

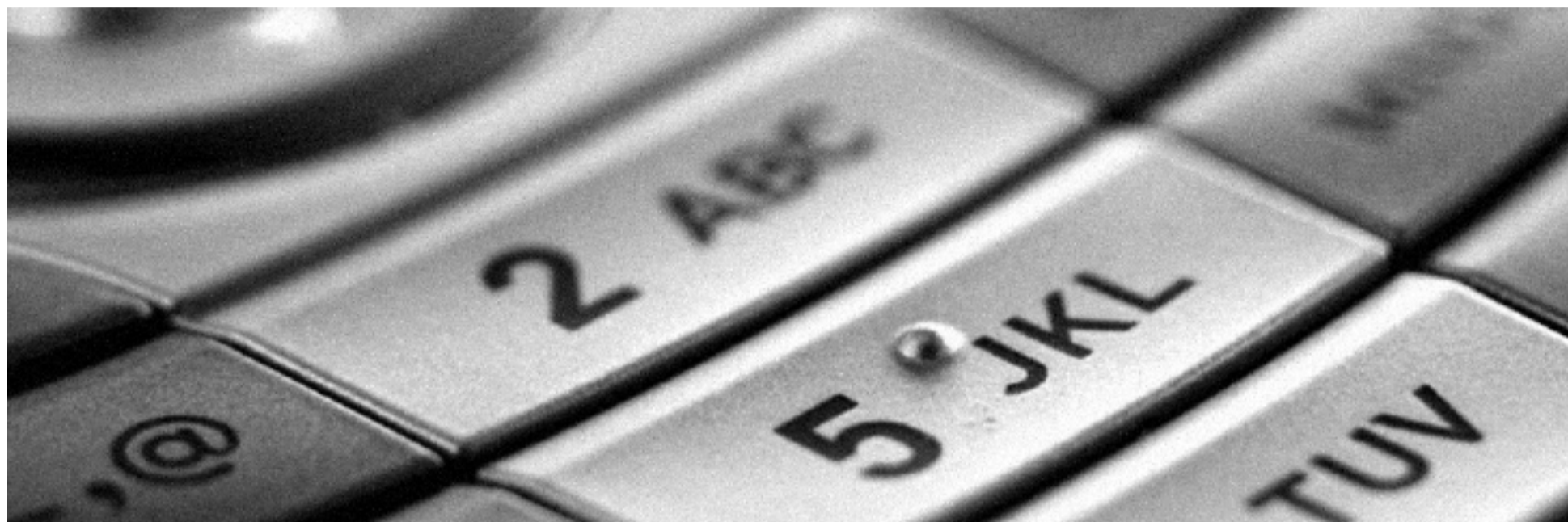


PhD graduate Paul Sulzberger has found that the best way to learn a new language is through frequent exposure to its sound patterns — even if you haven't a clue what it all means.

Fossil finds suggest an early origin for human speech — It may be time to rethink the stereotype of grunting Neanderthals. The prehistoric humans may have been quite chatty — at least if the ear canals of their ancestors are anything to go by.

A computer system that can carry on a discussion with a human being by reacting to signals such as tone of voice and facial expression, is being developed by an international team including Queen's University Belfast.

After just over a year of self-localisation Facebook is now available in 43 languages and is in the process of adding another 60. 25,000 volunteers helped translate Facebook into Turkish last year, and there are now 9 million Turkish-language users.



Do you speak txt?

I caught a snippet on Radio 4 the other day of an exasperated middle aged man bemoaning the abysmal standard of grammar amongst young people. It's a common enough complaint today but, as it turned out, this voice was quoting Plato who died 300 odd years before the birth of Christ. So, was there some prehistoric 'golden age' of language? A grammarian Garden of Eden where no-one ever split an infinitive or confused their predicate nominatives? Or was Plato suffering from a generational moan as inevitable as fallen arches and middle age spread? The latest furore to presage the death of 'proper English' has been occasioned by the rise of 'Textese', the truncated slang used to send text messages on mobile phones. Apparently Textese is now so prevalent that schoolchildren are submitting entire exam papers in it. The question for this edition of Speechmarks then is, are we poised on the brink of linguistic disaster or is this just another case of prescriptive vapours?

Textese has evolved over the last eight years, tracking the exponential rise in mobile phone ownership. It's a massive constituency. Last year we sent over 2.3 trillion text messages — nearly 20 percent up on the year before and almost 150 percent up on 2000. Britons alone send over 6 billion texts a month.

Essentially Textese is a form of shorthand. It converts conventional spellings into ultra-concise blip-words that are faster to tap out on a tiny keypad and better fit cramped mobile phone screens. Words are radically shortened to leave only their most definitive characters, so 'tomorrow' becomes 'tmoro' for instance. Words can also be combined with numbers to make new homonyms, 'later' becomes 'l8er' and 'before' becomes 'b4'.

Whole phrases are also condensed into single words of Textese with as strange an aspect as Swedish. 'Pos' for instance, means 'My parents are looking over my shoulder', 'roflcopter' is short for 'I'm rolling on the floor laughing out loud.' and, the instantly recognisable, 'wateva' indicates a great sigh of terminally bored juvenile indignation.

If one aim is contraction; like Orwell's 'Newspeak': "the only language in the world whose vocabulary gets smaller every year", another is exclusion. Textese is tribal. New evolutions mark out those 'in the know' from interlopers not unlike the impenetrable 'guild speak' you hear every day from economists and motoring journalists.

Are the rules of sentence structure, rules that go back to the Renaissance, really crumbling away because our kids are texting each other rather than passing notes under their desks?

Some people think so. Many believe that texting is producing a whole generation of illiterates. For John Sutherland, in *The Guardian*, Textese "masks dyslexia". John Humphrys, the broadcaster, goes further, claiming that texting is linguistic "vandalism". Things are just as heated in the United States. James Billington, the Librarian of Congress, has claimed that texting is bringing about "the slow destruction of the basic unit of human thought, the sentence." Cripes, not only are we at risk of losing our language, even our capacity to think straight is in peril.

There have always been those who would, if they could, hold language to a 'gold standard', (usually the version spoken around the time of their own youth.) However futile the attempt to resist change, some language gripes do have a sound basis. Splitting infinitives for instance. Whether or not it's causing the language to go down the drain you can't argue with the fact that a lot of infinitives do get split and as far as the rules go it is incorrect. In the case of Textese though, things are not so clear. Actually, there is little or no evidence that any of the imagined corruption of standard English is really happening.

Let's look at the facts behind the furore, dispell a few urban myths and take a quick glance at how 'proper' English ended up as it did.

One of the fears, for instance, is that with so much abbreviation, people (read 'young people'), will lose their grasp on proper spelling altogether. In truth, research shows that less than 10 percent of words in a text message are abbreviated and of those that are many of the abbreviations long predate mobile phones. Spelling in Textese may be different. It is truncated. But, you still need to know how to spell properly before you can truncate it. In fact many commentators around the world say that texting is actually improving literacy rather than damaging it. It is giving all sorts of people more practice in reading and writing.

In some ways Textese is reminiscent of early English phonetic spelling. Not that it's not 'wrong', but it does have a crisp vitality that expresses the informality and immediacy of the medium. Textese is like written chatter. No surprise then, that it's creeping into all of our emails.

The fear that new technology will damage the language has surfaced along with every new writing tool from the printing press to the word-processor.

It's mostly been doom and gloom though one notable exception was Conrad Swackhamer, a prominent New York attorney and editor. In 1848 he predicted that as people got used to the new electric telegraph, they would "cast off the verbosity and complexity of the prevalent English style". The new "telegraphic style" would be, "terse, condensed, expressive, sparing of expletives, and utterly ignorant of synonyms". The telegraph would propel the English language toward a new standard of perfection.

Dictionaries of telegraphese, were published, suggesting new words to meet both the limited bandwidth and the cost of sending messages. Here are some extracts quite as weird as Textese.

- Nalezing - Do only what is absolutely necessary
- Nalime - I will only do what is absolutely necessary
- Nallary - It is not absolutely necessary, but it would be an advantage



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Do you speak txt?

The idea that English springs from some pure source that must be protected is simply wrong headed.

Modern English is a mongrel mix of invader's tongues. Almost every tribe that ever ravaged these shores has left its mark on the language. (Actually the Vandals are an exception. They came and ravaged but left no words we know of except perhaps for 'ale', their word for beer.) With the tides of invasion English soaked up a huge number of loan words leaving us with a riot of irregular spellings and a huge number of words. Different parts of the country were influenced by different incomers to the extent that by the middle ages regional dialects were so distinct that if you ventured just a few miles down the road you'd need an interpreter.

It was Chaucer, a Londoner, whose writings began to establish the South Eastern dialect as the predominant form. By 1476 Caxton had set up his printing press in Westminster, the first book he printed there was Chaucer's popular Canterbury Tales. At that time spelling was pure whim. Shakespeare spelled his own name in numerous ways. Caxton began the process of standardisation in earnest choosing words from all over England. He dropped the Southern word for eggs, 'eyren' for instance, in favour of the Northern 'egges' we still use today.

Like Textese, Caxton's spellings mirrored pronunciation and in many cases preserve in their shapes sounds we no longer use. The 'gh' in the word 'night' for example, represents its original sound, something like the Scottish "loch". Likewise 'knee' and 'knight' are still spelled with the 'k' just as they were pronounced in Caxton's time.

Modern spelling is generally credited to Dr Johnson's Dictionary of the English Language, of 1755. Many of his rules were based on Latin forms which he considered the perfect, most elegant of models. But, the model didn't really fit and has left us with such an inconsistent mess that history is strewn with reforms and reformers from Teddy Roosevelt to the Duke of Edinburgh – all of them abject failures.

Conversation, social context, is the mechanism through which language changes and, society can be deeply resistant. Why otherwise, haven't the irregular plurals 'oxen' and 'sheep' given way long ago to 'oxes' and 'sheeps'? And how come 'mouses' (As in, "We've just ordered some new wireless mouses".) is a perfectly good plural for a computer device but not for nest of furry rodents? Even when change seems natural and reasonable, we still resist it. Whenever our kids say 'look Mummy! sheeps' we send them to bed with no supper: quite rightly.

Regularising irregular past forms such as 'knew' into 'knewed' and 'grew' into 'growed', would seem to be a good idea from a linguistic point of view. But such new forms are resolutely resisted particularly by the educated classes. Can you imagine John Humphrys on Mastermind telling a contestant that they "certainly knewed a lot"? On the other hand he'll probably be quite comfortable talking about his 'holiday', a word which until quite recently was reserved exclusively for religious feast days. When John Humphrys says 'Oh! that's wicked' do we have to check his expression to see whether he means 'really bad' or ironically 'really good'?

Acceptance of new forms of language depends on the social interpretation of the changes. New words live on the cusp as they migrate from boorishness to respectability. We even flag our ambivalence with those little hand signals that mean 'in inverted commas'.

Technology literate children are the coal face of change. Take 'book', for instance, the latest word for 'cool', as in "That's book dude!". Apparently if you type 'cool' into a mobile phone with predictive text, the first word that results is 'book'. Rather than persist to get 'cool' it has simply been replaced.

Textese is not a new language but an age old process, on a new platform.

txt lexicon

| | |
|-----------------------|----------------|
| Account | acc |
| Address | addy |
| At the moment | atm |
| Be right back | brb |
| Be back later | bbl |
| Be back soon | bbs |
| Because | bcuz |
| Boy friend | bf or b/f |
| Best friend for life | bffl |
| Best friend forever | bff |
| Between | btw |
| By the way | BTW |
| Definitely | def |
| Don't worry | dw |
| Forever | 4evr |
| For your information | fyi |
| Friend | frnd |
| Got to go | g2g or gtg |
| Have a nice day | H.A.N.D. |
| Hold on | h/o |
| How are you | hru |
| I don't care | idc |
| I don't know | idk |
| I do what I want | idwiw |
| I love you | luv u |
| If I recall correctly | iirc |
| In my opinion | imo |
| In my humble opinion | imho |
| Jokes | jks |
| Just for laughs | jfl |
| Just joking | jj |
| Just kidding | jk |
| Just to let you know | jtlyk or j2luk |
| Know | kno or noe |
| Laugh out loud | lol |
| Lots of love | lol |
| Message | msg |
| Never mind | nm or nvm |
| No problem | np |
| No thank you | no tnk u |
| Not much | nm |
| Obviously | obvi or obv |
| Of course | ov cors |
| Oh My God | omg |
| Please | plz or plez |
| Probably | prob |
| Love | <3 or luv |
| Peace | ∨ |
| Right | rite |
| see you later | cu l8er |
| Something | sth, s/t |
| Sorry | sry, sori |
| Talk to you later | ttly |
| says | ses or sez |
| Text | txt |
| Text back | txt bck |
| Thanks | thx, tnx, |
| Thank you | ty or thnk u |
| Thank you very much | tyvm |
| Tomorrow | 2moro |
| To be honest | tbh |
| Welcome Back | wb |
| What | wat or wha |
| Whatever | w/e or wateva |

After sitting in the fridge for weeks, Mr Johnson scrambled some eggs.

Dangling participles, like the one in this headline, must be the most egregious of all common writing mistakes. Not only will they damage the flow of your writing, they makes your message completely ambiguous.

The problem is that the reader expects the participial phrase that starts the sentence (After sitting...) to modify what immediately follows. But that's not the way it's been written. The way it reads is that the sitting is being done by Mr Johnson, not by the eggs. The modifier, the part of the sentence that tells you what the participle belongs to, has been left 'dangling'.

In grammar, a dangling modifier may be intended to modify the subject of a sentence, but because of clumsy word order it seems to modify the object instead. When such modifiers are participles, they often appear at the beginnings of sentences. For instance: "Walking down the avenue, the trees were beautiful." The "walking down" modifier seems to connect to "the trees" in the sentence, when actually they really connect to the walker. They are walking down the street and finding the trees beautiful. Thus, the modifier is hanging on nothing, dangling.

Here's another kind of example, a misplaced modifier (another participle): "I saw the trailer peeking through the window." Presumably, it was the speaker peeking through the window, not the trailer. Consider, this, "As a business leader, my tie must be colourful.". Who is the business leader, the speaker or the tie?

The problem is all of these examples stems from the order of the words. In Modern English grammar the opening phrase of a sentence should always modify what immediately follows. If it doesn't, you'll leave the participle dangling, as well as your readers.

Careless word order is perhaps the most common cause of ambiguous writing. Here is an amusing example, "Juvenile Court to Try Shooting Defendant" And a less amusing one, "The government ordered an inquiry into the unrest last year." Does 'last year' tell you when the enquiry was ordered or when the unrest happened? If the enquiry was commissioned last year the sentence could be reordered to read "The government last year ordered an inquiry...". Just as likely is that it was the unrest that happened last year in which case you would have to add an extra word or phrase to make that clear; "The government ordered an inquiry into the unrest of last year." or "... the unrest which occurred last year."

Of course, ambiguity may be exactly what you are seeking in a sentence and can be a fine art in the hands of a skilled politician. For example, the Minister might say "I oppose taxes that hinder growth." Depending on what they want to hear some will think the Minister opposes all taxes in general, because they hinder growth, others may think he only opposes those taxes which will hinder growth.

If you're a comedian you'll use ambiguity rather a lot.

"Last night I shot an elephant in my pajamas... What he was doing in my pajamas I'll never know."

Groucho Marx's classic joke depends on a grammatical ambiguity as does this playful set of gaming instructions for magicians.

"Whenever a player plays a spell that counters a spell that has been played or a player plays a spell that comes into play with counters, that player may counter the next spell played or put an additional counter on a permanent that has already been played, but not countered."

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