Is texting here to stay?
by Louis Menand
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It is estimated that a trillion text messages are sent and received every year.

Is texting bringing us closer to the end of life as we currently tolerate it? Enough people have suggested that it is to have inspired David Crystal to produce “Txtng: The Gr8 Db8” (Oxford; $19.95). “I don’t think I have ever come across a topic which has attracted more adult antagonism,” he says. (On the other hand, Crystal has written more than a hundred books, so he does not require extraordinary encouragement to share his views.) Crystal is a professional linguist, and professional linguists, almost universally, do not believe that any naturally occurring changes in the language can be bad. So his conclusions are predictable: texting is not corrupting the language; people who send text messages that use emoticons, initialisms (“g2g,” “lol”), and other shorthands generally know how to spell perfectly well; and the history of language is filled with analogous examples of nonstandard usage. It is good to know that the estimated three billion human beings who own cell phones, and who use them to send more than a trillion text messages every year, are having no effect on anything that we should care about. A trillion text messages, Crystal says, “appear as no more than a few ripples on the surface of the sea of language.”

The texting function of the cell phone ought to have been the special province of the kind of people who figure out how to use the television remote to turn on the toaster: it’s a huge amount of trouble relative to the results. In some respects, texting is a giant leap backward in the science of communication. It’s more efficient than semaphore, maybe, but how much more efficient is it than Morse code? With Morse code, to make an “s” you needed only three key presses. Sending a text message with a numeric keypad feels primitive and improvisational—like the way prisoners speak to each other in the walls of their cells in “Darkness at Noon,” or the way the guy in “The Diving Bell and the...
other by tapping on the walls of their cells in “Darkness at Noon,” or the way the guy in “The Diving Bell and the Butterfly” writes a book. And, as Crystal points out, although cell phones keep getting smaller, thumbs do not. Usually, if you can text a person you can much more quickly and efficiently call that person. But people sometimes text when they are close enough to talk face to face. People like to text. Why is that?

Crystal’s answer is that texting is, partly, a game. It’s like writing a sonnet (well, sort of): the requirement is to adapt the message to immutable formal constraints. A sonnet can’t have more than fourteen lines, and a mobile-phone message can’t have more than a hundred and forty bytes, which is usually enough for a hundred and sixty characters. This is a challenge to ingenuity, not an invitation to anarchy.

Most of the shortcuts used in texting are either self-evident (@ for “at” and “b” for “be”) or new initialisms on the model of the old “A.S.A.P.,” “R.S.V.P.,” and “B.Y.O.B.”: “imho” for “in my humble opinion,” and so on. More imaginatively, there are the elaborated emoticons, such as 7:-) for baseball cap, and pictograms, such as @(------ for a rose and ~(8^{|}) for Homer Simpson. These are for thumb-happy aficionados, though, not the ordinary texter notifying her partner that the flight is late. There is a dialect that is used mainly by kids: “prw” for “parents are watching”; “F?” for “Are we friends again?” But Crystal thinks that texting is not the equivalent of a new language. “People were playing with language in this way long before mobile phones were invented,” he points out. “Texting may be using a new technology, but its linguistic processes are centuries old.” Acronyms, contractions, abbreviations, and shortened words (“phone” for “telephone,” and so forth) are just part of the language. Even back in the days when the dinosaurs roamed the earth and men wrote with typewriters, the language of the office memo was studded with abbreviations: “re:,” “cc:,” “F.Y.I.” “Luv” for “love” dates from 1898; “thanx” was first used in 1936. “Wassup,” Crystal notes, originally appeared in a Budweiser commercial. @(------ is something that E. E. Cummings might have come up with.

Still, despite what they say, size matters. A trillion of anything has to make some change in cultural weather patterns. Texting is international. It may have come late to the United States because personal computers became a routine part of life much earlier here than in other countries, and so people could e-mail and Instant Message (which shares a lot of texting lingo). Crystal provides lists of text abbreviations in eleven languages besides English. And it is clear from the lists that different cultures have had to solve the problem of squeezing commonly delivered messages onto the cell-phone screen according to their own particular national needs. In the Czech Republic, for example, “hosipa” is used for “Hovno si pamatuju”: “I can’t remember anything.” One can imagine a wide range of contexts in which Czech texters might have recourse to that sentiment. French texters have devised “ght2v1,” which means “J’ai acheté du vin.” In Germany, “nok” is an efficient solution to the problem of how to explain “Nicht ohne Kondom”—“not without condom.” If you receive a
text reading “aun” from the fine Finnish lady you met in the airport lounge, she is telling you “Älä unta nää”—in English, “Dream on.”

But the lists also suggest that texting has accelerated a tendency toward the Englishing of world languages. Under the constraints of the numeric-keypad technology, English has some advantages. The average English word has only five letters; the average Inuit word, for example, has fourteen. English has relatively few characters; Ethiopian has three hundred and forty-five symbols, which do not fit on most keypads. English rarely uses diacritical marks, and it is not heavily inflected. Languages with diacritical marks, such as Czech, almost always drop them in text messages. Portuguese texters often substitute “m” for the tilde. Some Chinese texters use Pinyin—that is, the practice of writing Chinese words using the Roman alphabet.

But English is also the language of much of the world’s popular culture. Sometimes it is more convenient to use the English term, but often it is the aesthetically preferred term—the cooler expression. Texters in all eleven languages that Crystal lists use “lol,” “u,” “brb,” and “gr8,” all English-based shorthands. The Dutch use “2m” to mean “tomorrow”; the French have been known to use “now,” which is a lot easier to type than “maintenant.” And there is what is known as “code-mixing,” in which two languages—one of them invariably English—are conflated in a single expression. Germans write “mbsseg” to mean “mail back so schnell es geht” (“as fast as you can”). So texting has probably done some damage to the planet’s cultural ecology, to lingo-diversity. People are better able to communicate across national borders, but at some cost to variation.

The obvious appeal of texting is its speed. There is, as it happens, a Ten Commandments of texting, as laid down by one Norman Silver, the author of “Laugh Out Loud :-D”). The Fourth of these commandments reads, “u shall b prepard @ all times 2 tXt & 2 recv.” This is the new decorum in communication: you can be sloppy and you can be blunt, but you have to be fast. To delay is to disrespect. In fact, delay is the only disrespect. Any other misunderstanding can be cleared up by a few more exchanges.

Back when most computing was done on a desktop, people used to complain about how much pressure they felt to respond quickly to e-mail. At least, in those days, it was understood that you might have walked away from your desk. There is no socially accepted excuse for being without your cell phone. “I didn’t have my phone”: that just does not sound believable. Either you are lying or you are depressed or you have something to hide. If you receive a text, therefore, you are obliged instantaneously to reply to it, if only to confirm that you are not one of those people who can be without a phone. The most common text message must be “k.” It means “I have nothing to say, but God forbid that you should think that I am ignoring your message.” The imperative to reply is almost addictive, which is probably one reason that texting can be not just rude (people continually sneaking a look at their cell phones, while you’re talking with them, in case some message awaits) but deadly. It was reported that the engineer in the fatal Los Angeles commuter-train crash this fall was texting seconds before the accident occurred. The Times noted recently that four of ten teen-agers claim that they can text blindfolded. As long as they don’t think that they can drive blindfolded.

A less obvious attraction of texting is that it uses a telephone to avoid what many people dread about face-to-face exchanges, and even about telephones—having to have a real, unscripted conversation. People don’t like to have to perform the amount of self-presentation that is required in a personal encounter. They don’t want to deal with the facial expressions, the body language, the obligation to be witty or interesting. They just want to say “flt is lte.” Texting is so formulaic that it is nearly anonymous. There is no penalty for using catchphrases, because that is the accepted glossary of texting. C. K. Ogden’s “Basic English” had a vocabulary of eight hundred and fifty words. Most texters probably make do with far fewer than that. And there is no penalty for abruptness in a text message. Shortest said, best said. The faster the other person can reply, the less you need to say. Once, a phone call was quicker than a letter, and face-to-face was quicker than a phone call. Now e-mail is quicker than face-to-face, and texting, because the respondent is almost always armed with his or her device and ready to reply, is quicker than e-mail.

“For the moment, texting seems here to stay,” Crystal concludes. Aun, as the Finns say. It’s true that all technology is, ultimately, interim technology, but texting, in the form that Crystal studies, is a technology that is nearing its obsolescence. Once the numeric keypad is replaced by the QWERTY keyboard on most mobile messaging devices, and once the capacity of those devices increases, we are likely to see far fewer initialisms and pictograms. Discourse will
migrate back up toward the level of e-mail. But it will still be important to reach out and touch someone. Nok, though.
Danke. ♦

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