

Winter 2003 Honorable Mention

David Craig

Instructor's Foreword

David Craig wrote several adventurous papers in our PWR 1 class, among them an analysis of the rhetorical properties of calculators amid high school math team members (mathletes) and a contextual analysis of traditional trombone playing in classical orchestras compared to the same instrument's jubilant and emphatic role in ska bands. So, when he initially approached me with the proposed topic for his PWR 2 research paper—instant messaging and its effects on literacy—my interest was piqued. However, David firmly intended to argue that the rapid rise in popularity of instant messaging among adolescents has no deleterious effects on traditional literacy, a stance that, as a teacher of writing, I was a bit hesitant to accept, because I was in the opposing camp, having seen ample evidence of the decline in traditional writing ability in recent years.

The thematic focus of our course was Howard Gardner's multiple intelligence theory and its relation to rhetoric and communication. Using this as a jumping off point, David constructed an argument built on a theory of multiple literacies to support his position. Because the topic of his paper is still new and evolving, David was faced with a shortage of existing research data and had to conduct significant primary research, gathering, parsing, and analyzing more than ten thousand lines of instant messaging transcripts. Ultimately, he had to invent his own terminology to explain his observations; there were not sufficient existing words to describe his findings. While the sincerity with which he interrogated his topic was impressive, the real proof of the effectiveness of David's argument would be if he could persuade not only me, but a whole cadre of writing teachers who themselves deal with the topic of literacy daily.

He did. And he did so with panache and style.

It is with great pleasure that I present David Craig and his paper "Instant Messaging: The Language of Youth Literacy." Hopefully, this is just an introduction to the research work David will accomplish during his years at Stanford and beyond.

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INSTANT MESSAGING: THE LANGUAGE OF YOUTH LITERACY

David Craig

The English language is under attack. At least, that is what many people would have you believe. Everybody from the usual concerned parent to the local librarian seems to have a negative comment on the state of literacy today, and many of them pin the blame on new technology. They say that the current generation of grade school students will graduate with a level of literacy that is lower than that of any preceding modern generation. Worse yet, most critics claim that language education hasn't changed, yet kids are having more trouble reading and writing. Slang is more pervasive than ever, and teachers nationwide are wearying of the unyielding fight against improper speech and a breed of student that simply refuses to learn the correct way to use language. Furthermore, when asked what they perceive to be the cause of this situation, most of these doomsayers point straight at new inventions, such as email, cell phones, and instant messaging, wholeheartedly believing them to be the source of any perceived decline in youth literacy. Fervent or not, however, their arguments don't hold up.

Every old generation slips into the trap of condemning the language of the youth, and today's situation is no different. As Wendy Leibowitz writes in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, quoting Sven Birkerts, "[Students] read more casually. They strip-mine what they read' on the Internet, says [Birkerts, a lecturer in writing at Mount Holyoke College]. Those casual reading habits, in turn, produce 'quickly generated, casual prose'" (par. 15). Although history provides a constant reminder that youth culture is most likely not getting worse, there is an undeniable, visceral tendency to believe that it is. As technology changes and teaching fads phase in and out, the current state of English always seems to hang somewhere between imminent jeopardy and assured doom. Tension builds over the perception of a decline in literacy, and soon enough, knee-jerk reactionaries are proclaiming the end of language as we know it. Despite the hyperbolic nature of these

statements, the actual issue of literacy and its progress always demands attention. What are people saying about the current state of our language, and should their concerns worry us?

The Issue: Instant Messaging and Literacy

Proponents of academic literacy generally put forth their efforts on many battlefields. In the past, every medium from comic books to television has been pegged as the destroyer of language skill, and accordingly, all have received their share of lambasting and censure. Now, however, the development and mass adoption of the Internet has thrown wide the doors to an entirely fresh world of contention. Several novel communication forms have been popularized on the Internet, new avenues of the written word that have never before existed, and with them have come a host of concerns. Most recently, a youth-spurred surge in “instant messaging” has put the language mavens up in arms again.

Instant messaging, or IM, is a technology which allows two individuals who are separated by any distance to engage in synchronous, written communication. Like a phone call, it takes place in a real-time environment; however, its mode of operation relies solely on the written word to transmit meaning, and many messagers choose to completely disregard standard writing conventions while they converse. Because of these unique abilities and characteristics, IM has gathered a following that worries many English teachers. For example, here is a snippet taken verbatim from an IM conversation between two teenage Texan girls (transcript collected on 2/20/2003, names omitted to protect privacy):

Girl One: sorry im talkinto like 10 ppl at a time

Girl Two: u izzyful person

Girl Two: kwel

Girl One: hey i g2g

Girl One: sry but my dinner is ready

Participants must use words to use IM, but there is no requirement that their words be the King’s English, and this, for many of the concerned, is the rub.

Instant messaging, according to many, threatens youth literacy because it creates and compounds undesirable reading and writing habits and because its particular lowbrow vernacular damages students’ abilities to employ regular, formal literary skills. This polemic viewpoint, however, is irreparably flawed. Its basic line of reasoning fails to take into account modern research on

language evolution, psycholinguistics, and multiple literacy development, and its one-path nature places blame too squarely on one potential cause of youth literacy problems. Despite the assertions of these worried “defenders” of the English language, however, participation in online instant messaging is not preventing the youth from developing a wide variety of advanced literary skills. On the contrary, instant messaging is a beneficial force in the development of youth literacy because it promotes regular contact with words, the use of a written medium for communication, the learning of an alternative literacy, and a greater level of comfort with phonetics and the overall structure of language.

The Nature of IM

The role of instant messaging in literacy would be irrelevant if the technology were not in widespread use. After all, damaging influences, like positive influences, are only as powerful as their scopes are large. If no teenagers used IM, then its merits and demerits, although of academic interest, would retain no connection to the real world. This, however, is not the case. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 54% of American youths aged 12 to 17 have used instant messaging (Lenhart 20). In application, this translates to a pool of thirteen million young instant messagers. Of this group, Pew reports, half send instant messages every time they go online, with 46% spending between 30 to 60 minutes messaging, and another 21% spending more than an hour. If one uses the conservative time estimate in both cases—thirty minutes and one hour, respectively—it can be calculated that American youths spend, at a minimum, nearly three million hours per day on instant messaging services.

The general vastness of time spent by youths instant messaging qualifies the medium for sociological consideration in and of itself, but it is also crucial to narrowly examine its detractors’ complaints in order to determine if they are worth the same consideration. Primarily, literacy complaints about instant messaging and its culture fall into two categories: concerns over the IM lexicon itself, and concerns over IM’s impact on the structure and progression of thought. Logically, it would be useful to determine if IM actually possesses its own lexicon and its own impact on the structure and progression of thought. For, if it does not, then the naysayers’ complaints become neutralized. If it does, however, then their worries must be considered. A research endeavor to determine

instant messaging's influence on a person's structure and progression of thought would be immensely difficult to construct and interpret properly. The first set of concerns, however, lends itself more easily to quantifiable research.

The IM Vernacular: Myth or Reality?

In the interest of establishing the existence of an IM vernacular, I analyzed 11,341 lines of text from instant messaging conversations between youths in my target demographic: United States residents aged 12 to 17. Chat logs were sent to me by young messengers, and I made sure that these participants stayed unaware of the nature of my research and that all of the collected transcripts remained unedited. Once they had been gathered, I compiled the logs and parsed them, recording the number of times slang was used in place of conventional words and phrases, and generating graphs to display the usage frequencies of these replacements. This research is not intended to be representative of my demographic at large; rather, I conducted it to determine whether a distinct IM argot exists "in the wild" among at least some portion of instant messaging youths.

During the course of my study, I identified four types of slang in my collection of instant messaging conversations: phonetic replacements, acronyms, abbreviations, and inanities. Phonetic replacements are words in which one or more phoneme units have been replaced by a series of letters that, phonetically, read the same way. Examples from this group include "ur," phonetic for "your," "you're," and "you are," and "luv," phonetic for "love." Another popular type of slang word is the acronym. Acronyms on IM services, like anywhere else, are composed of the first letter of every important word within a phrase. For a majority of the people in my study, the most alluring acronyms were "lol" and "omg," constructions that mean, respectively, "laughing out loud" and "oh my god." Abbreviations were also common IM language fare, ranging from vowel-drop shortenings, like the change of "people" to "ppl," to more drastic reductions, such as "bc" for "because." Notably, IM's set of common abbreviations are not new to the English language, unlike much of the rest of its slang set. Finally, I found a class of words that I call "inanities." These words are either neologisms, compositions of several slang categories, or simply nonsensical transmutations of other words. My favorite from this category

is “lolz,” an inanity which translates directly to “lol” yet includes a terminating “z” for no obvious reason.

In the chat transcripts that I analyzed, the best display of archetypical instant messaging lingo came from the conversations of two thirteen-year-old Texan girls. The chart below presents aggregate statistics for their usage of phonetic replacements and abbreviations, two types of slang that make up an important part of the common IM lexicon. On the y-axis, frequency of replacement is plotted, a calculation that compares the number of times a word or phrase is communicated via slang with the total number of times that it is communicated in any form. On the x-axis, a variety of slang words are listed.

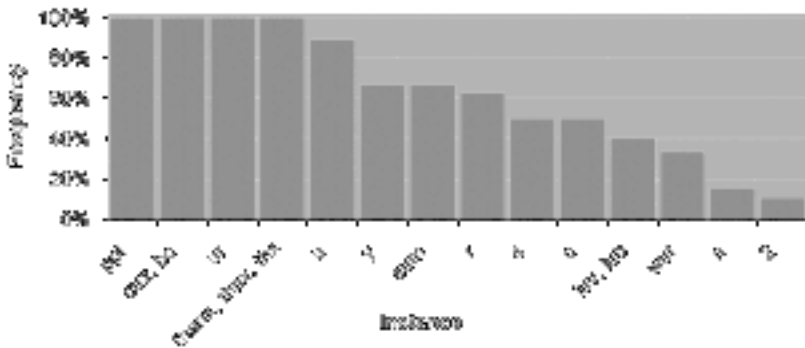


Figure 1. “Phonetic Replacements and Abbreviations.” Source: David Craig.

The Texan girls, avid IM users, employ ten slang words from the phonetic replacements and abbreviations categories at a 50% or greater replacement rate in their normal IM writing. In perspective, this means that for every time one of them writes out “see,” there is a parallel time when “c” is used in its place. In light of this, it appears that the popular instant messaging culture contains at least some element of its own vernacular. It also seems that much of this language is new: no formal dictionary yet identifies the most common IM slang. Only in the heyday of the telegraph or on the rolls of a stenographer would you find something similar, and these two exceptions differ from IM in the fact that they are not and were never popularized media of youth communication. Instant messaging, however, meets this criterion and, therefore, continues to gather attention and fear in academic circles.

The Critics of Instant Messaging

Instant messaging is certainly pervasive, and it does seem to demonstrate its own variant of English, yet these two factors alone do not qualify it for ridicule as a damaging influence on youth literacy. Despite this, many people have already blacklisted the new technology as a detriment to the study of the English language. In one wire from the Associated Press, the following passage is found:

“Abbreviations commonly used in online instant messages are creeping into formal essays that students write for credit,” said Debbie Frost, who teaches language arts and social studies to sixth-graders [. . .]. “You would be shocked at the writing I see,” [said Frost]. “It’s pretty scary. I don’t get cohesive thoughts, I don’t get sentences, they don’t capitalize, and they have a lot of misspellings and bad grammar,” she said. “With all those glaring mistakes, it’s hard to see the content.” (“Young Messagers” par. 2)

Echoing Ms. Frost’s concerns is Melanie Weaver, a professor at Alvernia College who taught a tenth-grade English class as part of an internship. In an interview with *The New York Times*, she said, “[When] they would be trying to make a point in a paper, they would put a smiley face in the end [:)]. If they were presenting an argument and they needed to present an opposite view, they would put a frown [:(]” (Lee pars. 16 and 24). Eighth-grade English teacher Deborah Bova from Indianapolis also commented in the *New York Times* article, describing her first reaction to discovering IM slang in her students’ assignments: “I thought, ‘My God, what is this? Have they lost their minds?’”

Although they may be the most outspoken group, teachers are not the only ones who harbor fear for the effects of instant messaging. James Billington, the Librarian of Congress, spoke with *The Washington Post* in March of 1999. The *Post* reports, “Billington believes [that] the library must play a role in saving the Internet from turning into a dumb-bunny domain, a mere offshoot of what he calls the ‘audiovisual culture.’ The Internet shortens attention spans, he says. It destroys the sentence, the foundation of the English language, with its diction-mangling chat rooms” (Achenbach par. 73). Beyond Billington, even more relative heavy-weights have started to weigh in on the issue. In fact, the malaise

is not peculiar to America or its pundits; English-speaking Europe is definitely concerned with IM and literacy.

In March of 2003, Great Britain's *The Daily Telegraph* ran a story called "Girl Writes English Essay in Phone Text Shorthand." This event does not seem newsworthy in itself, but the article is actually more of a commentary piece in which a few UK education figures share their views on IM's relation to education. According to the article, "The Scottish Qualifications Authority has expressed concern about the problem in its report on last year's Standard Grade exams, and revealed that 'text messaging language was inappropriately used' in the English exam" (Cramb pars. 4 and 5). After this, Judith Gillespie, a member of the Scottish Parent Teacher Council, fingers instant messaging as a culprit in the "decline in standards of grammar and written language," saying, "there must be rigorous efforts from all quarters of the education system to stamp out the use of texting [instant messaging] as a form of written language so far as English study is concerned."

The detractors of instant messaging are numerous, but their argumentation tends to lack substance. Most of the anti-instant-messaging rhetoric is prone to *post hoc* fallacies, attributing causal relationships to events which are only correlated, and its core opinions are based on hearsay, personal experience, and intuition. From a linguistics standpoint, there are three central concepts that contradict this line of thought, leading to the more reasonable conclusion that instant messaging has no negative impact on a student's development of or proficiency with classical literacy: 1) phonetic language play leads to better general literacy, 2) literacies develop independently of each other, and 3) languages evolve.

Linguistics—Language Play

As discussed earlier, one of the most prominent components of instant messaging slang is the phonetic replacement. In the game of phonetic replacements, nouns such as "everyone" become "every1," and prepositions such as "to" become "2." This type of wordplay has a special importance in the development of an advanced literacy, and for good reason. As young children develop and learn how words string together to express ideas, they go through many phases of language play. The sing-songy rhymes and nonsensical chants of preschoolers are a vital part of their language acquisition, and a healthy appetite for ludic behavior with words leads to a better command of language later in life (Crystal 182).

The five-year-old who dances around while singing a song composed of variations on her friend's name—such as the classic “Jenny Jenny bo benny banana fanna fo fenny, me my mo menny, Jennnny”—is exploring a rich, new world of sound and the symbolic meanings that it can be made to bear. Dr. David Crystal, a professor of linguistics at the University of Wales, Bangor, has expounded this theory in his book *Language Play*, making the case that language games should be practiced and celebrated in schools so that children might grow up with a better command of language.

As justification for his view of the connection between language play and advanced literacy, Crystal presents the argument for metalinguistic awareness. Metalinguistics refers to the ability to “step back” and use words to analyze how language works. “If we are good at stepping back,” says Crystal, “at thinking in a more abstract way about what we hear and what we say, then we are more likely to be good at acquiring those skills which depend on just such a stepping back in order to be successful—and this means, chiefly, reading and writing” (181). Metalinguistic capabilities are vital to every reader and writer. We must know how our language works, how it functions to contain and elucidate ideas, and what its limitations and distortions are if we wish to make it serve our ends. After establishing this, Crystal continues:

Just as metalinguistic skills in general require a stepping back, so too does language play. To play with language requires that, at some level of consciousness, a person has sensed what is normal and is prepared to deviate from it [. . .]. Language players are in effect operating within two linguistic worlds at once, the normal and the abnormal [. . .]. It therefore seems very likely that, the greater our ability to play with language, the more we will reinforce our [. . .] metalinguistic skills, and—ultimately—the more advanced will be our command of language as a whole. (181)

Quoting fellow linguistics researchers, Mary Sanches and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Crystal concludes, “speech play is instrumental to the acquisition of adult verbal art” (181). If it is accepted that knowledge of the how and why of language—that is, metalinguistics—leads to increased literacy in adulthood, then it can be transitively posited that the phonetic slang of IM leads to

increased metalinguistic awareness and, therefore, tangible increases in overall literacy.

Phonemes, the smallest units of differentiable sound in a language, are assigned in written form to letter combinations that represent their distinct pronunciations. In the English language, this writing-to-speech correspondence is obfuscated, indirect, and overlapping. As a case in point, consider the odd-looking word “ghoti,” a traditional favorite of phoneticians and language enthusiasts. Say it out loud once, and then try this: say the “gh” as you would the “gh” in “enough.” Now, say the “o” as you would the “o” in “women,” and the “ti” as you would the “ti” in “position.” Instead of hearing something like “goat e,” as you did the first time, you should now have just pronounced “fish,” and we haven’t invented any of our own phonetic correspondences. Accordingly, the game of phonetic replacement in IM slang leads to clever phrases such as “cul8r” for “see you later,” a construct that relies on the overlap that is generated in English when a combination of letters and numbers links to multiple sounds and vice versa.

As instant messengers develop proficiency with a variety of phonetic replacements and other types of slang, they can’t help but increase their subconscious knowledge of metalinguistics. As we shall see in the following section, this skill may develop in the realm of IM literacy, but it will apply equally effectively to every other literacy a person utilizes. Metalinguistic understanding is a knowledge of language so deep that it does not apply to only one type of literacy; a reader and writer with a powerful bird’s-eye view of her tools will always be able to send her message and form her opinions more effectively than one who cannot differentiate meaning from its vehicle.

Linguistics—Multiple Literacies

In the debate over instant messaging and literacy, many starting points are often assumed. For one, most arguers present their case as if students and people in general have only a certain amount of literary ability, implying that either IM or academic literacy will win out in a person and that the two modes need to be in some sort of give-and-take relationship. This assumption is, however, false. The human language mechanism is actually a diverse ability; literacy cannot be measured in one category, like a mark on a pole, to be raised or lowered. It needs to be realized that human beings can

develop a large set of literacies, ranging from the formal to the relaxed and from the mainstream to the subcultural.

Because of the human capability to maintain distinct and non-agreeing literacies, the language and culture of instant messaging can be analyzed as its own entity, separate in many ways from the classic literacy that nervous English teachers hope so much to preserve. Indeed, the literacies that a person possesses act independently of each other on many fronts, and in order to progress on a specific one of them, specific work is required. That is, if teachers wish to have their students craft better argumentative papers, then they should focus their class time on skills that relate to this goal; nobody would expect a group of students to develop the ability spontaneously. As a corollary to this argument, it can be stated that regression in a literacy stems only from inattention to that literacy. If students are asked to present a researched argument, but they do not have the background to do so, then their final product will, in all probability, be the manifestation of a literacy that is inappropriate for the assignment, such as a piece that uses a casual free-writing voice or even an IM voice. This hypothetical result is important because inappropriate conclusions are very often drawn from such an example. It is crucial to note, for instance, that the students' writing would be poor in the case considered because they were forced to substitute an ill-matching literacy where they lacked a proper one, not because the inappropriate literacy precluded the use of a fully-developed classical one. If students employ their instant messaging literacy in the wrong settings, it is because their other, scholarly literacies have not been attended to well enough. It is not, however, because IM has damaged their literary abilities or prevented the formation of these abilities.

To find a case for which the theory of multiple literacies appears airtight, one need only look at a writer such as Mark Twain. Few people would argue that Mark Twain's ability to write local color dialogue for a book like *Huckleberry Finn* subsequently hurt his ability to write other essays and future expository pieces. In fact, this local color literacy was invaluable to *Huckleberry Finn*; the book would have been pretentious and illogical without it. In this case, it is clear that Twain's possession of an alternate literacy not only did not harm but indeed helped his effectiveness as a storyteller and author in general.

The key to the successful employment of multiple literacies is discrimination. Just as Mark Twain chose carefully what dialogue in his works should be slang, every writer must always pay careful mind to the voice that he uses in any setting. One of the owners of the language pundit website, *The Discouraging Word*, who is an anonymous English literature graduate student at the University of Chicago, verbalized this sentiment in an email interview: “What is necessary, we feel, is that students learn how to shift between different styles of writing—that, in other words, the abbreviations and shortcuts of IM should be used on-line or in phone-based text messaging but that they should not be used in an essay submitted to a teacher or professor” (Editors par. 3). Continuing, he or she said, “IM might even be considered an alternate literacy—a different way of reading and writing, one that requires specific and unique skills shared by certain communities.”

Neil Mercer, a professor of language and communications at The Open University in Great Britain, seems to also share the opinion that IM is its own literacy. In his book *Words and Minds*, Mercer discusses synchronous computer-mediated communication, of which IM is a type, concluding, “[I]t combines in a useful way characteristics of speech and writing in ways which make it a welcome, valuable addition to our language toolbox” (129). His first idea, that of the medium combining speech and writing, is an important one by itself. As Aristotle said more than two thousand years ago, “It should be observed that each kind of rhetoric has its own appropriate style. The style of written prose is not that of spoken oratory” (qtd. in Salzinger and Feldman 100). This posited distinction between speech and writing has been researched vigorously, too, a process which has resulted in copious empirical evidence that establishes it as valid (Salzinger and Feldman 149).

Now, however, it appears that technologies like IM might be crossing the divide between spoken and written communication. As Day, Crump, and Rickly say in their essay *Creating a Virtual Academic Community*, “[W]hen they first enter college, many students operate more comfortably on an oral plane than on a written one; these electronic forums, then, provide a much-needed bridge between oral and written discourse” (Harrison and Stephen 298). These authors are not referring specifically to instant messaging technology, rather to chat-room-style settings, but the theory remains the same: developments like IM provide literacies of their

own that lead to environments in which wholly new ways of thinking, reading, and writing are possible.

The maintenance of a variety of literacies is helpful from the perspective of owning a “literary toolbox,” but its actual usefulness has one other important, synergistic quality: a relation to metalinguistics. The analytical ability that is necessary to proper voice discrimination is, of course, metalinguistic in nature because it involves the comparison of two language systems. This metalinguistic ability will be built up and strengthened effectively by the acquisition of multiple literacies, because multiple literacies force their observant possessor to notice the ways in which they differ and, therefore, the way in which language as a whole operates. Following this, youth readers and writers who possess both IM literacy and classical literacy will be far better off than their peers who have been trained only in scholarly systems. Far from being hurt by their online pastime, it will aid them in their attempts to communicate.

Linguistics—Language Evolution

As mentioned at the start of the previous section on multiple literacies, both sides of the debate over instant messaging and literacy often make many assumptions before even beginning to discuss the issue. Aside from the assumption of fixed literary capacity that has already been refuted, there is still one improper theory that needs to be addressed. It is accepted and believed by many people that there exists a true and singular, correct English literacy, and this idea prompts many to dismiss the language of IM as trite, damaging, or worse. Examinations of history, however, or of how the human mind works, show this viewpoint to be completely incorrect, yet artifacts of its influence and resulting dogma persist in literacy debates even today. In the classic school, there are highly detailed grammar books, through which all good English students must plod, and a whole host of spelling rules and literary conventions to be committed to memory. Yet in pursuing a universal and pragmatic literacy for society, we must be careful not to deny the very nature of language itself.

Dr. Steven Pinker, the director of the Center for Cognitive Neuroscience at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has devoted much attention to the nature of language, especially in his book *The Language Instinct*. He writes, “it is [. . .] important that we not underestimate the sophistication of the actual cause of any

instance of language use: the human mind” (399). One of Pinker’s main points about language is that it evolves perfectly by itself; no primitive civilization has ever required the services of a grammarian in developing its way of speaking, and none ever will. “The way to determine whether a construction is ‘grammatical,’” says Pinker, “is to find people who speak the language and ask them. [. . .] [T]he pervasive belief that people do not know their own language is a nuisance in doing linguistic research” (370-1).

When discussing the sticky rules of modern Standard English, Pinker dismisses them as “[conforming] neither to logic nor to tradition [. . .]. If they were ever followed they would force writers into fuzzy, clumsy, wordy, ambiguous, incomprehensible prose, in which certain thoughts are not expressible at all” (373). Continuing this lambaste of the artificiality of “preserving” a language, Pinker tackles slang: “As for slang, I’m all for it! [. . .] thousands of now-unexceptionable English words like *clever*, *fun*, *sham*, *banter*, *mob*, *stingy*, *bully*, *junkie*, and *jazz* [. . .] began life as slang. [. . .]. Vehicles for expressing thought are being created far more quickly than they are being lost” (400).

By applying Pinker’s theories on language to the case of the IM vernacular, it becomes easy to see how the novel creations of instant messaging might someday filter down, in part or whole, to the vaulted lexicon of Standard English. Languages are not immutable, and nobody is allowed to have the job of determining the properties of a modern one; as long as languages live, they change. To say that a new slang word “does not exist,” meaning that it cannot yet be found in a dictionary, is not only snooty but also factually inaccurate, and to say that more prescriptive grammar instruction is necessary avoids the real issue of why grammar triviality can be so hard to remember in the first place: much of it is inane, obviated, and counterintuitive to the natural language process.

These conclusions about the evolution of languages do not apply so much to the everyday objectives and duties of teachers, however. After all, English instructors have a mandate to teach Standard English as it exists in the currently accepted academic community. Language “defenders” and loudmouths and those who would eradicate the IM language, on the other hand, should take careful note: you cannot stop the tide. An education in the use of a variety of equally-developed literacies is what students need, not a course in the obliteration of a perfectly good alternate literacy, such as that of IM.

The Current State of Literacy

Many people are concerned about youth literacy, and in the course of their worrying, they frequently scapegoat and deride innocent technologies like IM; this is apparent. Why, though, is there such heated concern over the literacy of the current grade school population? It turns out that there might be some cause for alarm; standardized test scores for language assessments, such as the verbal section of the College Board's SATs, have shown a marked decrease in recent years. Intriguingly, math scores for the same students have unilaterally increased. These two trends can be identified clearly in a chart that was distributed by the College Board as part of its 2002 analysis of aggregate SAT data:

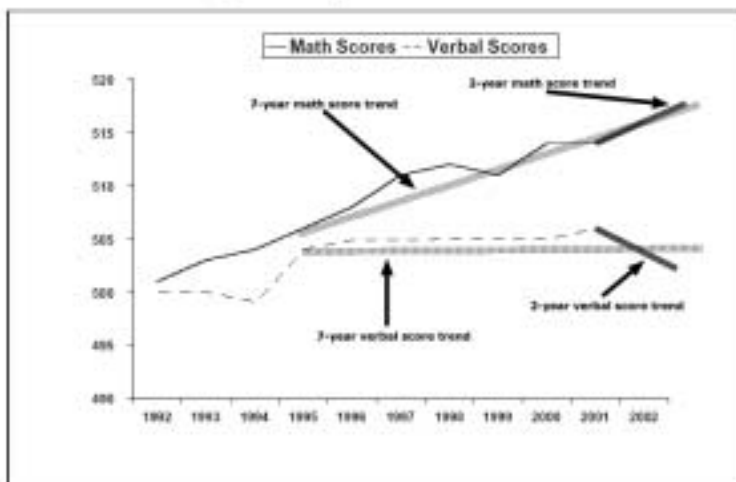


Figure 2. "Average Math Score Has Steadily Increased; No Comparable Improvement in Verbal Score." Source: *10-Year Trend in SAT Scores Indicates Increased Emphasis on Math is Yielding Results; Reading and Writing Are Causes for Concern*. (New York: The College Board, 2002), 9.

I added the checkered, striped, and solid gray trend lines to illustrate two significant patterns in the data that may lead to the conclusion that youth literacy is on the decline. The checkered and striped lines display the seven-year path of math and verbal scores, respectively. Within this time period, the average SAT math score jumped more than ten points. The average verbal score, however, actually dropped a few points. Even more staggeringly, the solid gray lines indicate the current two-year trends: math scores are on track to become even better, but verbal scores are headed in the

opposite direction and at an amazingly fast rate. When one judges by these data and trend delineations, it becomes easy to say that youth literacy may be in danger. The cause of this problem, however, is not immediately obvious.

What Has Caused the Decline

When an important drop in literary skill is identified among the youth, the academic community and society at large begin scrambling to assign blame for the situation. During this process, many suspects, from old standbys like television to newcomers like IM, get placed under the capricious eye of public scrutiny and labeled as the root cause of the youth's inability to read or write. This tactic, while superficially satisfying, does not bring the problem any closer to a solution. In our current time period, we are actually rather lucky; a basic and indisputable reason exists in plain view. Simply put, the United States is not teaching as much English as it used to.

The College Board collects data on several questions from its test takers. In one of these questions, students identify areas of academic study that they have been exposed to in their schools. If one examines the results of this question, an obvious reason for the drop in youth literacy becomes evident. As is made clear on the charts below, enrollment in English composition and grammar classes has decreased in the last decade by 14%.

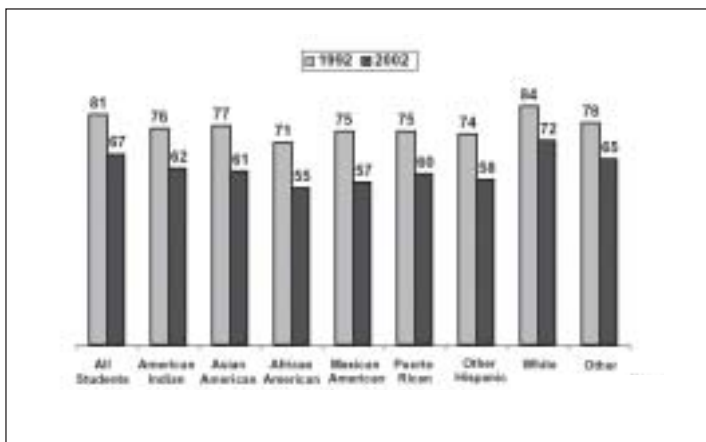


Figure 3. "Study of Advanced Math Has Increased; Study of English Composition and Grammar Has Decreased." Source: *10-Year Trend in SAT Scores Indicates Increased Emphasis on Math is Yielding Results; Reading and Writing Are Causes for Concern*, (New York: The College Board, 2002), 11.

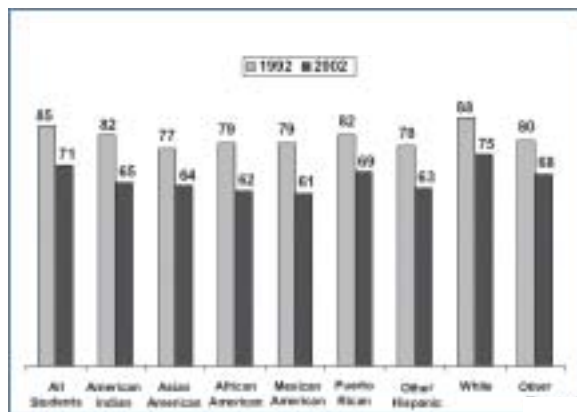


Figure 4. "Percentage of Students Taking Grammar During High School." Source: *10-Year Trend in SAT Scores Indicates Increased Emphasis on Math is Yielding Results; Reading and Writing Are Causes for Concern*, (New York: The College Board, 2002), 11.

The suspected decline in literacy seen in the College Board's data may or may not be representative of the youth situation at large. However, the possibility of instant messaging causing such a decline is not worth considering when the modern statistics on English education for United States youths send such a clear message. There is no reason to blame anything other than our schools' lack of focus on the teaching of Standard English skills. Once again, it is evident that separate literacies do not harm each other, and only when a student does not possess adequate skill in an appropriate literacy will he resort to using a language that he knows better, such as the nonstandard slang and informal thought-patterns of instant messaging.

Final Analysis

The use of instant messaging poses no threat to the development or maintenance of classical, formal literacy in the demographic of American youths aged twelve to seventeen. Due to the nature of the human brain's language processing capabilities, it is possible for people to develop and use literacies separately from one another with relative ease. In conjunction with this, knowledge of multiple literacies will only increase a person's metalinguistic awareness and, thereby, her ability to use language effectively to achieve a desired purpose. Also, although the current state of classical youth literacy does not appear to be in excellent shape, this dilemma is in no way linked to instant messaging. Instead, there exists an obvious alter-

nate explanation for such a situation: fewer young students are receiving an acceptable education in formal English.

Unfortunately, it may always be fashionable to blame new tools for old problems, but this does not mean that it's the right thing to do. In the case of instant messaging, it most certainly is not; although IM may expose literacy problems, it does not create them.

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