Txt msg language: Is it spoiling children’s spelling?

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Digital communication

- School-aged children and adolescents:
  - 89% report owning a mobile device and
  - 97% report frequent internet use (ABS, 2014)
- Casual, frequent, and ubiquitous
- Silent but can interrupt live interaction
Everyone’s doing it
Writing style: “textese”

• Many digital messages are written in “textese”
• Initial fad for abbreviating as much as possible
  gr8, ill c u l8r or u cn txt me
• Now more likely to represent speech
  er no 😊 im going away tonight ha ha
Proportion of words written in ‘textese’ in uni students’ texts, 2009-2015

Expressives ??!! 😄 xx

Cntrtvs

Proportion of textisms used

Year

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- Proportion of words written in ‘textese’ in uni students’ texts, 2009-2015
- Expressives: ??!! 😄 xx
- Contractives: Cntrtvs
What is textese doing to children’s reading and writing skills??!!

- Strong concerns in popular media that seeing/using textese will ruin children’s conventional literacy skills
  - Younger children will never learn to read/write “proper English”
  - Older children will forget how to read/write “proper English”
But is textese really so new... and is it really so damaging?

WOULD U NOT LIKE TO BE THERE (1830)
What can we learn from research studies of children’s use of textese?
Initial studies: relationship between textese use and literacy skills

• 8-12-year-old children asked to:
  – “translate” messages into textese or
  – write messages in response to a given scenario

• Greater use of textisms associated with better:
  
  - Reasoning ability
  - Reading
  - Spelling
  - Vocabulary
  - Awareness of words’ sound structure

(Kemp & Bushnell, 2011; Plester et al., 2008, 2009)
Longitudinal study, real (naturalistic) messages

- 8- to 12-year-old children with own phones

Children’s use of textese at start of school year \[\rightarrow\] PREDICTED \[\rightarrow\] Spelling scores at end of school year

- Could using textese possibly be helping children to improve their literacy skills?

Wood, Meachem, et al. (2011)
Experimental study: Does textese help spelling development?

- 9- to 10-year-olds, 10-week study

- Phone group’s spelling did not improve more than no-phone group’s spelling.
- But phone group’s textese use helped to explain (statistically) later spelling scores

Wood, Jackson, et al. (2011)
What about adolescents’ use of textese?
Experimental study with teens

- 13-15-year-old students
- Translated messages from standard English to “how they would write them in a text message”
- Use of textese in these messages *not* related to students’ reading, spelling, awareness of words’ sound structure or meaning structure
- (Although it was related to their ability to read nonwords)

De Jonge & Kemp (2012)
Why is texting associated with better literacy skills in children?

gr8! c u @ skool

- Texting provides **extra exposure** to written words → better reading/writing
- Textese allows **wordplay** → encourages engagement with words and their sound/structure
- Creating and deciphering textese enhances phonological awareness
Why isn’t texting associated with better literacy skills in adolescents?

- Literate adolescents already have reasonable literacy and language skills
- No extra value provided by extra:
  - Exposure to written language through texting
  - “Play” with language to create new textisms
  - Practice with processing sounds via creating/deciphering textisms
**But** literacy is more than just reading/writing single words

- Textese use is associated with better single-word reading and spelling in children
- But literacy is broader than that
- What about sentence-level “grammar”??
- Including:
  - Punctuation and capitalisation
  - Grammar-based spelling patterns
Grammatical violations in texting

To save time/effort:
• Omit capitals (jo and i will come)
• Omit punctuation (hi how are u im fine)
• Omit non-essential words (you going party?)

To represent spoken language:
• Phonetic forms that flout written grammar (you wanna go, I hafta run, best frenz)
• Ungrammatical forms (You iz good)

To add fun/meaning:
• Multiple punct marks (hey... what's up??!!!)
• Emoticons (bye 😊 Sorry u can't come 😞)
Does grammatical violation = grammatical misunderstanding?

• Primary school and high school students

1. Provided examples of sent messages
   – How many grammatical violations did they make?

2. “Corrected” text messages into “proper English”
   E.g., hi how is ya doin im good
   - How many grammatical violations did they leave?
Proportion of grammatical violations

Kemp, Wood, & Waldron, 2014
**Grammatical violations in texting: what do they mean?**

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<th>School Level</th>
<th>Relationship between grammatical violations in sent text messages and...</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Ability to correct others’ messages</td>
<td>Spelling improvement over 1 year</td>
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<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>High</td>
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Wood, Kemp, Waldron, & Hart, 2014
Varying textese use and responses to others’ textese use

• Do children *vary* how they use textese when writing to others?
  – Would suggest sophisticated use of written language

• How do children react to others’ use of textese?
  – Do they respond any differently depending on how much the person uses textese?

I can’t believe it – she wrote “gr8”!! That’s sooo 2003!
Online survey study

• Students in Grades 6-8 and 11-12
• Presented with 12 digital messages written by fictitious others (other children, and teachers), each making a request
• Messages varied in amount of textese:
  – None
  – Medium
  – High
• Participants asked to write a message in response to each request message

Hons student Sian Crowe, 2014
Example messages

Hi Luke, I was just wondering if I could borrow your notes from class on Monday? If so, can I catch you today to get them? Otherwise I can wait until tomorrow, or I can ask someone else if you’d prefer not to share. Thanks, Jacob

Hi Luke, I was just wondering if I could borrow your notes from class on Monday?? If so, cn I catch u 2day to get them? Otherwise I cn wait till tmro, or I cn ask someone else if youd prefer not to share. Thanks, jacob :)

Hi Luke, I was just wondering if I could borrow your notes from class on Monday?? If so, I can catch you 2day to get them? Otherwise I can wait until tmro, or I can ask someone else if you’d prefer not to share. Thanks, jacob

No textese

Medium textese (16%)

High textese (35%)
Outcome measures

- **Request granting**: Extent to which participants granted each request, from
  - 3 (full granting)
  - 2 (partial granting)
  - 3 (refusal)

- **Language convergence**: Extent to which participant *converged* their use of textese to that of the message sender (0 = perfect convergence)

Hi Luke, I was just wondering if I could borrow your notes from class on Monday? If so, can I catch you today to get them? Otherwise I can wait until tomorrow, or I can ask someone else if you’d prefer not to share. Thanks, Jacob
• Grade 6-8 students less likely to grant requests than Grade 11-12 students
• But no effects of whether they were replying to students/teachers, or amount of textese used
• Grade 6-8 students used more textese than Grade 11-12 students, but neither converged their language to fit recipient, regardless of who they were or how they wrote.
Conclusions

• Children’s use of textese is associated with (and may help to drive) skills in reading and spelling, but patterns less clear for grammar

• Making grammatical violations in text messages may be related to poor grammatical knowledge – but probably doesn’t cause it
Conclusions

• Children don’t seem to vary their textese use to suit the message recipient
• And they don’t seem to care how their recipient writes to them
• Scope for discussions about *register*: when it’s appropriate to use what kind of writing
• Will help children further develop their skills as flexible writers
Acknowledgements

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If you’re interested in discussing or investigating children’s textese use, I’d love to hear from you!

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