

Intrxtlty

by JONATHON GREEN

2 B, or nt 2 B: dats d Q:

Whether 'tis nobler n d mnd 2 suffA
d slings n arrows of outrageous fortuN,
Or 2 taK arms against a sea of troubls,
n by opposing Nd em?

W. ShAkspeEr *Hmlt*

Short Message Service, usually abbreviated as SMS, and popularly known as text messaging or, most popular and simply of all, *texting*, was created in 1985 as one of the specifications of what was then a new communications system, GSM. The service was launched in 1992 and over the past fifteen years has risen to become what must be the most widely-used social communications system in the mobile phone-using world. There may be more emails, moving ceaselessly among the world's computers, but they represent, as it were, the serious side of communications. Texting is the sassy junior, and it is hardly surprising that text messages have become the preferred means of getting in touch for hundreds of millions of young people.

It is, indeed, almost frighteningly prolific. 100 million texts are sent in the UK every day. This is a fraction of the 400-million-per-day Philippines, where everyone apparently knocks out a dozen of things per diem, but the stats do bear consideration: unsurprisingly Friday and Saturday nights – the peak social nights of the week – see the peak of texts. And August, at the heart of the summer holidays, is a consistent record-breaker. In August 1998, the first year that monthly UK SMS statistics were available and texting was still a relative 'infant', 11.1 million messages were sent each August day. Last year the daily average figure was 117 million: more than 3.6 billion messages for the month. The two biggest days were the 17th - 137 million messages sent to greet the A-level results – and the 24th - 136 million more to pass on news of GCSEs.

Enough, however with statistics. One can assume, anyway, that the numbers are even more bloated this year than last. Text is widely seen as a new language. Standard English dictionaries, especially those aimed at the college market, like to lard their latest edition with the announcement of a smattering of smart new words. A few texting terms have recently found their way onto the press releases. Whether they are looked up, any more than are the occasional examples of decade-old slang that similarly adorn such lexicographical updates, is not the

point. The question is: to what extent really is texting a language, let alone, to accept the category into which most commentators seem to have placed it, the latest form of teen slang?

Slang has always produced its subsets. The first and greatest (extent and longevity both) is cant, or criminal slang, which provides the original 'slang' glossaries of the 16th century, and which remained the only form of known slang until 'civilian' slang, what France, where criminal argot has remained the primary focus of lexicographers, calls *l'argot commun*, began appearing in dictionaries at the end of the 17th. Rhyming slang appeared around the 1810s, variously attributed to Irish navvies, Cockney costermongers or all-round criminals who felt that the old cant, with its roots in the 18th century and even further back, was now too well-known to the authorities. Backslang, with its own subset as used by butchers, appeared a little later but has essentially vanished. This latter is not a wholly British concept: in France, for instance, basic *argot* has been augmented with *louchébem*, used by Parisian and Lyonnais butchers and which itself is the word *boucher* (butcher) subjected to its own rules: the word is transformed by moving the first consonant to the end; then placing the letter 'L' at the start and suffixes such as *-ème*, *-ji*, *-oc*, *-muche* are added at the end of the new word. An alternative name, *largonji*, does the same for the French word *jargon*. More recently French teens have used *verlan*, another variation on backslang (*verlan* = *l'anver*, i.e., *envers* = inverse), with an extra leavening of Arabic from the country's North African immigrants. Back in English the gay world, inheriting this quasi-Italian vocabulary from the theatre, has Polari. But as the sources make clear, few of these are slangs as such. Rhyming slang, with its staunchly London roots, would, as I have suggested before, be no more than a local working-class dialect had it found its home in a city less powerful, linguistically as otherwise, as Britain's metropolis. Butchers' usage, by its nature, must render such lexica, never very large, as occupational jargons. Verlan is more reminiscent

of such inversions as those that underpin the schoolboys' 'secret' Pig Latin, while Polari has never truly moved beyond the more camp areas of the gay community.

All of which must suggest that texting, however loudly feted as the latest slang it may be, does not in fact qualify as such. Or if it is a slang, then it is an 'occupational' or 'interest-group' version, in other words, a jargon, dictated not merely by the inter-related group of users but by the technology they use. The medium dictates its message and the mobile phone screen undoubtedly sets the rules for the way one uses it. At an average of 160 characters maximum, the screen is definitely not the place for long-drawn out, polysyllabic disquisitions. What it demands is short, sharp, and to the point. Textspeak has evolved specifically to accommodate those limits. Which, to reiterate, makes it a jargon, an 'occupational slang' geared to a specific set of users and the environment of that use. That the group in this instance is tens of millions strong, and that unlike, say, that of management, the jargon is not used in a strictly professional environment, doesn't invalidate the basics: this is the language of a specific group used for a specific purpose.

Texting is intimately linked to the computer, especially as follows the rise of the Internet, but in terms of a technology producing a language, a somewhat more distant predecessor is the language of Citizens' Band radio (CB), which peaked, at least as a popular phenomenon, in the early 1980s. Not the language itself, which now seems embarrassingly decrepit (did we in the UK really pretend to see 'bears in the air' and call each other 'good-buddy'?) but from the fact that like texting it was rooted in technology. The in-car, or more usually in-truck radios with which long-distance drivers, originally on the mighty US highways, kept in touch en route.

Not that CB was the first such attempt to fit words to the limits of an electronic medium. Pre-World War II journalists regularly used 'cables' to keep word length down and save money on their reporting, delivered via the world's telegraphic cables. Evelyn Waugh's *Scoop* is spattered with teasing examples, and in real life one might read 'Wales Parisward smorning omnistation cheered', an abbreviation that was quicker and cheaper than 'The Prince of Wales left for Paris this morning. All those present at the station applauded him wildly.' Cables are long gone, but the need to compress messages remains.

And while CB talk is part of the process, in more immediate terms textspeak evolved from Internet chatrooms (which in turn developed from Bulletin Boards) where users adopted a number of abbreviations to accelerate response times and make a 'conversation' flow more freely. But chatroom users had one advantage: the long-established 102-key QWERTY keyboard. With the basic 12-key mobile keyboard, and a screen display

that permits a relatively minimal 160 characters, the abbreviations that for chatters were a choice became a necessity for text input. It is in these abbreviations, using letters, numbers or often a mix of the two, that lie the foundations of textspeak. They can be simple: *CUL8r* ('see you later') or relatively complex *Salte&ILDoIT* ('say it & I'll do it'), they can even be multilayered like the deceptively brief *wgw1* (i.e., 'wha g'waan', a British Caribbean phonetic treatment of standard English's 'what's going on?') but they seem virtually unlimited.

They also tend to the short. It may be that a French novelist has written a whole book in text (example: '6 j t'aspRge d'O 2 kologne histoar 2 partaG le odeurs ke tu me fe subir?') which, once expanded and translated, means 'What if I spray you with cologne so you can share the smells you make me suffer?') but most users want to keep it somewhat less literary.

And text is hardly a language that we can speak aloud. Driven by the need to render smaller, our acronyms and abbreviations exist usefully only in the screen's pixellated characters. One reads them as the words they were when committed to the technology. One may type *l8r* but we 'see' and read 'later'. And while a few acronyms may have been plucked from much older traditions – SWALK, 'sealed with a loving kiss', first adorned the envelopes of World War I troops though sadly NORWICH, '(k)nickers off ready when I come home', another Tommies' favourite, seems not to have survived to these p.c. days – and become words in their own right, the bulk unravel even as we see them (if, of course, they are comprehensible in the first place.)

Looking at the average text sentence – or for that matter the somewhat less than average opening lines of Hamlet's soliloquy above – texting would appear to be a mixture of abbreviations and acronyms, all very much at the user's discretion. There are dictionaries – of course – which feature a variety of terms, but it is hard, at first sight, to discern any sense of linguistic rules. If it works, then it works and in the democratic world of digital communications, who is to say what is 'right'. It all seems pretty random, but in fact analysts have discerned some rules: for instance single letters replace (small) words, e.g. be = b, see = c; single digits can replace (small) words, e.g. ate = 8, for = 4. Single letters or digits can replace syllables, thus great = gr8, before = b4. The sound 'th', as it often is in non-standard spoken English, becomes 'd', thus therefore = der4. Certain regularly used groups of characters are rewritten: 'orr' = 'oz, thus sorry = *soz* and tomorrow *2moz*. 'Superfluous' words like 'the' or 'a' are simply abandoned, while others are cut short, e.g. between = *btwn*. Above all are the acronyms, descendents of such now venerable terms as the Eighties' *yuppie* and from even hoarier phrases as *TTFN* (ta-ta for now), coined for the BBC comedy show *ITMA* around 1940 and originally voiced by the

comic charlady ‘Mrs Mopp’. A variety of standard-to-texting translation engines have been put together, the most authoritative of which is generally accepted as being *the transl8it! dxNRE & glosRE* (the translate dictionary & glossary), which can be accessed online. As it says: ‘*jst typ yor msg n hEr & klik d transL8it! butN.*’

Given the essential *ad hoc* status of the language – anything can be en-texted, though the results can vary widely as to concision – the vocabulary itself is harder to pin down. Such dictionaries as exist are online and by lexicographical standards, nugatory. The bulk of their entries are acronyms, sometimes quite lengthy: *IOWAN2BWU* – I only want to be with you, *HITULThILuvU?* – have I told you lately that I love you? to mention a couple popular in that particularly well-used texting application: online flirting or, as the wags have it ‘textual intercourse’. But they all seem a bit forced. How many people actually understand such strings? And how often are they actually brought into communicatory play? As the guides – yes, there are many – to what its users term ‘textiquette’ proclaim: ‘epigram not essay’. Or as textspeak would have it: *KISS*, keep it simple, stupid.

Perhaps the most ‘tekkie’ approach to texting, and perhaps that which best suits the screen, is the Zlango ‘pic-talk’ language, launched last year in Israel. This is based entirely on icons, and comes with a dictionary of 200 of them, broken down into eight groups: people (me, you, but also devil and god), actions (sub-divided into hands, movement, thinking, etc.), places (house, movie, party,

etc.), feel (‘shut-up’, ‘miss-you’, ‘please’), time, language, description (some, lots, big, etc.) and fun (music, dancing, movie...). You type in the word and up comes the icon. It can be ‘de-iconed’ at the other end. The jury remains out, and critics suggest that there’s not that much advance on emoticons and ‘smileys’, but it’s intriguing.

Slang doesn’t always last, though the antiquity of a far larger proportion than one might imagine is quite surprising, and jargon certainly doesn’t. The dictionaries who boast a sample of text will be quietly consigning it to oblivion come the next edition or so. In the bare quarter century since personal computing began its expansion, the technology has remained in a state of constant flux. There is no reason why that of the mobile phone should suddenly bring developments in that area to a halt. I lack the necessary entrails for useful prediction, but can we really believe that in ten, even five years, the phones of today will not have changed so extensively that the whole idea of 160-character screens, and the concomitant linguistic constraints that are the ultimate source of textspeak will be anything but quite uselessly ‘old-school’. After all, the current grail in computerland is of voice input where once we typed. Shall we thus talk out texts into our phones, our words instantly transmuted into digital strings, then transmitted and received as such – all to bypass the original means of using that machine, even in its most venerable, static form: simply talking through it. Then again, the technology may be something quite beyond prediction. ‘*Ther R mo tngz n heavN & erth,*’ as Hamlet might have texted Horatio, ‘*thN R dreamed of n yor philosophy.*’

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