

## Cover Letter

April 17, 2018

Noah Webster, Jr.

Merriam-Webster Inc.

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Dear Mr. Webster:

I am greatly interested in the job opportunity for a lexicographer at Merriam-Webster. I was pleased to find an opening at such an esteemed publication. When it comes to lexicography, I feel that the descriptivist approach is a far more necessary and powerful school of thought than the prescriptivist approach. I admire Merriam-Webster for its preference to the descriptivist approach in its publications and wish to contribute in what I feel is a very important role in the preservation of our modern English language.

For as long as the English language has been alive, there have been those who hold the prescriptivist standards to be gospel and try to suppress the language of those who stray from their standards. We cannot change this, but we can still work towards recording and preserving the language of all speakers of English. Our language is a rich tapestry of different peoples, cultures, and regions, and I believe it's the job of a lexicographer to record all these. That to me

is far more important than the stringent prescriptivist standards of English that are progressively seeing less use.

I am a student of linguistics and I have spent many months researching the misconception widely held today that slang and such “improper” uses of English--primarily by the youth of society--are degrading and deteriorating the language. I have analyzed studies and shared in the research of the effects of such language on the written and spoken performances of today’s youth, and I know that what Merriam-Webster is doing is what is right.

Attached is some of the research that I have done on the matter. I thank you for your consideration, and I hope that I can work together with Merriam-Webster in preserving our wonderful language for future generations to see.

Sincerely,

Hoang Nguyen

Hoang Nguyen

Prof. Sloggie-Pierce

ENGL 211C

17 April 2018

## The Language of Today's Youth and its Effects

### **Introduction and Background**

The English language is a beautiful mess of words and phrases, some of which don't seem to make any whit of sense. There are two geese in the air, but there are not two meese in the woods. Likewise, the sculptor molded a head of clay, but he never holded his tools. While speakers of English accept the numerous irregularities that dot the language, there is still a great resistance to change in their lifetimes.

Most notably, when the topic of language used by today's youth arises, there is a great uproar calling for an immediate cease-and-desist for fear of endangering the language. The texting language they frequently employ, called textese, as well as new slang terms, give way to many concerns. Such concerns raise suspicion that language used and perpetuated by today's youth degrades English and, as a more important and noble worry, lessens their ability to write and speak well. Conversely, for others this very concern is itself a cause for concern. English, like every language, changes with the passage of time, and the emergence of whatever slang may represent a particular time period is an inevitable and expected part. To suppress it is to deny the language its will to change.

It is important to understand the impact that language has on our lives. For today's youth, the language they use no doubt affects their written and spoken English skills. What is most important, however, is to accurately identify these effects. What people assume to be obvious conclusions are in fact more complicated matters, and it can be quite dangerous to rouse or take actions stemming from pure speculation.

## **Literature Review**

Many parents and educators often have the same reaction to students' use of slang terms like *hella* or *lit* and textese like *lol* or *omg*. They view such usage as modern corruptions of the language that is anathema to their generation, which they believe holds English to a higher standard. They discourage the use of these informalities for fear of them becoming habit. What educators are most worried about is that this habit will eventually leak into the classroom and find its way onto a formal paper.

Indeed, such a thing came true in 2003 when a 13-year-old Scottish girl handed in an essay written entirely in textese, much to her teacher's disbelief. The result was a warning from "[e]ducation experts...of the potentially damaging effect on literacy of mobile phone text messaging" (Cramb). Joining their endeavor, the Scottish Qualifications Authority, overseeing public examinations in Scotland, also reported the worrying increase in the presence of textese in the exams taken (Cramb). Meanwhile, over in The United States, educators were finding similar problems. Educators there also found that textese had leaked into their students' writing. A survey of 2,462 teachers found that many students lack the skills to construct even a proper email without resorting to their everyday non-standard form of English (Martin). SAT scores, too, saw a decline in the national average when the writing portion was added to the exams--though

whether the result was a direct consequence of the writing portion requires further investigation (Martin).

This is a new phenomenon brought on by the advent of texting and social media, as such constructions of English were rarely seen before. The digital era is in full-swing and living offline these days is nearly impossible. According to educator Peter Woronoff, kids are far more prone to the adverse language effects of the digital age than adults. Kids are more impressionable, and they “have read less, and prefer to play games, or watch TV.” As a result, the errors brought on by textese are more easily rooted in their minds. The misspellings that they commit on their phones, for example, appear to them as the correct forms and are transferred onto their school papers. Woronoff believes that “[w]e should not tolerate these activities, else it might endanger their progress.”

Most linguists, however, are wary of condemning textese as a truly harmful and impeding occurrence in the English language. It is hard to argue that students’ use of textese in the classroom is a result of the digital age. However, beyond the classroom, when examined at a more critical level, texting affects students in more ways.

The concern that textese will bleed into school work seems to ring true across the world. But the main issue which should be cause for alarm is whether students’ texting habits will desensitize them to what might be considered poor grammar. This so-called “point of saturation,” where a student is so used to seeing the incorrect forms presented by texting that he or she is no longer able to distinguish them in informal and formal contexts, is the object of much study. Researchers Herco Steyn and Rinelle Evans of the University of Pretoria tested the hypothesis in 2015 to determine whether the media hype surrounding the adverse effects of

texting is truly justified. They found that despite extensive use of textese, there is no negative effect at all on kids' ability to distinguish between formal and informal contexts of such (Steyn and Evans). Thus, fear surrounding the "point of saturation" is unfounded, as kids are not so deeply lost in texting that their minds confuse the contexts. They are able to switch back and forth between formal and informal usage at will.

What studies have further shown is that on a cognitive level, textese affects users in unexpected ways. In 2016, a team of researchers headed by in The Netherlands conducted a study in order to examine the effects of textese on the grammatical skills of students, as well as on their executive functions. A group of 55 children between the ages of 10 and 13 were tested on their vocabulary and grammatical skills, taking into consideration their texting habits (Van Dijk et al). While it may account for spelling errors in the classroom, the study found that, contrary to popular belief, textese does not actually cause a decline in the children's grammatical skills (Van Dijk et al). In fact, the opposite proved true. According to the researchers, "textese improve[s] children's abilities in written language...[and] it may also enhance their grammar abilities in spoken language" (Van Dijk et al). Secondly, the study found that texting has "[no] influence [on] children's performance on various tasks measuring executive functions" (Van Dijk et al). As such, children who text maintain their ability to multitask, despite concerns that it may hinder their ability to do so.

It may appear prosperous to those who have witnessed first-hand students misusing *your* and *you're* in their schoolwork, but texting has empirically shown to actually be beneficial to students on a cognitive level. The grammatical complexities of the English language go beyond simply using the correct words in the correct order. Outside of the particulars, which texting

appears to hinder according to educators, texting can improve the general English skills of students. The processes by which students arrive at understanding the workings of the language operate on another level.

English is a living thing and far from stagnant. Historically, the form we familiarize ourselves with nowadays differs not just from that of Chaucer's or Shakespeare's but from our predecessors of but a century ago. So much emerge to change the language. From a linguistic point of view, texting as something of a miracle. According to John McWhorter, professor of linguistics at Columbia University, texting has allowed us to express language in a way we haven't truly been able to before. Consider the art of giving speeches and presentations, for example. Though oral representations, they often start on paper. The words that are spoken are simply written words, and so the act of giving a speech or a presentation is really the translation of written English into spoken English. What texting has allowed us to do is to perform the opposite feat: converting spoken English into written English. McWhorter believes that texting has allowed us to create written language that is more "aware of the states and minds of others."

## **Discussion**

Though texting--and on a broader scale, slang--may appear to be a double-edged blade, it is clear that one side is quite blunt. When the media started to report incidents of students utilizing textese in school, the public treated texting as an epidemic that has to be dealt with before it spreads further. However, the effects of textese are greatly exaggerated.

There is first and foremost a distinction that must be made between those who support texting and those who encourage its use in the classroom. Very few belong to the latter group. Supporting texting and wishing for proper use of English in the classroom are not mutually

exclusive. Everyone wants for students to write well. There exists a standard in academia and other formal settings that is in place for a good reason. This standard is, however, not threatened by students' use of textese. A great majority of students, by their own will, do not use textese in academic settings, as they know better. Steyn and Evans's study shows that students are able to choose when and where they utilize the language. Teachers who see its use in school--and they will certainly continue to see it--should discourage the behavior. This is something that can be easily remedied by a red pen or a bold 'F.' The concern that texting is actively the cause of students' poor English skills is rather unfounded. If a student chooses to write properly but still fails to produce writing of an acceptable quality, then the problem lies not with texting but with education: the student simply was never taught better. Displacing the lack of knowledge on texting takes the student a step farther from learning what he or she needs to perform adequately.

The benefits of texting far outweigh any fixable detriments it may have. An overwhelming majority of linguists--those who devote their lives to the study of language--agree that texting is in fact a sign of progress in the English language. Its beneficial effects on kids' cognitive and grammatical skills are not attempts to clutch at straws in order to prove the public wrong. They are conclusions drawn from extensive scientific studies conducted.

As John McWhorter noted, texting truly is a linguistic miracle. To express emotion in written word is a challenge unless the author is personally known or unless the proper combination of words is used. What texting, as well as modern slang, has allowed us to do is to accurately represent our emotions in a simple and concise way. This is a valuable thing that highlights the growth of the English language in our technological world.



When it comes to linguistic changes, there have been resistors for as long as there has been an English language. Traceable across every decade, notable voices from school teachers to the president of Harvard University have cried out in protest against the degradation of the English language (McWhorter, “Txting is killing language”). There is always something to complain about. This generation’s source of controversy just happens to be the texting and slang used by today’s youth. The English language has persisted through the years despite constant fears that it will wither, and it will continue to persist. The best response is to simply embrace the modern changes for the wonders that they are and not fret about unfounded consequences. As stated by Steyn and Evans, “it is unlikely that texting [and slang] will replace traditional literacy practices.”

## **Conclusion**

The advent of texting and social media have brought on very noticeable changes in how the English language is used today. Though reactions to these changes are polarizing, it is important to remember what Mignon Fogarty, better known as Grammar Girl, once said: “You don’t have to love every change.” However, changes have happened in the past, are happening now, and will continue to happen in the future. Every generation has had people worried over the possible decline of the language, and every subsequent generation has proven them wrong.

The English language has shown itself to be entirely self-preserving, despite any attempts to “ruin” it. What we should be concerned with, rather, is not the preservation of standard English but the preservation of the changes that take place. The slang used by today’s youth--and yes, their textese as well--are the true indicators of linguistic progress. Descriptivist dictionaries like Merriam-Webster and the Oxford English Dictionary work tirelessly to record these changes

in their pages. Future generations will look back and see what linguistic abnormalities the people of our time think are ruining the English language--all the while doing their best to drown out the voices of their time that are echoing the same sentiment.

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