



THE LANGUAGE OF MODERN TEXTING: LINGUISTIC APOCALYPSE OR JUST ROUTINE FLUX?

Dr. Anjali Patil-Gaikwad
C.P. & Berar E.S. College, Nagpur.

ABSTRACT:

The language even 90s kids learnt at school no longer resonates with the young of today. It is equally true that the language of the youngsters does not resonate with most people above the age of 30. The chasm is deep. Possibly insurmountable. How big of a problem is this and what needs to be done? In fact, can anything be done at all? Should standard English be reinforced at school levels with strict consequences for any deviations? But then, which English is standard English? These are some of the questions this paper seeks to examine.

KEYWORDS : *strict consequences , standard English , arbitrary abbreviations.*

INTRODUCTION:

There is a lot of discontent among speakers of English today regarding the way the English language is being used in recent years, particularly with reference to texting. In a scathing diatribe against the modern trends of doing away with all grammatical rules to the extent where a sentence becomes unrecognisable, using arbitrary abbreviations the meanings of which can be lost on a vast majority, and using emojis to convey feelings, Welsh broadcaster John Humphrys says

'It is the relentless onward march of the texters, the SMS (Short Messaging 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.'

Humphrys' is a profession that relies heavily on the correct use of language, and his frustration with modern usage is largely understandable. But when even a pop icon like Nick Cave says '*Texting is apocalyptic on some level. It is a reduction of things,*' we have to know that the resentment runs deep. Cave is an Australian singer, lyricist, poet, composer, and actor among other things. His music is characterised by highly strung emotion and deals with the themes of death, violence, and religion. If ever there was a case for going unconventional by using abbreviated words and dumping grammar, Cave's would have been the one, given his pop culture persona. Even in personal life, his getup is what is known as emo - black leather apparel, spiked hair, chains, dark eye make up. Everything about him says rebel; yet, he baulks at the thought of language being 'reduced'.

So is language really being reduced? Is it being vandalised, destroyed, raped, pillaged? Is the linguistic apocalypse at hand? There is no doubt that the language even 90s kids learnt at school no longer resonates with the young of today. It is equally true that the language of the youngsters does not resonate with most people above the age of 30. The chasm is deep. Possibly insurmountable. How big of a problem is this and what needs to be done? In fact, can anything be done at all? Should standard

English be reinforced at school levels with strict consequences for any deviations? But then, which English is standard English? These are some of the questions this paper seeks to examine.

REDUCTION OF LANGUAGE:

That the usage of the English language has rapidly changed in recent years is a well established fact. A meme on the internet explains this in a very amusing fashion. It goes something like this. What Shakespeare wrote sometime around 1596-1598 - 'With mirth and laughter let old wrinkles come' - became 'Dude that made me laugh' in 1995, 'Too funny LOL' in 2005, and just a single laughing emoji in 2015. This is, of course, semantically incorrect. While the original sentence was intended as a kind of a blessing for a happy and long life, the other three are merely responses to something mirthful. But going into semantics here would be missing the larger point that English has, indeed, been reduced. There are several ways in which this is happening:

- **Fewer words are used to communicate on text:** The younger generation considers phone calls too direct (if a phone call is required, the proper etiquette now is to first send a text message to ask what would be a good time to talk to them) and prefers to text. Since it is tedious to type out longer thoughts, texts are made as concise as possible.
- **Removal of words from sentences:** Some words, earlier considered integral to the logical completion of a sentence, are completely removed in texting. For instance, a sentence like 'I have to attend a meeting in 5 minutes' gets shortened to 'Meeting in 5', assuming the longer word 'meeting' is allowed its full spelling. The reason for this is the same as the above point, that of keying in words being a tedious process.
- **Lessening of the purity of language:** Since language defies standardisation, this is a much larger discourse regarding the proper definition of 'pure language'. For the sake of saving time and preventing digression into a subject that is not the issue at hand though, this paper assumes that the language used in any given region in the 90s is the standard for that region. Taking that into consideration, there is no doubt that grammatical rules have been bent rather severely in the years since the advent of texting. This has resulted in the language losing its purity if compared with usage just two to three decades ago.
- **Losing the rhythm/lilt of language:** Every language has a certain cadence, a characteristic artfully used in free verse poetry. Although the last words of lines in this kind of verse do not rhyme, the natural ups and downs of stressed and unstressed syllables lend music to the language. This music is lost when everything is trimmed down to the bare minimum.
- **Reduction in the intensity of emotion and feeling:** Shortened texts do not allow us to express our full range of emotions primarily because even in full sentences, without the benefit of tone, it is very difficult to convey the exact meaning. Here, not only are we dealing with just text, but also truncated sentences and words. That is the exact reason why emojis were introduced in the keyboard. However, many people would rather not use them because they seem juvenile.

Reasons for Change:

The change in language is quite apparent and it is upsetting for those in favour of tradition. But this change seems inevitable if we take an overview of the changes that people have had to face in the past two to three decades:

- **Change in mode of communication:** Almost all communication that was not interpersonal moved from phone calls to texts. As mentioned earlier, even phone etiquette changed from a person being able to just pick up the phone and dial to having to text first to set up an appointment for a call. A two minute conversation cannot be packed into two minutes over text. Thus, texts had to become more concise.
- **Increase in the quantum of communication:** On the whole, people are communicating more than before. An average person has about 400 online contacts all over the globe and is a part of discussions

on 3-4 topics daily even if all the people on that forum are strangers. Without getting into the quality of those exchanges or why people engage in them or even whether they are warranted, this paper argues that people are connected to a much larger audience of friends, acquaintances, and even strangers, than before. With so many exchanges required of a person every day, the time one can allot to each is very little. It makes sense to keep words and sentences to a minimum in order to be able to reach out to more people every day.

- **Early texting setting the trend:** Before the advent of smart phones and touch screens, mobile phones needed multiple strokes even to type the simplest of words. For example, if one was to type 'risk factor', it would take as many as 27 keystrokes. Ironically, the word 'zero' is no less than 12 keystrokes. Add to this the facts that message length was restricted and each message was chargeable. It is no surprise that the advent of messaging services and the shortening of language went hand in hand. Perhaps if the messaging service had started off with the predictive text we use today, the turn English has taken would not have been the same.
- **More avenues for communication:** Social media has enabled people to express themselves (and be an audience to others' expressions) to an unlimited extent. A single person (particularly one who feels the need to be heard whether for a business or just because) can be found on varied platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, WhatsApp, etc. Being on so many apps at the same time, the need for constant updating, replying to people, even getting into arguments is a serious drain on time. Shortened language helps to some extent.
- **Tools facilitating communication:** The very tools that have enabled more communication are also the ones facilitating the shorter version of language. GIFs and emojis have taken the place of words expressing emotion. A response with the help of a single emoji is considered perfectly acceptable except perhaps in the most formal communication.
- **Lax attitude towards purity of language:** Much of the formality of English even in official communiques has eroded over the years. As younger generations get into the work force, they bring with them their own way of communicating, and this language is not laced with much solemnity. Moreover, the recipients of this communication are also more likely to let it slide, thus making shorter communication mainstream.

The Dilemma:

The dilemma about whether to stick to English as we know it or to give in to the deluge is real. There are legitimate and convincing arguments in favour of both sides. In favour of status quo, we can say that:

- Assignment of meaning to words cannot be arbitrary. If anyone was allowed to decide that a certain word meant such and such a thing from that day onwards, language would disintegrate into chaos. That is the reason words should not be messed with and should be fully spelt out. Assigning personal meaning to random letters thrown together or even spelling something differently from how it has always been spelt can be confusing.
- Abbreviations or images cannot be a real substitute for language because they are inadequate and often seem impersonal. A folded hands emoji cannot replace a sincere condolence message. Neither is a clapping GIF a good stand in for a heartfelt congratulatory message. Only words can do what words can do.
- The language used in texts makes comprehension difficult. All the conventional rules of spelling, grammar and punctuation have been made redundant and that muddles the meaning. For example, when one gets a text saying 'v r going 2day', the spelling may only be annoying and we may be able to make out that it says 'we are going today'. But the absence of punctuation and wrong grammar can lead to the wrong interpretation of the sentence. It may well have been a question in the vein of 'We are going today?' The correct construction would of course be 'Are we going today?', but punctuation marks have all but disappeared and long run on sentences without a single comma or full stop or

question mark have become the norm. In addition, there are a number of very popular abbreviations. Some like lol, rofl, tism, gm, have now become common and comprehensible to most. But every day witnesses the abbreviation of yet another phrase and needs decoding in the context if one is to understand it. Even then, there is no telling whether the meaning will be clear. Smh for 'shaking my head', 'otom for on the other hand', ftfy for 'fixed that for you', wysiwyg for 'what you see is what you get', tl;dr for 'too long; didn't read' are not abbreviations most people are familiar with. In the end, we may save time typing abbreviations, but end up paying for it in loss of communication. It is not a gainful barter.

- Standardising English if not any other language is vital because it is a language used internationally. Millions of people use it as a second language, and after taking pains to learn correct English they face another steep challenge when accosted with the casual way in which speakers of English as a first language keep changing spellings and grammar and drop punctuation as if language can be personalised.
- If the current rate of change continues, English will soon become unrecognisable. Language consists of signs and signifiers that are key to meaning. If the signs and signifiers change so rapidly and frequently, the continuity we find in language will be lost. Future generations will not be able to understand even 50 year old texts. This poses a serious risk to the repository of knowledge and information gathered over centuries.
- Above all, language is an integral part of our cultural identity. It performs the important social function of promoting a feeling of group identity and community. The preservation and generational continuity of traditions and values depends upon language. If we lose language, a lot of our heritage is lost.

If all the above arguments in favour of preserving language the way it is are logical and persuasive, there are equally valid and weighty arguments in favour of embracing the change.

- Far from complicating communication, the new text lingo actually makes it easier. It is short, to the point, not verbose, and spells like words sound. All this makes comprehension easier than it is for standard English.
- As for emojis being inadequate, this is just not true. The whole point behind emojis is to convey the tone in which something is said. There is no need for a non speaker of English to decode an emoji. It is plain words that are inadequate; emojis enable us to put across our feelings as well. Since facial expressions are uniform all around the world, emojis are the new global language and facilitate understanding where words fall short.
- Shortened words, no punctuation, and shortcuts to grammar make communication faster.
- Learning a new language, and particularly English, is scary for many people. Even those who understand spoken and written English are reticent to speak for fear of ridicule. Since purists are so worried about non native speakers of English getting confused because of the new usages, apologists of text lingo assure them that non natives actually feel less intimidated by English if they know that they can take liberties with the language and don't have to adhere to rigid rules. Knowing that they will not be judged for their faulty use of grammar or spelling actually helps them relax and learn better.

A Balanced Stand:

Interestingly, both sides - the one opposed to the change and the one propelling the change - argue that their version of English simplifies communication. The former because standardisation eliminates confusion, and the latter because the new lingo is more approachable. It will have to be admitted that both sides are not wrong. This brings us back to the earlier question of what the right thing to do is. Should the new trends be curbed and attempts to preserve the purity of English be redoubled or should the English speaking population go with the flow?

To be totally honest in answering the question, curbing the change isn't even feasible. It is too fast and too furious to be dammed and giving in is really the only option. It has already been discussed that the recent changes in the usage of written English are technology driven. We have seen how rapidly technology has changed the way we live, and it is evident that these changes are irreversible. Similarly, the change technology has brought to language is also irreversible. The pace of technology is simply too rapid to be able for the common person to stand his or her ground. In the past 50 years, there have been various kinds of resistance to change - resistance to credit cards, resistance to sharing phone numbers for fear of being tracked, resistance to online shopping, resistance to using social media, resistance to using smart phones. Today, these people are in a minority. Most of us have given in to the change because it simply makes more sense to stay with the tide than to go against it. Language cannot be an exception. However much we resist the tidal wave of change, it is more than probable that we will be swept away.

However, it is not all despair. It is possible to see it in a positive light if we are to look into the history of the English language. We would be hard put to find another language that has witnessed so much flux. Some 1500 years ago, various Germanic tribes like the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes settled in Britain, and brought their dialect with them. This influenced the language spoken in Britain at the time to an extent that the original became unrecognisable. The next wave hit around 800-1000 AD when Vikings invaded the eastern and northern parts of England bringing with them a horde of new words, some 700 of which are still in use today. We owe commonly used words like cake, knife, skull, die, ugly, husband, sale, skill, billow, glitter, sway, whirl, whisk, ball, egg, loft, freckles, irk, and many more to these origins. We couldn't even say the names of all the days of the week without Thursday, a word whose origin is Thor's Day, Thor being a Viking god. The case system in English also broke down with the arrival of the Vikings and their influence on the language. In 1066, William the Conqueror led Normans, Bretons and the French in an invasion of England that became the ruling class. The official language of England was French for nearly three centuries after that. During this time, about 85% of all Anglo-Saxon words in English were lost and it became the language of the peasants while French enjoyed a royal status. The Norman Conquest was such a defining moment in the history of English that it is considered the point where Old English morphed into Middle English. The Norman influence was all pervasive. Vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar and idioms and phrases all either got modified or added to or completely dropped. Today, the French impact is still seen in words such as cabinet, bureau, cadet, champagne, debris, detour, facade, hotel, metro, navy, rich, salad, bouquet, ballet, zest, etc. It is further seen in prefixes like con-, de-, dis-, and suffixes like -ant, -ation, -ment, -ism, as also everyday phrases like joie de vivre, bon appetit. It is under Norman influence that to this day the 'h' sound in words like honest, honour, hour, etc. is not pronounced. But by 1362, it was time for the tide to turn in favour of English again when King Henry V used the language for his written instructions. Chaucer's choice of language for his Canterbury Tales further solidified its position among the masses. From then on, the advent of the printing press, Shakespearean plays and other literary trends ensured that English enjoyed a place with a strong foothold among languages of the world. The very fact that the term Modern English came into being as opposed to Middle English signifies that there must have been a substantial change in the language, or it would not have needed a demarkation. Modern English also saw what is known as The Great Vowel Shift between 1400 -1700 AD, revolutionising the way words were pronounced. The changes certainly did not stop here. Today, even a native speaker, when reading Victorian English, would find a world of difference between the language then and now. Ironical, then, that the Victorian Era is when the transition to Late Modern English had already begun. Chaucer is widely regarded as the father of English poetry. This father, however, is entirely unintelligible to a vast majority of even native speakers. It can only be read with some preparation to get used to the spellings (with pronunciation in mind) and grammatical peculiarities specific to the period. Coming back to the last two centuries, a period called Late Modern English, this span has also been a time of immense flux brought on by the spread of the British Empire, the emergence of English as a global language, and large scale migration. English was subjected to influences from all over the world, and the consensus is that English is the richer for it, not poorer.

The English that we love and that is being defended by purists today is this English. The one that has taken a beating and battering from the Angles and the Saxons and the French and, in recent years, from the entire world. Defenders of this English forget that this language is what it is precisely because it borrowed from and got influenced so heavily by users around the world who took liberties with it, owned it, and left it more luxurious. Language is not a static entity; it is an alive beast, always in flux. At times the flux is too sluggish to be noticeable, at other times, it is as if the floodgates have opened and the original landscape has become entirely altered. The present age of technology is more the latter than the former, and that has made the pace of change very noticeable. It is perhaps the pace, and not the change per se, that has purists alarmed. But it is worth noting that technology has changed the way we travel, interact, communicate, do business, learn, impart education - the very way we live. Since language is an integral part of all these transactions, it cannot remain in stasis. We can rebel against it or revel in it, but change is inevitable. In fact, most academicians are more welcoming of this flux than commoners and look at it as an exciting period when they get to witness the English language shaping and shifting form. As linguist and language lover David Crystal once said,

'Text messaging is just the most recent focus of people's anxiety; what people are really worried about is a new generation gaining control of what they see as their language.'

In truth, if ever there was a language that belonged to no-one and everyone at the same time, that language would be English. It is a fallacy to look at it as one congealed, pure form that is spoken by only a certain set of people. It was always a flowing stream, gathering some and leaving some behind as it meandered through time and space, and so it shall remain. The present upheaval is nothing but another blip on the radar that English will, in all probability, gobble up and become even more grand and sumptuous because of it.

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