

Textism Use and Language Ability in Children

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INTRODUCTION

Textisms, textese and text speak are all different ways in which current literature refers to the phenomenon of writing in shorthand within the confines of a text message or SMS (Crystal, 2008; Plester, Wood and Bell, 2008; Wood, Kemp & Plester, 2013.) Originally this developed as a way to save space in order to fit more information within an SMS to save on the cost of sending multiple messages (Mose, 2013). With the popularity of contract phones increasing (Ofcom, 2013) the cost of sending individual texts has decreased, yet textism use is still popular due to the social affordances it offers such as social belonging (Thurlow, 2003), the ability to express oneself (Plester, Wood & Joshi, 2009) and fun from 'playing' with language (Crystal, 2008). The popularity of texting has been declining in the UK since the beginning of 2012 (Ofcom, 2013) however, textism usage is apparent in other media such as instant messaging, e-mails and social networking (Ling & Baron, 2007). Due to the increase in smartphone ownership usage of these media is also increasing (Ofcom, 2013.) Thus, despite the receding popularity of texting, it seems that textism usage is here to stay.

When we look at the way in which texting shorthand is written we find that it is often likened to spoken casual language (Thurlow, 2003). Thurlow (2003) examined a corpus of teenager's

text messages and found that not only did texting reflect spoken language but that some also followed differing language conventions. Thurlow (2003) created a coding scheme to describe the differences between textism types, this included:

- Shortenings, where word ends are omitted e.g. 'Mon' for 'Monday',
- Contractions, where vowels are omitted from the middle of words e.g. 'txt' for 'text',
- G-clippings, where the 'g' is left off word endings e.g. 'goin' for 'going',
- Other clippings, where other letters are left off word endings e.g. 'hav' for 'have',
- Initialisms, where sentences are shortened to the first letter of each word e.g. 'lol' for 'laugh out loud',
- Acronyms, these are similar to initialisms, but are considered acceptable in formal English e.g. 'BBC' for 'British broadcasting',
- Letter/number homophones, these use numbers or individual letters to represent sounds in words e.g. '2night' for 'tonight', or 'u' for 'you',
- Non-conventional spellings, these are words with differing orthography to the formal version of the word, but with intact phonology e.g. 'nite' for 'night',

- Misspellings/‘typos’, are words which appear to have been attempted correctly, but do not have either the correct orthography or phonology e.g. ‘rember’ for ‘remember’.
- Accent stylization, this refers to a word which is written in the same way as one would speak it out loud e.g. ‘gonna’ for ‘going too’.

From the above list we can see that accent stylization is the category that most represents casual spoken language. Initialisms and acronyms however, follow conventional English language rules which have been popular throughout history (Baron, 2003; Crystal, 2008). Contractions, shortenings and clippings all rely on an understanding of how conventional English works also, for instance you must know the whole word correctly before you can begin to take parts out. Letter/number homophones and non-conventional spellings are some of the most common types of textism children use (Plester, Wood and Joshi, 2009) and they both rely heavily upon phonetic knowledge. These phonetic textisms rely heavily on English language ability; in order to decode these words, or create them; you must first have good knowledge of letter-to-sound mappings.

Dr. Crispin Thurlow (2003) and Dr Beverly Plester (2008) were pioneering scholars when it came to looking at how and why people use textisms. Since then, there have been several researchers that have come to the forefront in research examining the impact of texting upon language, these include Dr Nenagh Kemp, Dr Richard Ling, Prof Clare Wood, Dr Larry Rosen and Dr Michelle Drouin.

OVERVIEW

As textisms rely heavily on language conventions (even if they are untraditional) it seems that they could cause problems for individuals who have trouble understanding language or who have not yet

developed in their own understanding of language in terms of grammar, word structure and phonetics. Textism usage has been repeatedly debated in the media (Crystal, 2008) in terms of its effect on reading, spelling and grammatical abilities; this in turn has prompted several researchers to look at the effects objectively. Much of the research has been conducted with children and teenagers as this age group appears to text most frequently (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell & Purcell, 2010) and they are still acquiring written language competency (Snow & Marian, 1978.)

Being able to use textisms can be likened to learning a second language (Berger & Coch, 2010); it has been found that when fluent texters read textese, similar parts of the brain are activated as when bilinguals read in their second language. This suggests that frequent textism users may be similar to bilinguals, for example they may be better at code switching between languages (Heredia & Altarriba, 2001). Evidence supporting this comes from Grace, Kemp, Martin & Parrila (2013) who found that undergraduates were knowledgeable of which situations textism use was appropriate in, and that they could code switch as needed dependent upon the message recipient.

Past research has failed to show any consistent negative effects of textism usage on children’s written language abilities; for instance Plester, Wood and Bell (2008) examined 11-12 year olds in terms of their textism densities and cognitive ability scores. Those who texted the most had poorer ability scores, however when textism use was looked at instead of frequency of text messaging, the relationship disappeared. Textism density was related to both better verbal reasoning and spelling abilities. It was theorized that these positive relationships arise from several factors, the first is ‘exposure to print’ (Wood et al. 2011); as children text more, they engage more with language and become more familiar with it. For instance a child may not read a book at home, but if they are texting frequently then they are at least being exposed to more written words. However, subse-

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