

## Evolution of Writing from Old English to Texting Language

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### Abstract

Texting as a verb in the act of sending and receiving short messages (SMS) has entered the English lexicon. This paper is a study on texting lexis or textese (Crystal, 2008a, 2008b) in unsolicited messages (SMS) received in a mobile number in the city of Chennai in India for two months in 2015. The first section of this paper provides the rationale for the study, followed by a theoretical overview of texting lexis and a brief methodology of the study. The frequency of texting lexis in the topics like Technology, Sports, Dating, and Entertainment are reported before discussing the features of texting lexis: Pictograms, Initialisms, Shortenings, Nonstandard Spellings, and Genuine Novelties after Crystal's list, and the type of each feature in the second section of the paper.

**Keywords:** *texting, unsolicited messages, lexical frequency, lexical features, types of texting lexis*

### 1. Introduction

This paper will trace the evolution of writing in general and in English to understand the organic nature of writing for language teachers before analyzing texting features in the messages.

Writing, without second thoughts, has been one of the greatest developments of human civilization. However, scant attention is paid to this wonderful tool called 'writing' in education systems of the world. Schools tend to view writing as a means to an end rather than explaining the evolution of writing to children which will possibly produce better writers.

### 2. Background of the Study

The background of the study deals with two areas of literature review; (1) the evolution of writing in general and in English, and (2) the evolution of texting language as shown in this section.

#### 2.1 The evolution of writing in general and in English

In the early days of civilization, people neither wrote nor knew about writing. However, writing has become one of the fruits of civilization which has made humanity what it is today. Writing in many systems with the use of signs and symbols before moving on to the phonetic system, syllabic writing and alphabetic writing in the end.

It is hard to trace the origin of writing in human civilization after the spread of language some 50, 000 years ago (Van Gelderen, 2006). Ways of writing or writing systems are classified such as logographic, syllabic and phonetic or alphabetic. Some languages use a combination of these in the writing system. English, in the era of computer mediated

communication, shows evidence of syllabic writing such as: *Txtng* (texting), *gr8* (great) and *b4* (before). Writing in English can be discussed under the following three periods:

**Old English (450 to 1150):** Writing in Old English has no connection to 21<sup>st</sup> century writing. Old English texts appear like a different language to readers who have not learnt Old English spellings and orthography. There are many popular works like *Beowulf* in Old English.

**Middle English (1150-1500):** The case endings of Old English got simplified and changed to ‘e’ in Middle English which has brought it closer to the English used in the present day context. Although English was not considered prestigious in the Middle English period, it was used in several domains such as court, church and in literature. English was used in the citadels of learning such as Oxford University and King Edward III used it for the first time in the British Parliament. Geoffrey Chaucer who wrote *Canterbury Tales* was a leading literary figure. He has been considered the father of Modern English Poetry and any chronological study of British literature began from Chaucer.

**Early Modern English (1500-1700)** This period is known as the renaissance, an intellectual and cultural development inspired by the desire to revive Greek and Latin culture. It was a time of freedom for ideas in all disciplines including language. A great deal of words were borrowed in English from other languages and new words were created in the language as well.

Spelling variation in Modern English from the renaissance until the 18<sup>th</sup> century is obvious in the language. For instance, an additional ‘e’ can be found in words such as ‘ransom’ (*ransome*) or ‘farm’ (*farme*) or ‘u’ instead of ‘v’ as in ‘silver’ – *siluer*. Doubling of ‘LL’ in the end was common too as in royal (*royall*), shameful (*shamefull*). Since the English language did not have a dictionary, spellings were inconsistent during the renaissance. Therefore, the word ‘die’ was spelt as ‘dye/ die’.

**Modern English (1700-present):** Spelling became consistent after Samuel Johnson’s dictionary and rules of the language and pronunciation started becoming consistent too. However, some variation in spelling can be observed in words such as honour/honor or behavior/behaviour which are British and American form in the present day context. Words such as journal as ‘*journal*’ and unity as ‘*vinitie*’.

By 1850 British and American spellings became consistent after a process of standardization. Newspaper editors and writers like Mark Twain played a significant role in this process in American English.

American spellings were unacceptable in the United Kingdom and in the former British colonies of the 1980s. However, even British publishers use American spellings and it is a matter of consistency in the present day context.

Therefore, texting language or email English can be considered as a form of global communication which is a hybrid of spoken and written English rather than as something

deviant. However, the boundaries and domains should be clearly laid out for texting language or computer mediated language (CML).

Textese or texting language/lexis has emerged as a new variety of language, which has become an integral part of the multilingual world. The terms *textese* and *texting lexis* will be used interchangeably in this paper. Research studies by Crystal (2001, 2006, 2008a, 2008b, and 2011) conclude that texting language violates orthographic and syntactic conventions of language with a stress on written sounds and compressions such as, 8 for 'ate', 2 for 'to, two and too', 4 for 'four and for', *bcoz* for 'because' to list but a few.

Purists like Sutherland (2002), find the language of texting “unimaginative... mask[ing] dyslexia, poor spelling and mental laziness” (cited in Crystal, 2008b: 77). On the contrary, Thurlow (2005) finds it ‘communicatively adept’ having ‘linguistic creativity’ and a ‘robust sense of play’ (ibid). The following poem that won a prize demonstrates the influence of texting in the present day context:

txtin iz messin,  
mi headn'me englis,  
try2rite essays,  
they all come out txtis.  
gran not plsed w/letters shes getn,  
swears i wrote better  
b4 comin2uni.  
(*The Guardian*, 3 May 2001)

## 2.2 Evolution of Texting Language

Crystal (2008a) claims that texting has evolved as a 21<sup>st</sup> century phenomenon which has a highly distinctive graphic style, full of abbreviations and creative language, used by a generation that doesn't care about prescriptive standards. The pace of interaction in texting is slower than face-to-face communication and it lacks the paralinguistic features of oral communication. Texting is definitely time consuming when compared to face-to-face interaction since users have to rely on mobile networks for any interaction.

According to Biber (1998: 112), “...informational discourse has a high lexical variety in contrast to interactive, affective types of discourse” The language of texting tends to blur the differences between written and spoken discourse. Biber explains, “in terms of its linguistic characteristics, stereotypical speech is interactive, and dependent on shared space, time, and background knowledge; stereotypical writing has the opposite characteristics” (ibid). As Crystal (2006: 31) makes the following observation:

Netspeak [texting language] is more than an aggregate of spoken and written features.[...] it does things that neither of these other mediums do, and must accordingly be seen as a new species of communication.

It is estimated that interactions about 80 percent in English are between second or foreign language speakers and do not involve any native speakers of English. According to Jenkins (2007: 1), “a lingua franca is a contact language used among people who do not share a first language, and is commonly understood to mean second language users of

English” Furthermore, English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) forms depending on the communication context rather than norms of use. The use of certain communication strategies, particularly code-switching, which is evident in texting is a characteristic feature of ELF varieties (Jenkins 2009).

A genre of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) has developed with the technological advancement and has become the de facto means by which many young people communicate by using short forms and abbreviations as seen in Silver’s ‘txt commandments’. This new language is often referred to as Internet slang.

As Seargeant (2008: 223) states, “... the existence of the language around the world is categorized not only in terms of the different communities that use it, but also in terms of the different uses to which it is put by those communities.” Crystal (2001: 238) sums up the linguistic status of CMC in the following comment:

In language studies, we are used to discussing issues in terms of ‘speech vs. writing vs. signing’. From now on we must add a further dimension to comparative inquiry: ‘spoken language vs. written language vs. sign language vs. computer mediated language’. Netspeak is a development of millennial significance. [...] Netspeak will become a much larger computer-mediated language, which in the digitally designed enhanced-bandwidth environment of the future could be the community’s linguistic norm.

As Tartichio (2008) cited in <http://thefreelibrary.com>. (posted on 25 May 2016) claims, “... it [texting] has even found its way into research papers and the home work of school children and college students.” Texting appears in creative writing, advertisements and in other authentic texts as well. The distinctive features of texting identified by Crystal (2008a) such as *pictograms*, *logograms*, *initialisms*, *omitted letters*, *nonstandard spellings*, *shortenings* and *genuine novelties* which provide the framework for this study are explained below:

2.2.1 Pictograms: Picture writing is also called pictograms where symbols are inserted instead of letters or words. Some examples include: b-be, 2-to/too, x-kiss and @-at. (ibid).

2.2.2 Logograms: A written symbol that represents a meaningful part of a word (such as a prefix) also called a logograph and (in certain languages such as Chinese) a character. Some pictograms include: b4-before, @oms-atoms, 2day-today, xxx-kisses and zzz-sleeping (ibid).

2.2.3 Initialisms: The reduction of a word to its initial letter, as in ‘v for very’. For instance, N-no, G-grin, W-with, Y-yes, GF-gril friend, DL-download, W/E-weekend, W/O-without, CWOT-complete waste of time, OMG-oh my God, englis-English, msg-message, plsd-pleased and chrg-charge. (ibid)

2.2.4 Shortenings: Abbreviations where a word is shortened by omitting one of its meaningful elements usually at the end or the beginning of words (as in exam or phone). ‘Day’ elements in days of the week is usually omitted Mon(day), Tues(day) etc.... The ending of months are also regularly shortened as in Jan(uary) and Feb(ruary). Other

omissions in Crystal's list include gran(dmother), uni(versity), bro(ther), hol(iday/s) and min(utes). (ibid).

2.2.5 Nonstandard Spellings: Texters use nonstandard spellings both intentionally and unintentionally. The list of nonstandard spellings that features in texting are not very great, but they are quite distinctive. Some examples include cos/coz-because, luv-love, ova-over, shud-should thanx-thanks, thru-through, wot-what and dis-this. (ibid)

2.2.6 Genuine Novelties: This is a form of language play to outdo what has been done before. Crystal's examples are: lydkidkwd 'If you don't know, I don't know who does' or the structure: 'in my humble opinion' as given below:

IMHO: In my humble opinion.

IMCO: in my considered opinion

IMHBCO: In my humble, but correct opinion

IMNSHO: In my not so humble opinion.

### 3. Research Objective

This paper tests the assumption whether unsolicited business text messages in English topics like Technology, Sports, Dating, and Entertainment share some of the characteristics of regular text messages identified by Crystal (2008a): Pictograms, Initialisms, Shortenings, Nonstandard Spellings, and Genuine Novelties.

Since mobile phone users in India receive unsolicited or spam messages which is unknown in many nations across the globe. In that sense, the uniqueness of the data is likely to add value to the present study.

### 4. Research Methodology

Data for this study were collected from 150 unsolicited text messages received in three mobile phone numbers in April and May 2015 in the city of Chennai in India. It was noted in the study that only unsolicited messages meant to promote products and services were included as opposed to personal messages from the mobile user's contacts. Although English is the dominant language of SMS in the Indian context, it is not unusual to find instances of code-mixing/switching and transliteration in the messages.

The messages were on a variety of topics like Technology, Sports, Dating and Entertainment with the number of messages as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Topics and Number of Messages

<b>Topics</b>	<b>Total No.of messages</b>
Technology	70
Sports	40
Dating	25
Entertainment	15
<b>Total</b>	<b>150</b>

4.1 Technology: Messages were related to promotion of broadband internet, mobile phones and cable television packages from various companies.

4.2 Sports: Messages were related to cricket updates, telecast schedules and quizzes during the the Indian Premier League (IPL) season in 2015. It is worth noting that cricket has become commercial in the recent years in India.

4.3 Dating: Ways to find soul mates in addition to sending greetings for loved ones were the main focus of the messages in this category.

4.4 Entertainment: Messages dealing with jokes, music downloads and horoscope updates were common in this topic.

It should be noted that there is a category of **“Others.”** Messages in this category were on health/beauty, lottery, university and school admission, catering services and jobs. The topics were varied in terms of contents, but the messages were not analysed as they were fewer than 10 messages in this category.

The transcribed data were analysed using Crystal’s (2008a, 2008b): pictograms, logograms, initialisms, shortenings, nonstandard spellings and genuine novelties which have been defined with examples in this paper.

The frequency of *texting lexis* in the topics is reported before matching the features of texting lexis like pictograms/logograms, initialisms, shortenings, nonstandard spellings, and genuine novelties after the types of data in Crystal’s corpus (2008a, 2008b). Lastly, the type of texting lexis after Crystal’s features like pictograms, initialisms, shortenings, nonstandard spellings, and genuine novelties are also reported.

## 5. Results and Discussion

This section will discuss frequency of texting lexis in the topics followed by features and types of texting lexis in the data.

Sports messages had 60 per cent of texting lexis. As mentioned earlier, the messages focused on how to receive cricket updates by SMS (*“Get updates on ur[your] Mobile. Sms xxx and get alerts. Call xxxx & [and] listen to score updates Rs.xxx/min from Mob[mobile], from LL[land phone/line”*) or (*“Download the msgs[messages]were common. The extensive use of texting language in this topic is a contrast to messages in Technology.*

Messages in ‘dating’ (*“Every time I breathe, I LOVE U [YOU+ CAPITALIZATION of ‘i love u’ ].... For More Love Quotes to impress your friend send SMS SUBLOVEQ on 58558”*) included 71 per cent of texting lexis in the messages. The use of textese in this context is a strategy to attract youngsters to subscribe to ‘dating’ networks.

Messages in Entertainment showed 40 percent of texting lexis (*“/”month instead of per month To get T20 inthead of twenty20. Other instances were @ [at]ur[your]Doorsteps 4[for]...”*) Finally, the frequency of texting lexis in this study does not correspond to the number of messages in the topics.

**Features and types of texting lexis:** Pictograms accounted for around 43 percent in the data, but it was interesting to find that only three types of pictograms ('&', '@' and '/') recurred in the messages. Although there were instances of non-standard spellings in the data, there were only two types 'ur'-your and 'luv'-love which were dominant in the study.

There was evidence of eight types of initialisms such as *wef: with effect from, T & C-terms and conditions, LL-land line/phone, ULTD-unlimited, LTD-limited, Msgs-messages and Chrgs-Charges* in the messages which occurred in 75 instances. Lastly, five types of shortenings (*sec-seconds, Mob-mobile, Fest-festival*] and *Pic-picture and Inst-instalment* occurred 70 times in the study.

Texting lexis under pictograms and non-standard spellings that appeared in the data were relatively restricted to Crystal's list (2008a, 2008b). Although there were 43 per cent of pictograms in the data, there were only two dominant types: '&' and '@' in the data. On the other hand, there was greater variety and nativization in the use of initialisms and shortenings in the messages. Most of the shortenings in this study did not appear in Crystal's list of shortenings. Therefore, it is acceptable to state that initialisms and shortenings in the study were nativized to suit the context as opposed to pictograms and non-standard spellings. As mentioned earlier, texting lexis in unsolicited (as opposed to personal) messages varies according to geographical (India/Chennai) and linguistic (English and other languages) contexts, register (business, social or personal) and the target audience (mainly youth and students) as well (Biber 1998; Jenkins, 2011).

The results indicate that unsolicited business messages in English vary from personal messages and it is possible that *text messages are nativized* as in other domains in the Indian variety of English. The findings of this study provide fresh insights in terms of understanding the dominant topics, frequency, features and types of texting lexis in unsolicited English messages in India.

## 6. Conclusion

The results indicated differences in the frequency of texting lexis in terms of *topics* and *features of texting lexis* like pictograms and initialisms as identified by Crystal (2008a, 2008b). There was no connection between the number of messages in the topics and the instances of texting lexis. For instance, texting lexis was higher in the messages in Dating when compared to the messages in Technology. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that the frequency of textese is not related to the number of messages in the topics.

The distribution of pictograms and initialisms was similar in terms of the instances and types in the data. Each feature appeared in 70 instances with eight types. Five types of shortenings were observed in 75 instances, but nonstandard spellings were quite limited in the data. Therefore, it is evident that shortenings had the maximum occurrences, but nonstandard spellings showed a greater variety.

Although, the findings are useful to understand the existence, frequency and types of textese in the messages, the study is limited in terms of the data, the context and period of data collection. It is advisable to collect data over a longer period of time. Further studies on translanguaging, (Garcia and Li Wei, 2014 and Pennycook, 2007) can be explored as it is vital in understanding the communication of multilinguals.

Therefore, if teachers and purists understand the evolution of writing in English from a historical perspective, the emergence of CML with its own features is no different from the shift from Old to Modern English. The uses of texting language reflects the effects of change in language in the era of globalization. Although it is hard to discourage learners from the use of CML, teachers should raise learners' awareness in terms of the domains in which CML can be used.

### **7. The Author**

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