**2b or not 2b?**

Last year, in a newspaper article headed "I h8 txt msgs: How texting is wrecking our language", [John Humphrys argued](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-483511/I-h8-txt-msgs-How-texting-wrecking-language.html) that texters are "vandals who are doing to our language what Genghis Khan did to his neighbours 800 years ago. They are destroying it: pillaging our punctuation; savaging our sentences; raping our vocabulary. And they must be stopped."

As a new variety of language, texting has been condemned as "textese", "slanguage", a "digital virus". According to John Sutherland of University College London, writing in this paper in 2002, it is "bleak, bald, sad shorthand. Drab shrinktalk ... Linguistically it's all pig's ear ... it masks dyslexia, poor spelling and mental laziness. Texting is penmanship for illiterates."

Ever since the arrival of printing - thought to be the invention of the devil because it would put false opinions into people's minds - people have been arguing that new technology would have disastrous consequences for language. Scares accompanied the introduction of the telegraph, telephone, and broadcasting. But has there ever been a linguistic phenomenon that has aroused such curiosity, suspicion, fear, confusion, antagonism, fascination, excitement and enthusiasm all at once as texting? And in such a short space of time. Less than a decade ago, hardly anyone had heard of it.

The idea of a point-to-point short message service (or SMS) began to be discussed as part of the development of the Global System for Mobile Communications network in the mid-1980s, but it wasn't until the early 90s that phone companies started to develop its commercial possibilities. Text communicated by pagers were replaced by text messages, at first only 20 characters in length. It took five years or more before numbers of users started to build up. The average number of texts per GSM customer in 1995 was 0.4 per month; by the end of 2000 it was still only 35.

The slow start, it seems, was because the companies had trouble working out reliable ways of charging for the new service. But once procedures were in place, texting rocketed. In the UK, in 2001, 12.2bn text messages were sent. This had doubled by 2004, and was forecast to be 45bn in 2007. On Christmas Day alone in 2006, over 205m texts went out. World figures went from 17bn in 2000 to 250bn in 2001. They passed a trillion in 2005. Text messaging generated around $70bn in 2005. That's more than three times as much as all Hollywood box office returns that year.

People think that the written language seen on mobile phone screens is new and alien, but all the popular beliefs about texting are wrong. Its graphic distinctiveness is not a new phenomenon, nor is its use restricted to the young. There is increasing evidence that it helps rather than hinders literacy. And only a very tiny part of it uses a distinctive orthography. A trillion text messages might seem a lot, but when we set these alongside the multi-trillion instances of standard orthography in everyday life, they appear as no more than a few ripples on the surface of the sea of language. Texting has added a new dimension to language use, but its long-term impact is negligible. It is not a disaster.

Although many texters enjoy breaking linguistic rules, they also know they need to be understood. There is no point in paying to send a message if it breaks so many rules that it ceases to be intelligible. When messages are longer, containing more information, the amount of standard orthography increases. Many texters alter just the grammatical words (such as "you" and "be"). As older and more conservative language users have begun to text, an even more standardised style has appeared. Some texters refuse to depart at all from traditional orthography. And conventional spelling and punctuation is the norm when institutions send out information messages, as in this university text to students: "Weather Alert! No classes today due to snow storm", or in the texts which radio listeners are invited to send in to programmes. These institutional messages now form the majority of texts in cyberspace - and several organisations forbid the use of abbreviations, knowing that many readers will not understand them. Bad textiquette.

Research has made it clear that the early media hysteria about the novelty (and thus the dangers) of text messaging was misplaced. In one American study, less than 20% of the text messages looked at showed abbreviated forms of any kind - about three per message. And in a Norwegian study, the proportion was even lower, with just 6% using abbreviations. In my own text collection, the figure is about 10%.

People seem to have swallowed whole the stories that youngsters use nothing else but abbreviations when they text, such as the reports in 2003 that a teenager had written an essay so full of textspeak that her teacher was unable to understand it. An extract was posted online, and quoted incessantly, but as no one was ever able to track down the entire essay, it was probably a hoax.

There are several distinctive features of the way texts are written that combine to give the impression of novelty, but none of them is, in fact, linguistically novel. Many of them were being used in chatroom interactions that predated the arrival of mobile phones. Some can be found in pre-computer informal writing, dating back a hundred years or more.

The most noticeable feature is the use of single letters, numerals, and symbols to represent words or parts of words, as with b "be" and 2 "to". They are called rebuses, and they go back centuries. Adults who condemn a "c u" in a young person's texting have forgotten that they once did the same thing themselves (though not on a mobile phone). In countless Christmas annuals, they solved puzzles like this one: YY U R YY U B I C U R YY 4 ME

**I h8 txt msgs: How texting is wrecking our language**

By JOHN HUMPHRYS

A good dictionary is a fine thing - I yield to no man in my love for one. If I stretch out my right arm as I type, I can pluck from my shelves the two volumes of the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary.

They are as close to my heart as they are to my desk because they are so much more than a useful tool.

Leafing through a good dictionary in search of a single word is a small voyage of discovery - infinitely more satisfying than looking something up on the internet.

It's partly the physical sensation - the feel and smell of good paper - and partly the minor triumph of finding the word you seek, but it's rare to open a dictionary without being diverted somewhere else.

The eye falls on a word you've never seen before or one whose meaning you have always wanted to check, and you close the dictionary just a little bit richer for the experience.

But my lifetime love affair with the OED is at risk. The sixth edition has just been published and - I feel a small shudder as I write these words - it has fallen victim to fashion.

It has removed the hyphen from no fewer than 16,000 words.

You may very well say: so what? Indeed, you may well have functioned perfectly well until now spelling leapfrog without a hyphen.

The spell-check (sorry: spellcheck) on my computer is happy with both. But that's not why I feel betrayed by my precious OED.

It's because of the reason for this change. It has happened because we are changing the way we communicate with each other, which means, says the OED editor Angus Stevenson, that we no longer have time to reach for the hyphen key.

Have you ever heard anything quite so daft? No time to make one tiny key-stroke (sorry: key stroke).

Has it really come to this? Are our lives really so pressured, every minute occupied in so many vital tasks, every second accounted for, that we cannot afford the millisecond (no hyphen) it takes to tap that key?

Obviously not. No, there's another reason - and it's far more sinister and deeply troubling.

It is the relentless onward march of the texters, the SMS (Short Message Service) vandals who are doing to our language what Genghis Khan did to his neighbours eight hundred years ago.

They are destroying it: pillaging our punctuation; savaging our sentences; raping our vocabulary. And they must be stopped.

This, I grant you, is a tall order. The texters have many more arrows in their quiver than we who defend the old way.

[…]

You know the sort of thing; those of us who have survived for years without a mobile phone have to put up with it all the time. My old friend Amanda Platell, who graces these pages on Saturdays, has an answerphone message that says the caller may leave a message but she'd prefer a text. One feels so inadequate.

[…]

It is too late to save the hand-written letter. E-mailing has seen to that and I must confess that I would find it difficult to live without it. That does not mean I like it.

I resent the fact that I spend so much of my working day (and, even more regrettably, weekends) checking for e-mails - most of which are junk.

I am also cross with myself for the way I have adapted my own style. In the early days I treated e-mails as though they were letters. I tried to construct proper, grammatical sentences and used punctuation that would have brought a smile to the lips of that guardian of our language, Lynne Truss.

Now I find myself slipping into sloppy habits, abandoning capital letters and using rows of dots.

But at least I have not succumbed to 'text-speak' and I wish the OED had not hoisted the white flag either. I recall a piece of doggerel which sums up my fears nicely: *Mary had a mobile. | She texted day and night. | But when it came to her exams | She'd forgotten how to write.*

To the editor of the OED I will simply say: For many years you've been GR8. Don't spoil it now. Tks.