

# Deaf Adolescents' Textisms

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## INTRODUCTION

Using the term mobile communication, the article refers to cell phone communication, more specifically text messages sent via cell phone. Textisms is the term coined by Beverly Plester and her colleagues (Plester et al., 2008) in reference to the unique features of unconventional spellings used in texting. There are other similar labels such as *Txt* (Shortis 2007). For consistency, the term *textisms* is used in this article. In the literature of deaf studies published in English, the term *D/HH* (deaf and hard-of-hearing) may be more commonly used to refer to individuals with hearing impairment. However, in the article's section that discusses this particular population, the term *deaf* will be used for the sake of simplicity.

## OVERVIEW

In the past decade, a great amount of research has been conducted on the informal, interactive nature of text messages and other online writing, such as e-mail and IM (Instant Messaging). Such research has focused particularly on the linguistic features of digital communication in English, as well as in other languages (e.g., Baron, 2008; Caron & Caronia, 2007; Castells et al., 2007; Ling & Baron, 2007; Plester et al., 2008; Segerstad, 2005; Shortis, 2007; Snowden, 2006; Miyake, 2007; Thurlow, 2006). Adolescents in developed countries have been the dominant consumers of mobile technology (Castells et al., 2007; Caron & Caronia, 2007; Katz, 2006), and the trend is going even younger. In the United States, the larg-

est age group that prefers texting over other forms of communication has now moved down from 18-24 to 13-17 (*Nelsen Wire*, 2010). Adolescent and young-adult Americans surveyed by the Pew Research Center (2011) reported that they send and receive 50 messages per day on the average. In Japan, the mobile phone is called *keitai*, and the number of *keitai* subscribers reached 132.76 million by March 2012, according to *The Statistical Handbook of Japan* (2013) issued by Japan's Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications. The most popular usage of cell phones among adolescents is *keitai meeru*, a Japanese equivalent of text-messaging (Breuer, 2009; Igarashi et al., 2005; Miyake, 2007). Although some studies have reported that the Internet and other modern technologies have been integrated into deaf individuals' social lives, research on how deaf adolescents write text messages is extremely rare.

## CURRENT SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE IN MOBILE COMMUNICATION AND DEAF STUDIES

James E. Katz is one of the pioneers of mobile communication research in the United States. He is currently the Feld Professor of Emerging Media at Boston University. His seminal book, *Magic in the Air: Mobile Communication and the Transformation of Social Life*, was first published in 2006. His recently published *Mobile Communication: Dimensions of Social Policy* (2011) discusses how mobile communication influences policy making and vice versa in the world. Several leading scholars have analyzed the content of

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text messages written by teens and young adults. Among them is Beverly Plester, an honorary research fellow in the department of psychology and behavioral sciences at Coventry University, England. She and her colleagues analyzed expressions used in the dyadic informal exchange of English text messages, ranging from lexical to morpho-syntactic to orthographic features, which they called *textisms* (Plester et al., 2008). Her book, *Text Messaging and Literacy—The Evidence* (2013), co-authored with two other scholars just came out recently. Another notable researcher of young people's texting culture is Naomi Baron, Professor at American University. She authored the groundbreaking book, *Always on: Language in an Online and Mobile World* (2008), which won the Duke of Edinburgh's prestigious English Language Book Award in 2008.

Although Dr. Baron's works extensively cover the examination of text messages in English and other languages including Japanese, it was Mizuko Ito, Professor in Residence at the University of California, Irvine, who brought the general public's attention to the rapidly changing behaviors of Japanese mobile phone users. Growing up bilingual and bicultural, she has studied and published on the topic of youth digital communication both in the United States and Japan. Her groundbreaking work that featured young Japanese texting behaviors is *Personal Portable Pedestrian: Mobile Phones in Japanese Life* (2005).

Some books discuss the important social and political implications of technology on people with disabilities. More specifically, a handful of researchers have investigated how deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals have integrated mobile phone technologies into their social lives. Yet, the exact nature of the textisms produced by deaf adolescents continues to be under investigated. Therefore, this area of scientific knowledge remains to be relative unexplored by the current leading mobile communication scholars. To fill this gap, I will provide in the following section of this article a short summary of my two case studies that focused on this neglected area (area #3).

## **Area 1: Mobile Communication with Texting in the United States**

Research into texting in English has highlighted specific ways in which adolescents write text messages. A variety of English expressions commonly used in the dyadic informal exchange of text messages ranges from lexical to morpho-syntactic to orthographic features called *textisms*. Examples of textisms reported in previous studies (e.g., Snowden, 2006; Shortis, 2007) include abbreviations (e.g., *SUP!* "What's up?"), non-linguistic symbols (e.g., @, +), rebus writing made of letters and numbers (e.g., *CUL8R* "see you later"), pruned conventional spellings, particularly through omission of vowels (e.g., *gd* "good," *lst* "last," and *wnt* "want"), slang or code-like expressions (e.g., *411* "news," or "something new"), and emoticons and other graphic icons. These elements are characteristic of texting as well as of many other forms of computer-mediated communication (e.g., Baron, 2008; Ling & Baron, 2007; Castells et al., 2007), although shorthand is more pronounced in texting because of the cell phone's small screen and keyboard (Crystal, 2001). Citing the original study by Carey (1980), Riordan and Kreuz (2010) list four categories of non-verbal cues in texting: vocal spelling (e.g., "weeeeelll"), lexical surrogates (e.g., "mhmm" – use of non-standard spelling that imitates vocal intonation or tone), spatial arrays including emoticons such as:-9, manipulation of grammatical markers (e.g., additional punctuation indicating pauses ... or expressing an attitude with !!!, and using capital letters for importance, such as NOT, or for signaling tone of voice, as in SHUT UP), and minus features (i.e., an absence of certain language conventions, such as a lack of capitalization at the beginning of a sentence). However, all these features of textisms identified in the previous studies are based on hearing adolescents' texting. Very little research has been conducted on how deaf adolescents, whose face-to-face communication is carried out through signing, write text messages in English.

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