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**Are Digital Media Changing Language?**

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Are instant messaging and text messaging killing language? To hear what the popular media say, a handful of OMGs (oh my god) and smiley faces, along with a paucity of capital letters and punctuation marks, might be bringing English to its knees.

Although journalists tend to sensationalize the linguistic strangeness of "online lingo," quantitative analyses of instant messaging conversations and text messages reveal that abbreviations, acronyms, and even misspellings are comparatively infrequent, at least among college-age students. For example, in a study I did of college students' instant messaging conversations, out of 11,718 words, only 31 were "online lingo" abbreviations, and only 90 were acronyms (of which 76 were LOL). In a study of college students' text messaging, my colleague Rich Ling and I found a few more lexical shortenings; yet the grand total of clear abbreviations was only 47 out of 1,473 words, which is hardly overwhelming.

Yes, young people sometimes accidentally slip a btw (by the way) into a school essay. But a recent study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project confirms that middle school and high school students understand what kind of language is appropriate in what context (Lenhart, Smith, & Macgill, 2008). What's more, scholars of new media language, such as David Crystal and Beverly Plester, remind us that the new technologies encourage creativity, which can spill over into school writing (Crystal, 2008; Plester, Wood, & Bell, 2008).

**Minor Shifts: Vocabulary and Sentence Mechanics**

Those of us studying electronically mediated communication (language produced on computers or mobile phones) have been looking for evidence that mediated language is changing traditional speech and writing. To our surprise, the list of effects is relatively short. Here are my candidates:

*Incorporation of a few acronyms into everyday language*. These days you sometimes hear students saying "brb" (be right back) to one another when they temporarily take their leave. I have also overheard "lol" (laughing out loud) in conversations among young people. However, these neologisms need to be put into perspective. Infusion of written acronyms into everyday speech is a common linguistic process—to wit, RSVP, AWOL, or ASAP. If a few more lexical shortenings make their way into general usage, that's nothing out of the ordinary.

*Decreased certainty about when a string of words is a compound, a hyphenated word, or one word*. This is a more nuanced proposition. Take the word *newspaper*. Should it be spelled *newspaper*, *news-paper*, or *news paper*? Obviously the first, you say. But historically, words tend to begin as separate pairings (*news* plus *paper*); gradually make their way to hyphenated forms (*news-paper*); and eventually, especially if they are high-frequency, become compounds (*newspaper*). The journey from *electronic mail* to *e-mail*, and, for many, to *email*, is a case in point.

Enter computers and the Internet. If I write *news paper* (two words) in an e-mail, no one is likely to correct me, because on the Internet no one is policing the grammar of the personal messages we construct. What's more, the two-word version handily passes spell-check (typically my students' criterion for correctness).

URL addresses for Internet sites may also be affecting our notion of word breaks. URLs allow no spaces between words. To create a Web page for selling beauty products, I need an address such as [www.beautyproductsonline.com](http://www.beautyproductsonline.com/). It is easy to imagine *beauty products* crossing the line into *beauty products* in offline writing without many people giving the merger a second thought.

*Diminished concern over spelling and punctuation*. Spell-check, along with online search engines, may be convincing us that devoting energy to honing spelling skills is anachronistic. Even before you finish typing a word containing an error, spell-check often automatically corrects the word. Similarly, if you type a misspelled word (or phrase) into Google, chances are the search engine will land you pretty much at the same list of sites you would have reached had you been a finalist in the National Spelling Bee.

In the same vein, I am increasingly finding that my students have little regard for apostrophes. (And as we know, URLs disallow punctuation marks.) My studies of college students' text messages show that "required" apostrophes (in a word such as *doesn't*) only appear about one-third of the time.

These effects on vocabulary and sentence mechanics are actually fairly minor. New words enter languages all the time. As for word separation, hyphenation, and spelling more generally, it helps to take the long view. A quick check of the *Oxford English Dictionary* reveals that lexical practices evolve, and yesterday's oddity may be today's norm—or vice versa.

In studying new media language, however, I've become convinced that more fundamental linguistic changes are afoot. The shifts I'm talking about are not in vocabulary, spelling, or punctuation, but in our *attitudes* toward language structure.

**Attitude Shift 1: "Whatever"**

Language is rule-governed behavior: That is, languages are constructed according to identifiable patterns that people follow. Native speakers have a mental template of these rules. Obviously linguistic rules have exceptions (the plural of *man* is *men*, not *mans*). And rules change over time. (Chaucer would have written "hath holpen" rather than "has helped.") However, we recognize exceptions—and change—by referencing our knowledge of rules currently shared within a language community.

By rules, I don't mean normative, prescriptive grammar—such edicts as, Don't end a sentence with a preposition. This arbitrary "rule" was concocted by 18th-century self-appointed grammarians who took Latin, which has no word-final prepositions, as their model. Instead, I have in mind such rules as, Subjects and verbs need to agree in number—making a sentence like "Cookie Monster eat toast for breakfast" ungrammatical. If a language community adheres to the rule-governed model of language, its members will render consistent judgments about linguistic usage. Yes, we all make performance errors, but our rule-governed linguistic brains recognize, perhaps after the fact, that we have erred.

Since the 1960s, a constellation of factors have combined to alter our sense of "good" language use (Baron, 2000). Revolutions in school pedagogy began replacing teacher-directed classrooms with peer review and activities designed to foster collaboration. The infamous red pen was now used more to encourage intellectual exploration than to correct sentence mechanics. Multiculturalism led us to encourage students not to be judgmental about their peers. No longer do we say that Li Po "talks strangely"; rather, she is an "English language learner." Instead of criticizing Bill from Appalachia (who says "Him and me went home"), we note that Bill speaks another dialect of English.

Gradually, we have become less obsessed with correctness and more focused on tolerance and personal expression. This shift, however admirable, has linguistic consequences. School is no longer necessarily a place to instill a sense that linguistic rules (or even linguistic consistency) matter.

Each year, I ask graduate students in my Structure of English class if it matters whether English continues to distinguish between the words *may* and *can* ("May I come in?" versus "Can I come in?"). Many of the students fail to see why anyone should care. The same laissez-faire attitude applies to distinguishing between the words *capital* and *capitol* (the first identifies the seat of state government, whereas the second refers to a building, such as the U.S. Capitol). Why not just ditch one and let the other do double duty?

My point is not to pass judgment. The issue is that attitudes toward linguistic "rules" have shifted. A wide swath of educated speakers of English (at least American English) simply don't worry about the niceties of such rules any more. One day it's *may*; the next day it's *can*. So what?

This attitude reminds me of spelling in Middle English, where you would often find the same word written half a dozen different ways, all on the same page. Standardized English spelling didn't become a reality until nearly the 18th century. By 1750, Lord Chesterfield famously warned his son that "orthography … is so absolutely necessary for a man of letters, or a gentleman, that one false spelling may fix a ridicule upon him for the rest of his life." Today, it is difficult to imagine anyone taking Chesterfield's admonition seriously. If spell-check doesn't catch the problem, whatever! Does spelling really matter, anyway?

The shift away from caring about language rules or consistency predates new media language. It even predates personal computers. However, computer and mobile-phone technologies add fuel to the linguistic fire. An e-mail manual such as Constance Hale and Jessie Scanlon's *Wired Style* (1999) encourages writers to "celebrate subjectivity" (p. 9) and to "play with grammar and syntax. Appreciate unruliness" (p. 15). Scholars like David Crystal and Beverly Plester, as I noted earlier, highlight the creative potential of text messaging. We should not be surprised to find linguistic free spirits applying similar latitude to everyday speech and even to more formal writing.

**Attitude Shift 2: Control**

Besides amplifying the linguistic "whatever" attitude, computers and mobile phones are instrumental in a second attitudinal shift—a change in the degree to which we control our linguistic interactions.

Human communication has always involved varying amounts of control. If I see you coming down the street and don't wish to engage in conversation, I might cross to the other side and start window shopping. If you phone me and I don't like what you're saying, I can always hang up.

Contemporary online and mobile language technologies ratchet up the control options. On my instant messaging account, I can block you so you never get a message through. (I always appear to be offline, even though I'm busily instant messaging others.) I can multitask, talking with you on the phone while I search for a cheap airfare online or instant messaging you while I'm conducting half a dozen other online conversations.

Social networking sites offer additional forms of control. People exercise control in the way they design their pages: Staged photographs, exaggerated profiles, and padded friends lists enable online users to manipulate how others see them. In the words of one undergraduate, her Facebook page is "me on my best day."

These sites also enable users to maintain relationships with friends without expending much effort. For example, young people commonly check up on their friends' activities by viewing their online photo albums or status reports, obviating the need for a phone call or e-mail, much less a face-to-face visit. One popular move is to post a Happy Birthday greeting on the Wall (a semi-public message board) of a friend's Facebook page without making real personal contact.

On mobile phones, caller ID informs us who's calling, so we can decide whether to answer. Sometimes when I'm meeting with students, their mobile phones ring. A quick glance at the screen, and then the phone is silenced and slipped into a pocket or backpack. "It's only Mom," they explain.

Another form of control on mobiles is deciding whether to talk or text. I might choose to send a text message rather than call to keep the communication short (meaning, "I don't want to get bogged down in a conversation in which I'm obligated to listen to what you have to say"). In cross-cultural research I conducted last year, more than one-third of the Swedish, U.S., and Italian university students I surveyed said "keeping the message short" was an important reason for texting rather than talking.

One inventive control technique is pretending to talk on your mobile phone when you see an acquaintance approaching—even someone you like— to avoid conversation. In my studies, 13 percent of U.S. students reported engaging in this behavior at least once a month. And 25 percent reported that they fiddled with text-based functions on their phones (such as checking old messages) to evade conversation with people they knew.

In each instance, technology enhances our ability to manipulate our communication with others. As the arsenal of control devices continues to grow, we increasingly come to see language not as an opportunity for interpersonal dialogue but as a system we can maneuver for individual gain.

**Responding to Language Shifts**

In thinking about the effects of new communication media on language, we need to distinguish between "may fly" language (here today, gone tomorrow) and changes that are more substantial. If we care that a couple of new acronyms and alternative spellings could make their way into everyday spoken or written language (particularly when it comes to schoolwork), it actually is possible to just say no. Students already understand that particular styles of language are appropriate for one venue but not another (calling a teacher "Mr. Matthews" but using first names for friends). They understand (and probably even expect) reminders.

Responding to the linguistic "whatever" attitude is a more complex proposition. Parents and teachers need to understand that young people are not the only ones manifesting this attitudinal shift. One of my favorite examples is from the environmentalist and author Bill McKibben, who wrote this in praise of a book: "Go find a friend and tell them all about this fine book." We've all learned that a singular noun such as *friend* needs to be paired with a singular pronoun (here, *him* or *her*). Yet Simon and Schuster had no qualms about putting this blurb on a book jacket.

Depending on our pedagogical goals, we might choose to be linguistically hard-nosed (perhaps pluralizing the noun to *friends* and avoiding the gender question entirely). Or we might admit more casual spoken style into the classroom, following the general trend today for writing to reflect informal speech.

Before we despair that language is going to hell in a handcart, we should remember two lessons. First, normativeness in language goes through cycles, much like taste in music and politics. All is not lost. And second, regardless of the swings that language goes through, there is room for individual schools or teachers to set their own standards. Most schools have abandoned teaching handwriting, but a few have held their ground, to the good fortune of their students. Just so, if you choose to insist on written precision, students generally will follow your lead.

The issue of control is trickier, because it involves personal empowerment. Here the battles aren't about acronyms or noun-pronoun agreement but about such questions as, Should students be allowed to have mobilephones in school? or Is it the job of the school to teach online and mobile-device etiquette? These concerns rarely have easy solutions. However, by understanding that new language technologies have shifted our students' attitudes about who holds the power in linguistic exchange, we will be better prepared to understand their perspectives and to reach common ground.

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