

Chapter 16

Comparing the Characteristics of Text–Speak Used by English and Japanese Students

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ABSTRACT

Text messaging is pervasive among the youth of many cultures, but the extent and nature of text-speak, the modified host language, is open to question. This study of English and Japanese undergraduates specifically investigated whether text-speak is a product of the technological constraints on the host language or is influenced by gender differences in communication style. The study had a between-subjects factorial design with two independent variables: language (English, Japanese) and gender (male, female). The dependent variable was frequency and type of text modification. The results show both a qualitative and quantitative difference in texting between the two groups with English texters being more active. However, English and Japanese females made more adaptations to the host-language than their within-culture male peers, even though the structure of the two host languages was very different. The greater use of abbreviations by females compared to males might be explained either by a higher engagement with this mode of communication or diverging goals between the sexes when texting.

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INTRODUCTION

The critical act of communication is increasingly mediated through technology. The rapid evolution from voice transmission to a multi-modal communication device has resulted in the mobile (cell) phone becoming a core communication tool. Such phones are owned by the majority of the young in both the developed (Kennedy, Judd, Churchward, Gray, & Krause, 2008; Axelson, 2010) and the developing countries such as China and (Gong, 2008) and South Africa (van Heerden, Norris, & Richter, 2010). There is also a convergence in the functionality and feel of this mobile technology around the world. One function, text messaging via short message service (SMS), is supported on all phones and is widely used by teenagers and young adults (Cheung, 2008; Kennedy et al., 2008; Axelson, 2010; Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). Research and Markets (2008) estimated text traffic flow to be over 2 trillion messages worldwide. In the UK in 2009 of 265 million text messages were sent on average a day; the UK 2009's text message total was 96.8 billion (MDA, 2010). In the US, Rideout et al. (2010) report that 46% of 8- to 18-year-olds spend an about 90 minutes a day texting while Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, and Purcell (2010) report that one in three teenagers send more than 100 text messages a day.

Texting is more likely to result in a feeling of perpetual contact, enhancing joint-presence, than voice calls because it is an anytime anywhere received mode of contact and allows covert contact and also multitasking (Reid & Reid, 2004). The question investigated here is what factors predict the characteristics of the constrained language of texting termed text-speak by Crystal (2008) to differentiate it from the act of sending a message that is texting.

Although texting is a global phenomenon there are regional differences in users' propensity to send text messages. Americans, possibly because of the ready availability of home computers, were late adopters of texting compared to their European

counterparts (Ling & Baron, 2007) although by 2010 seventh to twelfth graders were texting on average for 1.5 hours per day (Rideout et al., 2010). Undergraduate students in Junco and Cotton's (2010) study spent an average of 120 minutes per day actively texting. British youths are prolific texters with 50% sending more than six every day (Mobile Life Report, 2008). The Japanese also make extensive use of text facilities and it is the preferred mode of communication for young, non-family-related pairs of friends even though they had in frequent face-to-face contact (Kenichi, 2006). Comparative studies have shown that the Japanese are 4 times more likely to text rather than to speak over the phone than their Swedish counterparts (Baron & Hard af Segerstad, 2010). This is not to say Swedish young adults are not avid texters, rather they used a range of methods to maintain contact with family, friends and colleagues including traditional voice communication; although their preference, as for many in their age group, is for texting (Axelson, 2010). Australian students have a very heavy level of phone use but they too use both voice, 76.2% daily calls, with 79.5% daily texting (Kennedy et al., 2008).

Text messaging operates both through the host language but can also result in changes to that language; those changes to the language result in a modified language, which we have termed text-speak. Such changes occur when individuals use techniques such as abbreviation or truncation as shorthand to develop SMS and instant messages. The rules of text-speak have emerged from grass-root users and are based on the shorthand used on bulletin boards and in Internet chat rooms and are so ubiquitous that they are now being collected in dictionaries, see for example "Text messaging survival guide" (Shoeman & Shoeman, 2007) or websites such as netlingo or urban dictionary (<http://www.netlingo.com>; <http://www.urbandictionary.com>). Does cultural differentiation extend to the operational use within the modality of text-speak or is it independent of culture?

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