

Gr8 Txtpectations

The Creativity of Text Spelling

Tim Shortis argues that new vernacular forms of spelling are the latest in a creative tradition of rule-based, non-standard orthography which poses little threat to standard spelling but challenges accepted ideas about the function of standardisation.



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The term **Txt** is used to refer to the text used in SMS text messaging, instant messaging, internet chat, informal emails and social software.

A manifesto for Txt spelling

Popular media concerns about Txt spelling and the associated allegations of 'dumbing down' in youth text messaging are erroneous. There is considerable creativity and diversity on the part of the users in the ways they deploy the vernacular resources of Txt and there is a longstanding historical basis for such practices; both in 'untutored' domestic contexts, and in popular culture. The logical basis of non-standard orthography, as found in Txt, is also at the root of the intelligibility of some literary verbal art which includes text respelled in non-standard forms. e.e. cummings, James Joyce and William Faulkner come to mind. In these examples too, the non-standard spelling is a source of creativity and vividness and enables a simulation of spoken mode.

The growth of informal writing enabled by new text forms such as SMS and MSN has de-regulated what counts as English spelling rather than altered spelling itself. It has opened up tolerance of a wider range of spelling choices available in day-to-day use and has allowed users new flexibility, economy and means of inflecting nuances of meaning. Seven years after its mass adoption in the UK, Txt is no longer the domain of the 'yoof' who first popularised it: users are now from all age ranges and social profiles. The traditional discourse around codified standard English spelling and its associated binary evaluations of competence and incompetence has given way to criteria based on appropriateness and the pragmatic issue of what works for the user in a given context. Spelling is now a more flexible friend used for functional economy and identity performance as well as to show credible mastery of standard conventions. In effect, the less defined, determinate spaces of what counts as literacy in new text forms have created a context in which there has been an extension of the orthographic palette of meaning-making potential beyond the standard forms listed in dictionaries.

Viral spelling reform

Underneath the excited media coverage of Txt as a youth argot and the purported evidence of moral and linguistic decline, the spelling of Txt can be seen as a mass iteration of a sort of informalised spelling reform but without the official framings of that movement. These framings, as set out in Masha Bell's article in this issue of EDM, include the organised project to unpick the standard English conventions in which print has been conducted for four hundred years and replace them with codified alternative spellings in a new standard orthography. In the case of Txt, there is no codification and no supplanting of standard forms: the standard and non-standard co-exist, and the non-standard is not unitary or prescriptive but may include several variations in the ways to spell a single word.

It does not follow from this that all writers of new text forms such as SMS make use of the extended orthographic palette, or that any one user will be consistent in her or his approach irrespective of the situation. People routinely respell in some contexts and expect and provide standard forms in others. These 'people' are not homogeneous and all individuals exercise their choices and positions heterogeneously and in response to their sense of identity, social affiliations and their perception of the exigencies of the particular situation. So Txt spelling, unlike standard English spelling, is heterogeneous in its practices, with varied idiolectal profiles relating to the individual user's choices, habits, and sense of identity.

The vernacular spelling tradition

The kinds of spelling used in text messaging and other new ICT text forms aren't new but draw upon a tradition of vernacular spelling which we have always experienced but have seldom framed, least of all as a curriculum focus in school English. Indeed the English teacher's designated role in instilling accurate standard forms of spelling in students has created a blind spot in the recognition and treatment of other choices. Digital technology has diffused the orthographic principles which were found

in pre-digital vernacular literacy practices such as trade names, children's transitional 'creative spelling', popular culture, including comics and pop music, and graffiti as catalogued by Cook and others. Such practices exist in collective consciousness even if the spellings used in *The Beano*, or by the pop group *Slade*, are not recorded in school dictionaries or taught in class. Previously, the ubiquity of standard English in print had naturalised the conventions of the standard spelling choices and rendered other options, such as those listed above, as invisible for serious comment. With the advent of informal writing in new technology text forms, and the daily innumerable millions of routine respellings of Txt, the popular tradition has been foregrounded, although it is still largely misrepresented in media coverage.

Txtapocrypha: the much-cited-in-the media Scottish schoolgirl's SMS homework produced in response to the request to write up what she did in her summer holidays. Can you understand it and how typical is it of the text messages you see? How does it compare with the txt below, an exchange between two South London teenagers, one of them using predictive text?

My smmrhols wr CWOT, B4,we usd 2go2 NY 2C my bro, his GF & 3:- @ kds FTF, ILNY, it's a gr8 plc.

Bt my Ps wr so (:-/ BC o 9/11 tht they dcdd 2 stay in SCO & spnd 2 wknd up N.

Up N, WUCIWUG - O. I ws vvv brd in Mon. O bt baas & ^^^^^.

AARB, my Ps wr ☺ - they sd ICBW, & tht they wr ha-p 4 the pc&qt...IDTS!! I wntd 2 go hm ASAP, 2C my m8s again.

2day, I cam bk 2 skool. I feel v O? BC I hv dn all my hm wrk. Now it's BAU

ME:

Hey Gems,how ru? How was last nite? Hope u had a gd time..;) I herd the party was rele bad...ppl had an awful time! I guess I shud b glad I didn't go afta all...tbXx

REPLY:

Hey babe I had a lovely time, i'l tell you about it another time...

Yeah I don't know how everyone managed to have such a shit time, thats the gorbeneey girls way! Shall I call you tomorrow, and we can have a big us chat to make up for the last two weeks? X

ME:

It's a date. Speak 2 u 2moz, beast Xx

Alarmism and the media

'Meeja' coverage has repeatedly misreported the actual practices by thinly exemplifying alarmist comment with exotica from a cabinet of textism curiosities (see text panel on *page 24*). In its iterations of an old complaint about language decay and moral panic, Txt has been presented as a new language rather than as a constrained variety of writing with some alterations in spelling and grammar. Actual examples of Txt have been sourced from popular books of dubious provenance and have been furnished with esoteric but seldom-used initialisms and elaborate 'banks' of obscure emoticons. Actual examples of texts are rare in the coverage and the one most frequently cited is far from representative (see text panel on this page).

In this respect, treatment of Txt has echoed the treatment of email as reported by Petrie in her 1999 study in which initialisms and emoticons were similarly over-reported. These two features also feature prominently in the stocking-filler guides to Txt usage found by bookshop tills, and more surprisingly, in a compendium of Txt speak by David Crystal.

One consequence of this misreporting is its obfuscation of understanding of how Txt works: how it is understood with relative ease, and how it spreads. The accessible shortenings of Txt, as of vernacular orthography, include phonetic spelling, vowel deletion, and letter and number homophones for frequently occurring words (see *page 25* for detail). These are easily worked out by speaking them out, whether in Txt, trade names, *Loveheart* sweets, pop music respellings, personalised number plates, or knife-on-a-tree graffiti¹. In contrast, initialisms and acronyms are unfathomable without prior knowledge of the referent or repeated use. They are types of new word, or new spelling, most often associated with the shortening of complex words and noun phrases from specialised technical domains: so <SCUBA> for <self-contained underwater breathing apparatus>². Some initialisms do also occur for frequently used phrases and collocations, or "key bindings", as Werry terms them: <LOL> for <laughing out loud> or <lots of love>; <g2g> for <got to go>. However the list is not extensive whereas the lists found in media coverage and popular books about text usage are exhaustive and frequently obscure.

Emoticon panic

Similarly, emoticons are used but they are subsidiary features and much less elaborated than the popular guides suggest. Many Txters avoid using them altogether. Emoticons are unlikely to have the precision of recognisable meaning beyond a few basic types: smiling, grimacing and winking. Essentially they function like accents but to inflect semantic nuance rather than grammatical inflexion – to indicate irony for example. Emoticons do not need the referential precision shown in the bloated emoticon banks because they are always juxtaposed with words and function in relation to their textual surround. Socially-oriented Txt could never have diffused as it has if had been dependent mainly on esoteric initialisms, acronyms and emoticons.

Understanding Txt spelling

The respellings of Txt are 'natural', functional and uncodified in dictionaries, including the peculiar popular dictionaries of Txt mentioned above. They have worked and have spread because the spelling used in text messages and related text forms is linguistically coherent, logical and creative in its orthographic principles and draws upon pre-existing conventions of non-standard spelling. Such spellings are interpreted and replicated by immersion rather than by formal instruction. So Txt is an orthography remade by users in their practices rather than one which depends on being received, learned and directly replicated in the manner of the effortful accomplishment of standard spelling accuracy. This functional focus of ICT respelling – its viral but logical basis and the capacity of users to recover meanings without recourse to glosses, dictionaries and expert reference – sidelines the popular guides to netspeak, techspeak and Txt. In practice, such codification is superfluous, even misleading. So unlike standard spelling, Txt is viral in its diffusion: it truly is caught not taught.

The discourses around Txt are functional rather than evaluative in orientation. This is to say that users of Txt in informal writing are often oriented to understand the meaning of Txt rather than to evaluate the literacy competence of the writer. This represents a shift away from the regimentation associated with writing and its binary of competence/deficit.

Far from being the deficit practice of a moronic default, Txt spelling can be viewed as a source of creativity, diversity and pragmatic cultural accomplishment, and one which indexes significant shifts towards conversationalisation and informalisation in written communication. Technology hasn't driven the change but its use in new text forms such as text messaging, instant messaging, and other social software, (writing which is ungated by the regulation of school, employment and print proofreading), has diffused and indexed the shift to the informal¹⁰. In this, spelling choices have become part of the stylistic repertoire by which users can express their multiple identities rather than a forcing ground of compliance to the standardised conventions of published print.

There is little evidence that the advent of Txt is changing the expectations about English spelling in formal genres and situations. In educational contexts the concerns about standard English spelling accuracy have intensified, at least in the UK. But in the context of factors such as continuing technological change, the hybridisation of spoken and written modes and the globalisation of English, the extended orthographic palette is here to stay – although by its very nature it is likely to elude capture and definitive codification in dictionaries.

In all this Txt represents a rich source of comparison with the efforts and proposals of the spelling reform movement.

An example of an emoticon bank: about 10% of the smileys listed on this website but how many are in actual use?

Emoticons

Emoticons are facial expressions made by a certain series of keystrokes. Most often producing an image of a face sideways.

!-(Black eye
!-)	Proud of black eye
#-)	Wiped out, partied all night
#:o	Shocked
\$-)	Won the lottery, or money on the brain
%(:-) Â	Propeller-head
%*}	Inebriated
%+{	Got beat up
%-(Confused
%-)	Dazed or silly
%-6	Brain-dead
%-\	Hung over
%-{	Ironic
%-	Worked all night
%-}	Humorous or ironic
%\	Hangover
>>:-<<<	Furious
>-	Female
>->	Winking devil
>-<	Furious
>-)	Devilish wink
>:)	Little devil

Source: <http://www.computeruser.com/resources/dictionary/emoticons.html>

The Txt of TXT int nu: pipped to the post by gr8Txtpectations

Vernacular orthography is not a new phenomenon but it is not easy to document in the absence of accessible records. The informal, untutored spelling of domestic literacy practices before the age of universal schooling is more likely to be found in ephemeral low status texts which are of their nature less likely to be kept, let alone published. We are more likely to be able to access the domestic letters, and notes of Byron than his servants but it is the writing of the transitionally literate servants which would be more likely to show informal orthography. In contrast to the lack of records of mundane everyday written language in previous times, such transactions in Txt are now insistently recorded in the 'half-life' of electronic text forms: the emails, text messages and mutating texts of *My Space* and other social software are neither transitory like speech, nor fully permanent like a written record on paper.

Literary texts do include some representation of such language. For example, in an early autodidact realisation of synthetic phonics, here is Dickens's Pip describing his early attempts to teach himself to write and including an example.

Typical example of early 'meeja' coverage of Txt spellings: a newspaper summary of an almanac entry sourced from a stocking filler book of textisms.

13 METRO Wednesday, November 22, 2000

You too can talk text – NALOPKT (Not A Lot Of People Know That)


BY SUZANNE STEVENSON

ALMANACS may date back to ancient Greece – but one has finally succumbed to the modern cult of the mobile phone. The latest edition of the Hutchinson Almanac has a glossary of text message abbreviations for the first time to try to end confusion over the symbols. It details 46 phrases used by avid text fans such as NALOPKT, which stands for Not A Lot Of People Know That, and FOCL – Falls Off Chair Laughing. Emoticons – symbols made from key-stroke combinations to convey emotion – also appear in the almanac, alongside the usual facts such as the tides and phases of the Moon. The guide follows the publication last month of a mobile phone text message dictionary, WANZTLK. A spokesman for Hutchinson Almanac publisher Helicon said: 'This is an area of much confusion for people.' About 500million text messages are sent each month, mainly by the under-30s.

KEY MESSAGES

Some of the abbreviations featured in the Hutchinson Almanac:

BTDT – Been There, Done That
PMFJI – Pardon Me For Jumping In
CUL – See You Later
LCW – Loud, Confident and Wrong
WYSIWYG – What You See Is What You Get
DQM – Don't Quote Me
YHM – You Have Mail
FOCL – Falls Off Chair Laughing
TIC – Tongue In Cheek
TTFN – Ta Ta For Now
TTYL – Talk To You Later
LOL – Laughing Out Loud
GIGO – Garbage In Garbage Out
NALOPKT – Not A Lot Of People Know That
FUD – Fear, Uncertainty and Doubt
TPTB – The Powers That Be



'But, at last I began, in a purblind groping way, to read, write, and cipher, on the very smallest scale. One night, I was sitting in the chimney-corner with my slate, expending great efforts on the production of a letter to Joe. I think it must have been a full year after our hunt upon the marshes, for it was a long time after, and it was winter and a hard frost. With an alphabet on the hearth at my feet for reference, I contrived in an hour or two to print and smear this epistle' ...

MI DEER JO i OPE U R KRWRITE WELL i OPE i SHAL SON B HABELL 4 2 TEEDGE U JO AN THEN WE SHORL B SO GLODD AN WEN i M PRENGTD 2 U JO WOT LARX AN BLEVE ME INF XN PIP^{iv}

The contrast of Pip's transitional literacy is the more marked from the relative sophistication of the vocabulary and syntax in the narrator's previous paragraph. The 'Txt' is replete with comic digs at Pip's partial social and literacy accomplishment: the simulation of 'h' dropping (<ope>) and hypercorrection (<habell>), the mimetic simulation of the deliberative concentration as he writes (<KR WITE>), phonetic spelling (<teedge> for <teach>) or educational referents, and for more complex (loan-

derived) words (<prengt for <apprenticed>) and all sorts of other errors where a rudimentary phonics method cannot of itself determine an orthographic choice: <shal> for <shall>, <HABELL> for <able>, particularly where the 'auditory' reference point is a marked regional accent as is suggested in the implied vowel sound of <shorl> and <glodd>. Pip also uses the letter homophones <U> and the number homophones <4> and <2> more recently seen as intrinsic to the new-fangled Txt of yooof.

This extract of represented vernacular spelling is interesting in showing the powerful meaning-making potential of non-standard forms of spelling by comparison with the naturalised homogeneity of the standard. This potential for powerful effects and 'affect' has been a focus for recent sociolinguistic scholarship focused on respelling including Jaffe's analysis of a college canteen notice with respelling and other sociocultural takes on non-standard spelling, notably Mark Sebba's recent book (2007)

Vernacular spelling can also be found in the traces of popular culture in songs and alphabetical and numerical rebuses. Here the focus is more on a playful game of orthographic puzzling out to see how the potentials of spelling can be stretched. Letter and number homophones feature prominently. Here for example is the first verse of a song from 1913 taken from CHIN-WAG, the magazine of the Eton College East End boys project^v.

ROT, YET NOT.

D R friends, I humbly beg of U
 2 tarry and 2 read,
 And I promise I'll apologise
 2 U-that's if there's need.
 My native home's in 0 I 0 –
 "Some place" I guess you'll say;
 But, gentlemen, I tell U this:
 O I O's in U.S.A.

Then there is the old orthographic puzzle spoken by children: YYUR, YYUB, ICUR YY4ME

Or this more elaborate example (see panel, opposite) of a 19th century rebus puzzle where the reader has to fathom out the narrative from the combination of images and letter and number homophones:

The Resources of Txt

Although the choices made by users are heterogeneous, it can be argued the resources of non-standard orthography are relatively homogeneous and linguistically circumscribed, as shown in the texts cited. In these texts and in the larger corpus from which they are drawn, there seem to be a finite set of orthographic principles which account for the overwhelming majority of Txt respellings. These principles can be subdivided into three groupings which relate to motivational principles. Following the model developed by Werry's account of the linguistic features of Internet Relay Chat (Werry, 1996), there are three main motivations^{vi}:

The quotation shows the ease with which alternative spellings have become habitual and awareness of audience as a factor in determining use of abbreviations whilst the friend (G1) imitates the active, intuitive figuring out of meaning in a non-standard spelling. There is not much sense that a dictionary is missed here.

The viral success of Txt challenges our common sense assumptions about the function of spelling and the need for codification in all matters. The adoption of single forms of spelling was a centripetal pressure associated with the nation state project in the age of print. In the context of printing technology it was implemented strictly in the house styles of publishing houses in the 17th century. The variety of spellings in current use since the proliferation of new ICT based text forms, including the existence of variations for the same word, suggests that adherence to a prescriptive standard at all times is not a prerequisite for mutual intelligibility, at least in informal social contexts. At a time of informalisation, non-standard spelling may even have benefits of affect and rapport in the revoicing of the written word.

It seems likely that standard English spelling will continue to prosper. We learn to write in standard English spelling for credibility and transparency in formal 'high stakes' social contexts where failure to comply will carry social and economic penalties. But other spelling options are available, and in certain situations, with certain participants, such options may be more pleasurable, efficient and appropriate. The teaching of standard spelling is a project concerned with giving students credibility and access rather than intelligibility. Or to put it another way, perhaps collusively, and hijacking an image from a popular treatment of punctuation: Lynne Truss may have been confused that the Panda was a gangsta which ate, shot and left but most of us weren't.

This article is based on Tim Shortis's continuing doctoral study of Txt spelling and vernacular orthography supervised by Gunther Kress and Carey Jewitt at the Institute of Education, London. A longer version of the argument presented here is available. The address for correspondence is timshortis1@mac.com

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ⁱ For a lists of the respellings seen in vernacular orthography see Vivian Cook's popular treatment of spelling

ⁱⁱ It is interesting that the Oxford English Dictionary shows ACRONYM coming into the language during the second world war and its context of intensive technological deployment.

ⁱⁱⁱ For the notion of informalisation and conversationalisation see Fairclough (1992).

^{iv} This quotation has been set out in a consistent font size to maintain the focus on spelling. In the book, two font sizes are used by typographical design in order to suggest Pip's erratic handwriting control. So:

MI DEER JO I OPE U R KRWITE WELL I OPE I SHAL SON B HABELL 4 2 TEEDGE U JO AN THEN WE SHORL B SO GLODD AN WEN I M PRENGTD 2 U JO WO T LARX AN BLEVE ME INF XN PIP

^v See <http://www.villierspark.org.uk/vpabout.php?r=1HEKHGAUAA&sub=VHEKJPBAB> for other copies of CHIN-WAG and the context for this.

^{vi} Compare Thurlow (2003) 'While young people are surely using their mobile phones as a novel, creative means of enhancing and supporting intimate relationships and existing social networks, popular discourses about the linguistic exclusivity and impenetrability of this particular technologically-mediated discourse appear greatly exaggerated. Serving the sociolinguistic 'maxims' of (a) brevity and speed, (b) paralinguistic restitution and (c) phonological approximation, young people's messages are both linguistically unremarkable and communicatively adept'