been through digital devices, but we've always found ways to simplify our speech and invent new words that deviated from the norm.

For example, we all know the acronym RIP. We see it on Halloween decorations, in off-hand references to the metaphorical death of something, or in casual conversations. We know, of course, that it's shorthand for "rest in peace." But this term wasn't introduced when texting came on the scene. Instead, it's been found on tombstones dating as far back as the eighteenth century! The early Victorians and Edwardians are the last people we might accuse of something so cavalier as abbreviations, and yet, in the case of this acronym, they clearly started it! The same can also be said for their predecessors if we look back to ancient Egypt. In fact, Egyptian hieroglyphics are known for containing a puzzle device called a "rebus." A rebus combines the use of visual images with individual letters to literally make a word picture that represents certain phrases. For example, if you wrote the phrase "I see you" by drawing a picture of an eye, and some waves to designate the word "sea" (if you wanted to add a little wordplay) and followed this by spelling out the word "you," that would be a rebus.

Hieroglyphs made frequent use of rebuses and if you've ever seen an example of hieroglyphic writing, you'd be hard-pressed to blame them! Who has the time to write out all those complicated word pictures over and

over again? If they wanted to simplify by using one symbol to create a more complex message, we can understand! Because we do the same with text messages. As illustrated by the example of Julia Bird's poem in the last chapter, text messaging also relies heavily on rebuses to convey meaning-- just think about abbreviations like "b4," "c u l8r," and "2day!" Emojis are also examples of rebuses because they're using visual symbols-- a smiling face with hearts for eyes to indicate love, a frowny face with a tear to show that we're sad-- to communicate emotions. Instead of typing out the phrase, "I'm so sad our plans won't work out," we can simply send a crying emoji and know that the other person will understand.

It just goes to show that even though it's easy to think texting evolved in response to laziness or the changing priorities of a new generation, the truth is that simplifying our speech is an inherent human desire and it's been around for centuries! However, we can make one accurate statement regarding the evolution of text abbreviations: much like the first rebuses used in hieroglyphics, they sprang up as a result of hardship. And if that seems like a bit of a weird statement, just consider the insufferable struggle of typing out every single letter on the brick-like flip-phones we all had when cell phones first came on the market. Today, as an avid iPhone user, I think I would pull my hair out if confronted with the painstaking task of tapping through two unnecessary letters just to get to the one I wanted… and repeating this process for every single word I wanted to type. Now, I can't imagine being without my QWERTY keyboard. But when I was 12 years old and had my first phone, the struggle seemed normal.

Many older readers probably remember the same struggle of using a phone that crammed all 26 letters of the alphabet into a mere 12 keys. Remember how typing something as simple as "OK" required tapping the number 6 button 3 times just to get to the O? Once you'd confirmed that the "O" had indeed appeared in your draft message (and not, in fact, vanished like a figure of your imagination), you had to go back to the number 5 button and press it twice to get the "K." It was exhausting and hardly designed for the rapid-fire message exchanges we wanted as kids. So, is it any wonder that people started developing abbreviations to save time? When we consider

the history of texting in this light, you might be surprised to find your perspective shifting. Because instead of an example of laziness, you can see that text lingo is actually an example of innovation! It's a tribute to the fact that, when faced with a problem, humans will always find a way to create, grow, and generate solutions.

The Demographics of Texting

The information in this chapter is unlikely to come as a surprise to anyone. We already know that age and gender influence a person's communication in the real world, so why should it be any different when it comes to texting? In fact, recent studies show that demographic differences are actually more pronounced in texting than in any other form of communication. And as a millennial myself, I've witnessed this firsthand. I have a habit of sending multi-paragraph texts, frequently interspersed with emojis. I do this to show the receiver of my message that the tone of my text is light-hearted, that I value communication with them, and that I don't want the meaning of my message to be misconstrued. For example, if I'm worried that a snarky remark might be taken as an insult or a sign that I'm unhappy with the other person, I'll add a laughing emoji or one with a silly face to show that I'm just teasing. Similarly, if someone sends me something I find amusing, I tend to respond with several emojis that appear to be laughing so hard they're crying, along with a comment about how much I enjoyed it.

My mother, who is in her fifties, couldn't be more different. If I were to send a picture of my kitten to a friend my own age, I would reasonably expect to receive a reply that is similar to my own texting style. A friend might reply with multiple exclamation marks and heart emojis to show that she thinks my kitten is extremely cute. My mother, however, will unquestionably reply with a simple, "Cute." Given the texting norms of my generation and my particular social circle, I might instinctively view this message as being overly short or indicative of the fact that my mother did not enjoy the picture at all. Indeed, if I were to receive that text from someone my own age, I would take it as a signal that they didn't want to talk to me and were giving me a not-too-subtle hint. But such an interpretation would be fallacious because it fails to account for the differences in our ages. Because I am extremely comfortable with technology and expressing myself through text, I tend to treat my phone as an extension of myself; ergo, my texts will read as almost identical printed

forms of my verbal communication. Put simply, my comfort with my phone enables me to text in pretty much exactly the same way I would talk.

But my mother is different. Because she is older and less comfortable with her phone, she is less inclined to type long sentences. And because she suffers from painful arthritis in her hands, she has no desire to waste time by typing out long responses and multiple exclamation marks and emojis. That doesn't mean that she didn't like my kitten picture or that she doesn't want to talk to me. Instead, her age simply means that she texts differently.

The research of Norwegian social linguist Richard Ling confirms this theory. Conducting his research in 2005, he noticed that 40% of women sent at least one text every day, and that 85% of teenagers and young adults did the same. He also discovered that women were more likely to type multiple sentences or even paragraphs, use correct spelling, and avoid abbreviations. By contrast, only 5% of men reported that they used proper spelling and punctuation in their texts, and a mere 35% stated that they sent text messages every day. They were also more likely to use a lot of abbreviations and keep their texts to one sentence where possible. It was also unsurprising when Ling discovered that only 2.5% of older people said they sent a text message more than once a day. But the shocking twist came when he learned that older people were actually more likely than teenagers to use abbreviations and keep their messages short. Why? For exactly the same reasons provided in the example about my mother. Whether it's because they find texting physically painful or because they're uncomfortable typing long messages, the generation that most often critiques texting is more likely to engage in the practices they disparage!

Texting is Not an Assault on Our Language Skills

By this point, you might be willing to accept the validity of texting as a linguistic evolution. You might appreciate the examples of rebuses and creative writing contests and you might even be willing to acknowledge that texting isn't as nonsensical or lazy as you might have assumed. But many readers will still have one final question weighing on their minds: what about our language? How is the advent of technology impacting our kids and our ability to communicate with one another? Is it possible that texting is impairing our traditional language skills? The author doesn't think so and here's why.

While conducting the research for this book, the author interviewed a group of high-school students from the UK. To test his theory that texting does not have a detrimental impact on our language skills, he asked them a question: would you ever use text lingo in an academic setting? Would you be surprised to hear that his question was met with confusion? So far from seriously engaging with his question, the teens were simply baffled by the very thought. One of them even asked, "Why would anybody use text lingo outside of a text message?" Their confusion illustrated a critical distinction that supports the author's research: we might put text abbreviations in the same linguistic category as slang, but they're actually very different. And although they may have evolved in similar methods, slang is actually more of a threat to our traditional language skills because it sneaks seamlessly into our vocabulary. As slang becomes part of our daily lexicon, it can be tricky to police ourselves and differentiate between the right and wrong occasions to use it. But because text lingo is confined to the digital realm and is primarily employed for ease of access, it bears little relevance outside of our phones. There's no point in trying to abbreviate "c u l8r" in our speech or in an essay because we would never do that anyway. And even teenagers can tell that's not appropriate in a professional or academic setting.

So, for everyone who worries that their kids will be corrupted by text messaging or that they'll start writing nonsensical essays in text-speak, the author hopes you can put your mind at ease. Texting may be a new and creative form of communication, but its limits are definitively restricted to the confines of our cell-phones.

Final Summary

A lot of people have strong feelings about text messaging. Maybe you believe it's an exciting new mode of communication, a portal to a more evolved and more creative future, or you see it as an assault on the English language. But if the latter is true for you, the author hopes that his research can change your mind. Texting is often misunderstood, but it isn't an insidious digital invasion and it isn't corrupting the minds of our children.

Instead, as we've seen through the examples of The Guardian's poetry contest and the author's field research with his focus group of teens, texting is simply a new and innovative means of communication. And in fact, its roots can actually be traced to an age-old human preoccupation with abbreviation. So, the next time someone rants about those darn kids and their cell phones or refers to texting as lazy or stupid, you can tell them the ancient Egyptians were using text abbreviations before phones were ever invented!