

Text messaging

Text messaging – also called SMSing, short messaging, texting, txtng – is a relatively new technology. It emerged in the 1990s; after a slow start, it took off explosively from the end of that decade. However, different regions and countries embraced the technology at different times and rates, quickly in Scandinavia, more slowly in USA. In many ways it is surprising that the technology took off as it did. It was initially developed not for communication amongst mobile phone users, but for phone companies to contact customers. Nor was it particularly convenient to input messages either by the keys of a standard mobile phone (now outmoded technology) or the somewhat more user-friendly virtual keyboard of a smartphone.

From the beginning, text messaging attracted considerable negative reaction in the public domain, including hype over its dangers to the language, to the mind and brain of users, and to standards of literacy. Suffice it to say that there is no strong evidential support for the negative reactions, which also accompanied the emergence of the printing press in the West six hundred years ago. As we will see, the linguistic characteristics of text messaging are by no means novel or unique; moreover, a high level of literacy is demanded on the part of users.

In what follows we describe some characteristics of text messaging in English. Text messaging is not, of course, restricted to English, although this language dominates in linguistic studies. It seems that text messaging in other languages show similarities to text messaging in English, as well as differences. Significant differences and commonalities also exist in text messages in English in the different countries and social contexts in which the language is used.

The features of text messaging most commonly remarked on concern the representation of lexical and grammatical words. Unusual spellings, abbreviations, acronyms, logograms and pictograms (e.g. emoticons such as <:)> and emojis like <☺>) are widely believed to be distinctive characteristics of text messaging. The following examples, from my own small collection, are illustrative. Nonstandard spellings in these examples include <u>, <thru> and <c>; abbreviations include
, <Lvn>, <Vry> and <pls> (the last three show omission of vowels), and standard abbreviations <Dpt>, <NOV> and <info>; logograms include <2>, <4>, <@> and <&>. (What principle motivates <u> and <c>?)

(14-1) *Hi love got 2 Br ok. Waiting 4 train 2 Lvn. Vry tired. Hope u r ok & @pool. Have a good swim. Love u - INITIAL01*

(14-2) *Your flight is cancelled Sk1273 17NOV13 Copenhagen Aarhus Dep: 2250 You are rebooked on Sk1225 17NOV13 Dep Time: 2300 Please check in on your new*

*flight. For more info pls visit <https://ci.sas.mobi/fi/cancelmsg.aspx?a=en> Brgds
SAS*

(14-3) *Hi love got here & going thru passport c u soon*

None of the non-standard features in these examples are unique to text messages, and many predate the technology. Rather than being novel, they are transferred from other domains, and are perhaps embellished in the process. Moreover, it is rare to find text messages employing the extent of non-standard characteristics suggested in the media, in examples such as (14-4), probably invented by journalists.

(14-4) *Mst f d tym dey usd ds knnd flng'ge 2 tlk 2 1 anthr nt lly n txt bt evn n wrtng ltrs 2
(Business World, 18 December 2000, p.1, cited in Tagg (2012: 8))*

As Crystal (2008: 17) observes:

Although many young texters like to be different, and enjoy breaking the rules, they also know they need to be understood. There is no point in paying for a message if it breaks so many rules of a language that it ceases to be intelligible. So there is always an unconscious pressure to respect some of the standard properties of orthography.

Various studies have shown that the above-mentioned non-standard features are not particularly frequent in text messages; (14-5)–(14-7) show none. Thurlow and Brown (2003), in a study of text messages of 19 year old university students in the USA, found an average of just 3 per text message; emoticons were also uncommon, as were combinations of letters and numbers (as in <b4>, <2gether>).

(14-5) *NAME02 here. I am in Odense now. When and where would it suit you that I pick up the key?*

(14-6) *I am outside your door. NAME02*

(14-7) *Flight was on schedule. The bus leaves in approximately 10'. I'll get off at the university. See you there. Best, NAME03*

Other characteristics of text messages include: a tendency for messages to consist of just a single short sentence; avoidance of capitalization (often only the first word of a message is capitalized); reduced punctuation usage, especially avoidance of full stops; and a tendency not to have an opening salutation or a closing greeting (and if there is one, it is often reduced, as in (14-1) and (14-2)).

Tagg (2012) suggests that texters draw on various linguistic choices to evoke the informality and intimacy of spoken conversation. Thus she argues that text messages

often use speech-like sentence structures that make text messages syntactically more like speech than writing, speech-like patterns of ellipsis (examples (14-1) and (14-3)), and non-standard spellings of words that reflect spoken forms (e.g. <ya> for <you>). Non-standard representations of words are also used in linguistic play, and, for some texters, to construct a personal identity.

Before the linguistic and social practices surrounding text messaging could become entirely codified it was replaced by new technologies, at least in the conversational domain, where it are rarely used among friends and acquaintances. These days almost all of the messages I receive are from businesses such as Microsoft, my phone company, airlines (see e.g. (14-2)), online shops, delivery companies and the bank, and even these are steadily decreasing in frequency. For example, whereas in 2020 delivery companies might send me half a dozen or more SMSs advising me of the progress of my delivery, now I might get one (or none, the information being logged on an app). These SMSs often show some of the features mentioned above (e.g. brevity, reduction in punctuation, abbreviations), though there is little reminiscent of spoken conversation, which they do not attempt to emulate. Furthermore, a user's role is almost exclusively as a recipient of machine generated messages. If any response is required it is usually to follow an internet link. Almost never does one (or even can one) reply on the messaging system.