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Abstract

Since the language used in text messages has evolved significantly to a stage where English speakers can have a hard time understanding the words used in texting, scholars have considered whether textism constitutes a new literacy. This paper addresses the general opinion of linguistic scholars regarding the question of whether or not texting language can be considered as textism: a new language separated from English. The general opinion of cell phone users in the society is also collected through personal interviews. The current finding claims that textism cannot be considered as an independent language, but all scholars and cell phone users agree that translation between English and textism is necessary for certain abbreviations and words. Beyond just determining the legitimacy of textism, this paper also addresses another belief of the general public: textism is damaging standard English literacy skills, especially for children and students. This paper specifically studies textism’s influences on students from young teenagers (age 11) to college undergraduate students (age 25). The findings of linguistic researchers show that abbreviations used in textism are entering into students’ essays for all grade levels. Specifically, for middle school students, texting also has a negative relationship with verbal and non-verbal reasoning skills. On other hand, college students experience tone and style changes in writing due to textism. Even though textism can have significant effects on students’ writing performances, this paper finds that textism cannot cause English speakers to lose the ability to read, write, and communicate in standard English. By further studying the relationship between English and textism, we can better understand the influences of textism and map out the potential direction of English language evolution.

Textism: The Product of Technology and Language Evolution

The moment Neil Papworth sent out the first text message in 1992, a new seed was planted in English literacy (Crystal 77). No one was expecting this new way of communication to one day redefine English literacy. In fact, people treated text messaging like a new version of email (Crystal 77). As time went on, more and more people worldwide decided to use text messages to communicate, and cell phone users’ word choices and sentence structure started to diverge from conventional English. New words and abbreviations are created every day on the texting platforms. As the difference between texting and traditional English becomes greater, the texting language is sometimes treated as a language by itself, which the American society calls SMS language (Short Message Service Language), and linguistic scholars call "textism" (Kemp & Bushnell 18). Since textism has evolved and developed significantly for the past thirty years, the legitimacy of texting literacy should be questioned and verified in order to further study the evolution of the English language. Despite the fact that translation is necessary sometimes between textism and English, there is not enough evidence to suggest that textism is a completely separate literacy. Regardless, textism can influence students’ academic writing performances, and even though textism cannot directly damage students’ literacy skills, it can cause decline in children’s reasoning skills.

In a cell phone user’s perspective, the existence of a gap separating textism and standard English is yet to be determined. I conducted interviews with twenty cell phone users ranging from age thirteen to forty-five. Eight of my interviewees believe that textism is simply an abbreviated version of English, but translations between English and textism are necessary from time to time. Dr. Karma Waltonen, a writing instructor at UC Davis, claims that she does not consider textism as a separate language from English, but it is necessary to understand certain terms of textism in order to communicate with others. During the interview, she said that “for [her], [texting] is still simply a medium…because once we say [textism] is a separate literacy, we are assuming it’s just a different language, but [she] [is] still using formal English in certain situations” (Waltonen). Dr. Waltonen believes that textism is still English but it is just expressed in a different form, and words used in texting can change depending on situations and texting habits (Waltonen). Her perspective points in the direction that textism is a product of language evolution, but she does not deny that it can be difficult for certain English speakers to understand textism. Dr. Waltonen and seven other interviewees’ opinion is not accepted by everyone I interviewed. In fact, the remaining twelve interviewees disagree and claim that textism is and should be considered a separate literacy from standard English.

In contrast to Dr. Waltonen, I decided to interview a group of college and high schools students who are much younger than Dr. Waltonen and use text messages more frequently. An undergraduate student from UC Davis, who chose to remain anonymous, believes that textism is a new language and said : “there is constantly new "slang" words that surface and become trendy for people to use. I find myself having to use urban dictionary a lot so that I can understand completely what someone may text me, so yes, translation is definitely needed sometimes [for textism]”1. In this student’s perspective, understanding textism is not that much different from learning a new word from another language. The fact that he needs to use online resources to understand textism shows that textism can be a new literacy as far as he is concerned. From my interviews, no conclusion can be made, and my interview sample does not have a unanimous opinion. In fact, the data collected really supports the idea that the general public’s opinion is divided when it comes to defining textism. Regardless if an individual believes textism is a literacy or not, all my interviewees agree that there is a disconnection between English and textism, which requires some processes of translation. If the society can agree that there is a clear separation between English and textism, why can’t people agree that they are two languages?

The divided public opinion can be explained by the fact that every cell phone user has different texting habits. To analyze the public’s disagreement, scholars such as Jonathon Green specifically studies the habits and styles of cell phone owners using SMS language. In Green’s article “Intrtxtlty,” he claims that “texting would appear to be a mixture of abbreviations and acronyms, all very much at the user’s discretion” (Green 127). He further claims that it is true that there are new words and rules created by textism, but not everyone uses the same abbreviations, and it is difficult to say who is “right” when using textism (Green 127). Every cell phone user a has different experience using textism, and the disconnection between English and textism can mean either a formation of a new language or just a new library of vocabularies. Like Green mentioned, there are people who treat text messages like letters which means texting is simply writing on a different platform. There could also be people who use mostly abbreviations and acronyms while texting; texting language is then a totally different literacy than English as far as they are concerned. In terms of the results from my interviews, the legitimacy of the language textism is yet to be determined due to the fact that everyone treats textism differently, and everyone has different habits using textism.

More confident than the general public’s opinion, linguistic scholars favor the claim that textism should not be considered as an independent literacy but should be a new form of English writing. When it comes to the fact that English speakers need accommodations to understand textism, the existence of a new literacy should be considered. Instead of seeing textism as a new language, scholars believe that textism is part of the English language’s evolution. According to an article named “The Language of Texting: Altering English or a Language of its Own” by Elizabeth Corney, she claims that translating processes, such as code-switching, are observed between English and textism, and textism can eventually bring “permanent” (Corney 42) changes to English. However, Corney also claims that even though “it is possible that these changes could create an entirely new language of just ‘textspeak’... the changes are most likely not vast enough for this to occur or last for a while” (42). When it comes to deciding whether or not textism is a language, researchers like Elizabeth Corney favor the idea that textism is not a language or at least not yet. It is true that some changes brought by textism require translations, but those changes are becoming part of the English language instead of forming a new language. Even though certain textism terms can seem distinctive enough to not be considered as English, scholars like Elizabeth Corney cannot find enough evidence to prove that the formation of this new language is complete.

Other linguistic scholars, such as David Crystal, who published over one hundred books on language research (Crystal 77), takes a stronger stance and claims that texting is not a language but instead a new way of writing. Crystal says in his article, “Text Messages,” that “one of the most interesting things about the way texting has evolved [is that] is it a genre…[and] will Textspeak have an effect on the language as a whole? This is unlikely” (82). In Crystal’s opinion, textism is creating a new genre where English can be expressed differently, and textism can create literacy words. Texting is not necessarily creating a new language, instead it is a new way to write in English. At the same time, Crystal does not deny the fact that textism “is characterized by its distinctive graphology [with] its chief feature [of] rebus[ing] abbreviations” (Crystal 80). Both Crystal and Corney agree that textism is bringing changes to English literacy, and it has its own features and ways to be used. However, textism is not generally considered a language proven by these two linguistic scholars. The language used in texting can bring permanent changes to English whether the effect is creating a new genre or bringing in new slang or vocabularies. The distinctive abbreviations and translation processes mentioned by Corney and Crystal explain why the general public is confused on whether textism is a language or not in my interviews. Special features of texting language create the gap between English and textism, and some English speaker consider this gap to the line separating two languages. Differences between textism and English are not great and clear enough to consider textism as language, but textism created a new form or genre of writing that requires translations and explanations.

Although I do not believe that textism is a separate literacy, textism has not caused damage to students’ English literacy skills. There is not enough evidence to prove that textism can cause difficulties for any English speaker to read, write, and communicate in standard English. As children get in touch with textism while they are still learning the English language, teachers and parents are worried that the SMS language will damage children’s English literacy. The common belief proposed by news and media is that texting can damage the language skills of children and SMS language is the reason for poor writing performances (Kemp & Bushnell 18). The common belief of society is that SMS language generally has negative effects on children who are still learning the English language. Even though most parents and educators believe that children should avoid texting due to its negative effects, most linguistic scholars disagree with the common belief of society.

One study conducted by linguistic experts Kemp and Bushnell proves that the general belief that frequent usage of SMS language is related to poor writing performance and the decline in English literacy for children is false. The research was conducted with eighty-six kids who have experience sending text messages. The kids were asked to complete a series of literacy tests which included grammar, spelling, and writing. The test results actually go against the common belief of society. Kemp and Bushnell claimed that “it does not appear that children’s writing is being ‘overrun’ with textisms: only 2%–4% of words in these children’s conventional English messages were written as textisms, and presumably the intrusion rate would be even lower in formal, school-based writing” (Kemp and Bushnell 26). Overall, the experiment shows that using textism does not necessarily damage literacy skills. In fact, most words used in text messages are rarely seen in children’s academic writing. Even though textism (SMS language) definitely does not have the same writing and spelling styles as regular English, children have the ability to distinguish between words used in textism and conventional English. Children treat textism and English almost as two separate languages, despite the fact that textism is not considered a language, because they know what words they should use when they are using standard English.

Despite the fact that textism cannot affect the English literacy of children, textism can damage both verbal and non-verbal reasoning skills. The idea that textism has no effect on the academics of children cannot satisfy society’s concern regarding textism. Researchers started to conduct more researches in the field and extend the study to observe effects of textism beyond literacy skills. From Kemp and Bushnell’s study, it is shown that children have the ability to separate texting words from conventional English words. Scholars, such as Beverly Plester, studies specifically on textism and its effects beyond academic performances. Plester and her colleagues conducted two studies with children from 11 to 12. One of the studies focuses specifically on children’s verbal and non-verbal reasoning skills and their relationship to the frequency of texting. Sixty-five children between age eleven and twelve are involved in the research, and they were divided into three groups based on the number of text messages they send per day. All children were then asked to complete both the verbal and non-verbal portions of the Cognitive Abilities Test (CAT) which is generally used to determine reasoning skills through children’s English literacy ability. The result shows that “the higher text users scored significantly lower on the verbal and non-verbal reasoning measures than did no text users, and marginally lower than low text users” (Plester 137). Referring to Table 1, the average CAT scores (SAS scores) of children who send the most text messages per day are 99 and 99.2 respectively which are significantly lower than 110.5 and 115.5, the average scores of children who send no text messages. Table 1 shows us that the frequency of texting has a negative relationship with verbal and non-verbal reasoning skill. Even though textism does not affect how students perform academically in writing, it certainly does not mean that texting literacy has no effects on children. Reasoning skills are strongly correlated with literacy skills, especially verbal reasoning. Decline in reasoning skills can be considered as a negative effect of textism which means texting language can do harm to children who are still learning the English language. It is also discovered in Plester’s study that the amount of texting is a factor that should be considered when researching its effects. The correlation found in this study is that frequent texting can cause damages in reasoning skills for children.

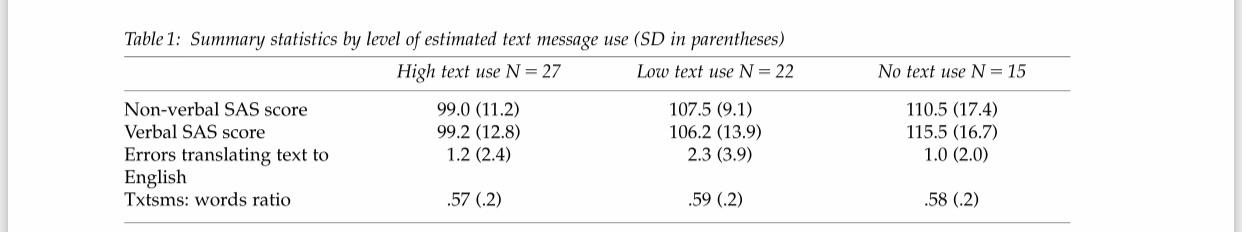


Table 1. CAT scores of students with different texting frequencies from Plester, Beverly et al. “Txt msg n school literacy: does texting and knowledge of text abbreviations adversely affect children’s literacy attainment?” *Literacy*, *Wiley Online Library*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2008, pp. 137–144.

By speaking with a middle school teacher, it seems that middle school teachers observe obvious effects of textism on spelling and grammar, and those errors can be seen in students’ writing all the time. Linguistic scholars unanimously agree that textism has no or close to no effect on children’s literacy skills, but to deepen the understanding of textism’s effect on children, I interviewed Amy George who is a 6th grade teacher at Birch Lane Elementary School in Davis. George observed that her students are using certain words such as “U r” instead of “You are” in writing assignments and 6th grade students do not really know why “U r” or certain text messages are considered unacceptable in school writing. However, George said that even though those mistakes are seen in students’ work, she is unsure that text messages are the only cause of this observation. Not every student has a cell phone in George’s class, and George told me that those students who do not have cell phones do not necessarily show better writing performances. All writing assignments in George’s class need to be completed in complete sentences and words that are accepted by standard English. George showed me a couple writing assignments of her students and proved that all her students have the ability to write in standard English regardless if they send text messages or not. Amy George’s observation of textism’s effects is actually not completely against the scholars’ conclusion; in fact, her observation can be correlated with Kemp and Bushnell’s research. Obviously, Amy George observes more mistakes in students’ writing than what Kemp and Bushnell would expect, but both George’s experience and the research agree that students cannot lose the ability to write in standard English simply due to the exposure of textism. With Amy George’s input, textism should have effects on children, in the way that they are more likely to use words that are not included in standard English, but they have not lost their ability to write, read, or communicate in conventional English simply due to higher frequency of using textism.

Frequent use of text messages and textism tend to show different effects on students based on their age; textism negatively affects vocabulary skills for high school students. One of my interviewees is Mikayla Morgan, who is currently a senior in high school. When answering the interview question of whether textism can affect her writing performances, Morgan claims, “I find myself writing abbreviations of words. I think that this can damage our vocabularies and writing styles because it is very informal” (Morgan). Similarly, another high school interviewee Ashley Maselli, who is also a senior in high school said that “texting language can become a habit and transition to other formal writing settings can be difficult” (Maselli). She further claimed: “since the limitations of simple phrases are usually utilized in texting language, the use of word choice becomes difficult! With that said, there's the internet! If I can't remember or find the proper word to use, I look up synonyms” (Masellie). The experiences of Maselli and Morgan both show that abbreviation is a significant part of the texting language and they have observable effects on writing. Using texting abbreviation frequently can really damage their vocabulary skills in formal and professional writing. In their experiences, especially in Morgan’s case, the vocabularies they tend to use in writing can become less formal which is not what formal/standard English is asking for. Maselli also experiences the difficulty of using and remembering the accepted words for conventional English which requires her to use other resources while writing. In Maselli’s case, texting language and abbreviations are taking over the vocabulary she uses which unconsciously makes her writing formal in an academic setting. The frequent use of text messages can damage high school students’ vocabulary skills which further cause their writing performances to decline under the guidelines of standard English.

On the other hand, college students tend to believe that frequent use of textism does not damage their literacy skills or influence on their writing performance. I conducted interviews with twelve college students who use text messages daily, and only four of the interviewees believe that textism can affect English literacy skills. The majority of the interviewees believe that being exposed to or using textism does not mean losing the ability to write formally. One of my interviewee Troi-Ryan Stoeffler, who is a second-year computer science major, believes that textism does not really have an effect on his writing performance. He claims that “[textism] is merely a shortcut of a meaning, [and] maybe if a person is fully immersed in it though, they could be effected [by textism] since it is his or her's only way of communicating” (Stoeffler). Another interviewee, Sophie Rucker, who is a second-year civil engineering major claims that “[textism] has the potential of damaging literacy if a foundation of formal English literacy is not there because what [an individual] is practicing becomes a habit” (Rucker). Rucker, Stoeffler, and the major of my college interviewees believe that textism can damage English literacy if and only if a specific individual has no experience or exposure to standard English. All current college students should all have enough experience and knowledge of formal English writing learned from high school and college courses. In college students’ perspective, the damages and effects caused by textism is, therefore, minimized.

Even though students believe that textism has no effect on their own writings, college writing instructors claim that textism can cause students to use unacceptable abbreviations and influence their writing styles. The second part of my interviews was conducted with two writing instructors in the University Writing Program at UC Davis: Dr. Karma Waltonen and another instructor who chose to remain anonymous. The interviews were intended to see students’ writing performances from the instructor’s viewpoint which can be different from students evaluating their own work. Dr. Waltonen, who has been teaching college writing since 1998, claims that there are certain errors that only show up in the past six to seven years and she believes those errors are caused by textism. She told me there was one time she saw a student using “U” instead of “you” in a formal essay (Waltonen). She even asked the student to re-read the sentence with “U”, and the student was not able to identify the mistake. Dr. Waltonen said that she is not really surprised to see these types of issues since the language created in text messages is seen everywhere and the students are exposed to this language every day. She also claimed that textism is not just limited to text messages, in fact, this language seen in Twitter and other media platforms. Dr. Waltonen believes that students read more textism than conventional English and she is worried that textism is entering students’ formal writing lexicon.

In addition to the existence of textism abbreviations in papers, the other UC Davis writing instructor I interviewed claims that students’ writing has become more casual and students tend to use less details in writing due the rising use of textism2. Beyond just using direct textism in essay like Dr. Waltonen mentioned, the anonymous instructor believes that textism is also affecting the way students write in general. Since texting aims to use the least amount of words to deliver a message, students tend to adopt this writing style in formal essays; they use less details and condense their ideas into fewer words. Even though there is an observation of words reduction, the instructor is not sure if this change is negative. She believes that word reduction does not necessarily mean losing details; it can also mean students are becoming more efficient at communication ideas. In addition to word reduction, the other major effect observed is the change in tone in students’ papers. The tone generally used in text messages or textism is rarely serious and formal. The abbreviations and words created by textism are intended to be used in communication when an individual does not have to follow all grammar rules and use conventional English words. When those textism words enter students’ lexicon of essay writing, is it expected to see that the tone of their paper shift towards what is considered casual compared to standard English. The instructor is also not sure if the change in tone can be considered as a negative impact on academic writing or literacy skills. This instructor claims that the effects of textism is a “two-way street” between textism and conventional English. The way people write and communicate is the source of new textism words, but those new words in textism can affect how we write and communicate at the same time. She believes that this cycle of creating new textism words is an expected change of the English language in the modern world and there is no surprise that those words are showing up in students’ papers. Even though the appearance of textism in papers is not necessarily damaging writing performances for college students, but it is wrong to ignore the fact that textism is affecting academic writing in the ways of tone change and words condensing.

From the interviews, the fact that textism can influence college students’ writing seems to be well established, but linguistic scholars tend to argue that there is no effect of textism in college level writing. Language experts, such as Shazia Aziz, believe that textism cannot have a significant effect on college students’ writing performances. Under the comparison between Aziz’s data and the interviews I conducted, both conclusions agree that there is no serious damage towards literacy skills or writing performance at the college level. Aziz conducted a textism research with 50 undergraduate students, ranging from age 19 to 25. The research consisted of an experiment where each student was asked to complete a 150 to 200 word writing task; 25 specific features of textism, such as missing commons or capital letters, are then counted in those papers. The results show that on average all textism featured categories appeared less than one time in a student’s paper, except the categories of using correct capital letter and correct commas (Aziz 12888). Shazia Aziz concluded, “the result [of the experiment] can be considered applicable to this population or age group and hence no great impact was found as they have acquired reasonable amount of proficiency in language by this time and are quite conscious of the context they are writing in” (Aziz 12890). College undergraduate students already have a good background of academic writing, and they have the ability to distinguish when it is fine to use words and terms from textism and when they should write formally. The number of writing errors are low in their testing papers which indicates there is an awareness that they are making language mistakes while texting.

Since Aziz’s research is based on checking the grammar and spelling rules of standard English, it does not cover the style change in writing that my personal research found. Writing performance is not simply based on grammar and spelling; Aziz failed to consider other components in writing evaluation, such as tone and style. In terms of college students, textism can cause numerous style changes as mentioned in my interviews, but the hypothesis that these changes are negative has yet to be proven. As shown by Aziz, minor errors of using unacceptable abbreviations and spellings can be a possible result of frequent use and exposure to textism, but those errors are rare at college level, which means students have the ability to separate textism and formal English.

It is an undeniable fact that there is a disconnection between textism and standard English. However, textism still cannot be studied and viewed as a separate literacy. Even though the formation of a new language is not verified, textism can influence English writing performances of students ranging from young teenagers to college undergraduates. Since 1992, English has evolved so much on the texting platform and countless new words and phrases have been created. Textism allows people to use creative abbreviations, unconventional sentence structures, and limitless ways to manipulate English words. Perhaps this is the reason why we need more research on text messages and textism. New research and studies should focus specifically on the difference between textism and English, and then compare this disconnection to the differences between English and other languages. New studies should also focus on the appearance of textism on other digital platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, and check how those appearances can affect literacy skills for students. In 2019, the exposure of textism is not limited to just text messages; textism can be seen everywhere including news articles, novels, and online stories. The effects of textism may have unlimited possibilities, and it has potential ramifications on English that are not even known yet. Rather than debating over the legitimacy of textism, there should be a focus on the learning opportunity the formation of textism provides us on English literacy and its potential evolution. The technology of texting was invented to make communication easier and more convenient, but the product of texting technology, textism, turns out to be so complex that it is making English evolution more unpredictable than we have ever seen before.

Notes

1. The interview is conducted through email with the student on February 21, 2019. The student decided to remain anonymous.
2. The interview was conducted in person with this UC Davis writing instructor on February 19, 2019. The instructor decided to remain anonymous.

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