

# Textese as a dialect: Why texting isn't destroying literacy

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The widespread use of nonstandard spellings in texts has led many researchers to wonder if Textese is harming people's literacy abilities. Despite multiple studies claiming to have found a negative correlation between the two, no consensus has been reached, with results varying between studies. This lack of consensus is addressed through critique of Drouin & Driver (2012), which found a negative correlation between Textese usage and literacy abilities. This critique is centered around the primary argument that Textese is a dialect of English. Building upon previous theoretical frameworks of dialects, a definition of a dialect as a heuristic for identifying dialects as separate from languages or other dialects is created: a nonstandard variety of the language that differs from the standard variety of the language on a syntactic, lexical, and phonological/graphemic level. Naturalistic texting data from previous studies is used to show that Textese fits these criteria. This analysis shows how prior studies faltered in their methods by neglecting code-switching and code-mixing between Standard American English and Textese during their literacy abilities examinations. The prior studies in this area imply that one can become less proficient in English by learning a new dialect of the language, so recommendations are made to improve research in this field by incorporating a focus on code-switching in studies.

## 1. Textese and literacy

In 2003, a 13-year-old girl in the UK wrote a school essay as if it were a text message, using abbreviations, emoticons, and acronyms (Taylor, 2005:76). This essay shocked her school teachers in such a way that it made national headlines. News stations reporting on the essay claimed that this exemplified how literacy standards in the UK had fallen. The headlines contained rhetoric such as "Kids are using hieroglyphics in their writing" and "Texting is the death of English" (Thurlow & Brown, 2003). This fear of texting language, or Textese, goes beyond a singular school essay. BBC news reporter John Humphreys went on record to say that he needed to see a "verbal hygienist" after reading text messages that kids were sending nowadays (Thurlow & Brown, 2003).

Text messaging has had a boom in popularity since the early 2000's, seeing a 62% increase in adult usage between the years of 2005 and 2010 (Lyddy et. al., 2014). Fifty-two percent of teenagers reported that texting is their preferred method of communication, over methods such as instant messaging, email, or calling (Lyddy et. al., 2014). Alongside this growth in popularity of text messaging, there has been growth in the writing system of texting, with acronyms, shortenings, emoticons, and emojis being used in writing. This development of SMS argot (Taylor, 2005:82), now referred to as Textese, led many to push back against it. They claimed that these nonstandard spellings were destroying the English language and affecting young English learners' ability to speak and write in English.

The discourse surrounding Textese has sparked the interests of many researchers. Multiple studies have been conducted to find a correlation between use of Textese and literacy, however, no consensus has been reached, with some studies finding a negative correlation (e.g. Drouin, 2011; Rosen et. al., 2010; De Jonge & Kemp, 2010), some finding a positive correlation (e.g. Coe & Oakhill, 2011; Kemp & Bushnell, 2011; Plester et. al., 2008), and some finding no correlation at all (e.g. Drouin & Davis, 2009; Massengill-Shaw et. al., 2007). This lack of consensus highlights a clear problem in this area of research. To confront this problem, an analysis and critique of these studies must be done.

This analysis will be conducted through an critique of Drouin & Driver (2012). Starting with a single study from this field is a starting point for analysis into how it falters. This study in particular was chosen for critique since it is set apart from other studies in this area by its use of naturalistic data, meaning the data collected consisted of actual text messages collected from their participants. Drouin and Driver (2012) found a negative correlation between use of Textese and literacy skills. It is this finding that will be the basis of the critique. The interpretation of this correlation is where this study falters, as there is an assumption of a causation between the two.

In this critique, I offer an explanation for this correlation beyond texting affecting literacy abilities: Textese is a dialect of American English. The methods used in Drouin and Driver's (2012) study, which consisted of multiple timed, standardized literacy examinations, penalized time used for code-switching, a necessary skill needed when proficient in two or more dialects, during the literacy examinations. This leads to an artificial decline in literacy scores, creating the correlation. Section 2 will go in-depth on the methods and results of Drouin and Driver (2012). Section 3 will present arguments that Textese is a dialect by creating a definition of a dialect using previous research, and then testing Textese against this definition. Section

4 will apply this idea of Textese as a dialect to Drouin & Driver (2012) to highlight its shortcomings. Section 5 will highlight arguments made against this area of research correlating Textese with literacy and suggest alternative paths for research.

## **2. Analysis of Drouin & Driver (2012)**

Drouin and Driver (2012) had four research questions going into the study:

- 1) What are the text messaging behaviors of American undergraduates?
- 2) What are the Textese characteristics of their actual text messages?
- 3) How does young adults' use of text messaging and Textese relate to their literacy abilities, and do certain textism categories relate more positively or negatively to literacy?
- 4) Does the use of predictive texting technology relate to the frequency of text messaging, use of Textese, or literacy abilities?

For this critique, attention will be focused on the third research question because it answers my research question of how do these studies approach the correlation of Textese and literacy, and how to they falter?

Drouin & Driver (2012) also aimed to expand upon previous research which asked a similar question about the use of Textese and its relation to literacy abilities. Their literature review focused on two prior studies. De Jonge and Kemp (2010) used a translation task, asking participants to translate sentences from conventional English as if they were sending a text message to a friend. Through this experimental data generation, De Jonge and Kemp (2010) found that use of Textese had a negative correlation with literacy, finding that higher usage of textisms correlated with lower literacy examination scores. Drouin (2011) also used experimental data, asking participants to rank their usage of Textese on a 5-point Likert scale, along with asking how participants would use Textese in different contexts, i.e., email, texting, social media, etc. The study found a positive correlation between frequency of text messages sent and literacy abilities, but a negative correlation between use of Textese outside of texting and literacy abilities.

Drouin and Driver's (2012) study expanded prior research by using naturalistic data collection methods. The study consisted of 183 American undergraduates who were fluent/native speakers of English. This demographic was chosen to most closely reflect the demographics of De Jonge and Kemp (2010) and Drouin (2011). In order to measure literacy abilities, participants took multiple literacy exams, including a standardized reading exam, a reading fluency exam, a spelling exam, and a vocabulary exam. For the reading and reading fluency exam, participants were timed

and penalized if they could not complete a question within a certain time frame. The final part of the study was a survey distributed to all the participants, asking them to submit recent text messages they've sent. Participants were also asked about their texting behaviors, such as how many text messages they send in a day and if they use predictive texting while writing text messages. It's this use of real-world text messages that separates Drouin and Driver (2012) from previous studies. De Jonge and Kemp (2010) and Drouin (2011) had not used naturalistic data collection methods.

The results of Drouin and Driver's study were split into two sections: textism density (the number of textisms used in a certain length of text) relating to literacy and category density (the number of a certain type of textism, i.e. initialism, shortening, used in a certain length of text) relating to literacy. This was done for insight into if Textese itself was affecting literacy rates, or if only a certain part of Textese affects literacy rates. The results for textism density found a weak negative correlation between textism density and literacy abilities. However, for category density, a positive correlation was found between use of accent stylization, or rewriting words the way they are pronounced dialectally (i.e., *wanna* for *want to*) and literacy abilities, while a negative correlation was found between the categories of omitted capitalization and omitted apostrophes and literacy abilities. The positive correlation between accent stylization and literacy abilities was explained by showing how its use involved playing with spelling principles in order to create a spelling that better reflects the pronunciation of the word. The negative correlation between omitted capitalization, omitted apostrophes, and literacy abilities was explained by showing how the use of these "shortcuts" leads to mistakes in the future, as texters forget which is the correct form.

### 3. Textese as a dialect

If Textese were to have an impact on literacy, it would be considered non-linguistic, as in it is separate from language. However, if Textese were linguistic, or were language itself, it could not be impactful on literacy, as language itself does not mediate literacy, but rather understanding and comprehension of language mediates literacy. While Textese is not its own language, it is possible that it is a dialect of American English. If Textese is a dialect, it cannot be a direct factor in literacy abilities. Therefore, it is imperative to analyze Textese as a dialect, to then apply to Drouin & Driver (2012).

To define Textese as a dialect, dialect must first be defined. The definition of dialect is a highly contentious topic among linguistic scholars, as the boundaries between a language and a dialect of a language are not clear. Wolfram (2017) defines a dialect as “any regional, social, or ethnic variety of a language”. This definition is a good basis to begin with but is by no means exhaustive of a dialect. The definition still leaves the outlying questions of what separates a language from a dialect and what separates varieties of a language.

Haugen (1966) attempts to answer the first question by explaining that there is a hierarchical relationship between languages and dialects. Every dialect is a language, but not every language is a dialect, meaning that a language encompasses all its dialects, but not vice versa. Languages and dialects are separated through language standardization. A language is the standard variety of the language, or a variety which holds political power over the other varieties of the language, which are deemed as dialects. Therefore, a dialect is a nonstandard variety of a language. By this definition, dialects are often excluded from “polite society” (Haugen, 1966), meaning they are not commonplace to be used in formal settings, such as educational institutions, government, etc. Due to dialects being nonstandard varieties, dialects are more prone to being targets of language subordination, or when a nonstandard variety of a language is looked down upon by speakers of the language, claiming that the standard variety is the “correct” way to use the language (Lippi-Green, 1997). Haugen (1966) claims that language subordination is one way to identify a dialect and to separate it from a language.

This new dialect definition still leaves the outlying question of how to differentiate two dialects to determine if they are different. Stalker (1974) argues that the main linguistic features that distinguish dialects from one another are syntax, lexicon, and phonology. For written dialects, phonology is replaced with orthography. This is an important distinction, that written dialects can be considered dialects in the same way spoken dialects can. Written dialects are created alongside spoken dialects but can evolve on their own and grow apart from the spoken dialect associated with it. Due to this, written dialects can be interpreted as their own dialect separate from spoken dialects (Stalker, 1974). To differentiate two dialects, one set of language data from each dialect must, when compared, differ on all three of these features. This can also be used to separate languages from dialects by comparing language data with dialect data. This criterion builds on the previous criterion, which separates languages from dialects. For purposes of identifying a dialect, comparison against the language (the non-subordinated variety) the dialect stems from will be done, examining the three features.

A dialect can now be defined with all things considered. A dialect will be defined as the following: a regional, social, or ethnic variety of a language (Wolfram, 2017) that is non-standard (Haugen, 1966) and differs from the standard variety of the language in syntax, lexicon, and either phonology or graphemic representation based on medium of communication (Stalker, 1974).

With a definition of dialect established, Textese can now be compared against it. This definition has two main criteria that must be fulfilled for Textese to be considered a dialect: (1) Textese must be a non-standard variety of American English (the scope of Drouin & Driver (2012) is restricted to American undergraduates, so the scope of this critique will be restricted to Standard American English to best reflect the study), and (2) Textese must differ from Standard American English (henceforth SAE) in syntax, lexicon, and graphemic representation.

Textese is a non-standard variety of American English. Haugen (1966) explains that a non-standard variety of a language can be identified through the existence of language subordination in the language variety. Language subordination against Textese can be seen through the public outcry against its use, such as the story of John Humphreys going on the record on public radio to condemn the use of Textese (Thurlow & Brown, 2003). Sutherland (2002) refers to Textese as “bleak, bald, sad shorthand”, continuing on to compare texting to “hieroglyphics”, mirroring the rhetoric used by the British news station in the opening paragraph. Sutherland (2002) claims that Textese is severely damaging the English language, being “penmanship for illiterates”. In a defense of Textese, McWhorter (2013) voices people’s concerns about it, stating “We always hear that texting is a scourge. The idea is that texting spells the decline and fall of any kind of serious literacy, or at least writing ability, among young people in the United States and now the whole world today”. All this negative discussion surrounding Textese, claiming that it is not only an incorrect way of communicating, but that it is damaging English as a whole, is a clear indicator that Textese is a language subordinate to American English. Therefore, Textese must be a non-standard variety of American English, meaning the first criterion is supported.

The second criteria to establish Textese as a dialect is that it must differ from SAE in syntax, lexicon, and graphemic representations. On a syntactic level, SAE and Textese differ due to first-person subject dropping. Subject dropping is when the subject of a sentence is dropped to maintain a more conversational tone. The SAE sentence *I’m getting the 4pm bus* with Textese subject dropping would change to *Getting the 4pm bus* (Crystal,

2008:167). Since the Textese sentence distinctly lacks both the subject and the attached copular verb (*I am*) yet is still grammatically correct for the dialect, Textese differs from SAE on a syntactic level.

On a lexical level, SAE and Textese differ because of the use of pragmatic particles in Textese. These pragmatic particles encode pragmatic information into a sentence, while still maintaining semantic information of the word. The most common example of a pragmatic particle in Textese is *lol*, still retaining the semantic information of being an acronym for *laugh out loud*, but encoding the pragmatic information of being a hedge, or lessening the assertiveness of the speaker (Uygur-Distexhe, 2014). In SAE, *laughing out loud* would not encode this same information, and *lol* would be considered ungrammatical. *Laughing out loud* and *lol* have the same semantic meaning but can be distinguished as two separate words due to *lol* being used as a pragmatic particle. Therefore, SAE and Textese differ on a lexical level.

On a graphemic representation level, SAE and Textese differ due to Textese categories. Most of the categories change the graphemic representation of words and phrases without changing the underlying meaning at all (with the exception of accent stylization, which adds phonetic information to the word (Drouin & Driver, 2012). This can change how the word/phrase is interpreted, changing its meaning). Since these changes can be made on a graphemic level without affecting the words and phrases on a lexical level, SAE and Textese differ on a graphemic representation level.

Textese differs from SAE on a syntactic, lexical, and graphemic level, meaning criterion three is supported. Since all three criteria of a dialect are supported by Textese, Textese can be considered a dialect of American English by our definition.

#### **4. Is texting really the problem?**

When Textese is analyzed as a dialect, two major shortcomings in Drouin & Driver (2012) appear. The first shortcoming of the study is the use of timing in the literacy exams, specifically the reading and reading fluency exams. The short time allocated for reading each word or sentence penalizes those who are proficient in Textese for code-switching between it and SAE. Code-switching is not exclusive to bilinguals but is also a necessary skill for bidialectal people as well, as it is required to switch between two dialects of the same language (Ramat, 1995). Code-switching is not instantaneous, as it is a skill that must be built up (Wei & Martin, 2009). While the time it takes for an inexperienced speaker to code-switch is still quite fast, it is still

slower than a speaker who does not have to code-switch. This slightly longer time needed to code-switch explains the weak correlation between Textese and literacy abilities. It takes those proficient in Textese a bit longer to code-switch, so they score a bit lower than those who do not code-switch.

Another factor contributing to this correlation is code-mixing. Grosjean (1995) defines two modes of speaking for bilingual/bidialectal people: monolingual mode and bilingual mode. A speaker is in monolingual mode when the audience they are speaking to is monolingual, or they are only expected to talk in a single language. This allows for the speaker to block out most input from other languages/dialects so that they can focus on speaking in the desired language. Speakers in monolingual mode may experience some interference from the other languages/dialects they speak, manifesting as “slips of the tongue”, or code-mixing. A speaker is in bilingual mode when the audience they’re speaking to is also bilingual, or there is the expectation to speak in more than one language or dialect. This allows for easier code-switching, but also allows for code-mixing to happen more often (Grosjean, 1995). An important distinction to make between code-switching and code-mixing is intentionality, where a code-mix is often unintentional or accidental and a code-switch is intentional.

For Drouin and Driver’s (2012) study, participants were recruited under the study title “Cross-Generational Text”. This could signal to some participants that the study is about text messaging, opening the bilingual mode. For those proficient in Textese who do not switch to bilingual mode, it still prompts Textese interference, as it is in their head that the study is about texting. Participants who switched to bilingual mode must spend more time code-switching to SAE and correcting code-mixing, and participants who stayed in monolingual mode must spend more time blocking out interference from Textese. In both cases, participants must spend more time completing the tasks despite possibly being equally capable as other participants who were not proficient in Textese.

The other shortcoming of the study is the third research question. When Textese is analyzed as a dialect of English, the research question of trying to find whether use of Textese relates to literacy abilities becomes problematic. The implication of the research question, and of the findings as a result of the question, is that there exist lesser dialects of English which hinder your ability to communicate in proper English. The language ideologies surrounding Textese are certainly not positive (Thurlow & Brown, 2003), but that itself does not imply that speakers of the dialect are less proficient in English. Research questions such as the one for this study are rooted in the prescriptivist idea that language change is bad, and will ultimately ruin a language (McWhorter, 2013). Use of Textese under



prescriptivist standards indexes the author as an “incompetent writer” (Busch, 2021), since the ‘ideal’ of the language is not being met.

Drouin & Driver (2012) is certainly not the first study to ask the third research question of the study. Upon reviewing past studies on this topic, it becomes very clear that this research question is flawed. Some studies found a positive correlation between use of Textese and literacy abilities when using a demographic of children (Coe & Oakhill, 2011; Kemp & Bushnell, 2011, Plester et. al., 2008), some found no correlation between use of Textese and literacy abilities in adults (Drouin & Davis, 2009; Massengill-Shaw et. al., 2007), while others found a negative correlation between use of Textese and literacy abilities amongst adults (Drouin, 2011; Rosen et. al., 2010; De Jonge & Kemp, 2010). Despite so many studies investigating this question, no consensus has been reached. This is a clear indication that the problem does not lie in the studies doing something wrong, but rather that the research question itself is flawed. These studies are not measuring the correlation between Textese and literacy abilities, as no such correlation has been proven to exist. Instead, they are measuring their participants’ abilities to code-switch between Textese and SAE. These studies are not built to account for code-switching, however, which leads to the lack of consensus among researchers. The study of Textese and literacy can be improved by accounting for code-switching. Thus, instead of equating proficiency of Textese with declining literacy abilities, these studies would investigate the relationship between code-switching skills and use of Textese. Parthey et. al. (2018) discusses that writing education itself should be updated for Textese, with a focus on academic writing in order to combat Textese seeping into academic settings, thus reinforcing code-switching skills.

## 5. Conclusion

With Textese as a new and emerging dialect (Taylor, 2005:79), there is a large increase in bidialectalism in previously monolingual speakers in the United States and beyond. Without prior exposure to how to properly code-switch, inappropriate code-switching and code-mixing is bound to happen (Wei & Martin, 2009). This unruly code-switching is what led the girl to write her essay in Textese (Taylor, 2005:76), and what led many researchers to hypothesize that Textese was damaging people’s ability to use English properly. However, this ‘damaging’ of language is actually just language change. Language change and evolution has historically been met with resistance and fear (McWhorter, 2013), however, it is a normal process that should not be feared. This paper’s critique showed how Drouin & Driver (2012) needed to revise their methods and research questions to account for the analysis of Textese as a dialect. Textese is a legitimate dialect of

English, and with the popularity of texting only increasing, it's time that researchers move past their negative language ideologies of Textese and come to accept it as the newest dialect of English.

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