

## **KILLING OR CHANGING THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE BY MOBILE TEXTING, THE INDIAN CONTEXT AND SUGGESTED REMEDIAL MEASURES**

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Is text messaging destroying or changing the English language? Numerous protectors of the integrity of English have certainly suspected so, and such concerns are raised constantly in the media. This article finds out the extent to which text language poses a threat to English as we currently know it. India, with its vast population, of about 1350 million people (as of 2017) is a cash mine for players in the mobile business. Players are national as well as those with intelligent tie-ups with foreign giants. They have the sole target of proliferating the wide usage of mobiles across the length and breadth of the country.

Other than the concern being raised by employers across the globe, the long-term damage that text language has successfully inflicted upon English is yet to be seen. It is, however, undeniable that the presence of text language, for all its minor benefits, is leading to a more lazy approach to correspondence, especially among younger generations.

Of the many applications to which mobile sets can be put, one significant usage area is “messaging”, also termed as “texting”. One conflict that has been produced by the surge in mobile phone use is a rift between people who like to talk and people who prefer to text. Sending text messages has become a medium of choice for mobile phone users, since it takes less amount of time to get the message delivered.

Young people are increasingly prone to texting and stay away from making calls, which are more direct – but also less permanent forms of communication. Ironically, the speed with which instant messaging or texting takes place means that mistakes are common: but we often let each other get away with them because we know what they mean.

Many teachers in primary and secondary schools have expressed concern at the number of children whose literacy levels are dropping; and who are not even able to write by hand, so accustomed are they to computers, tablets and mobiles and the other forms of gadgets. What is tellingly important here, is young generation is using English with their own way; sometimes with incorrectness.

There is an increasing concern that the birth of a heavily abbreviated text messaging language could bring about severe problems for the English language in the near future. One could argue that such fears are founded upon mere parochialism among the middle class, yet the evidence to suggest that text language is having a detrimental impact upon English is highly compelling.

It is here that some language has to be used. In India, apart from local languages a large segment of the population prefers to use English. We seem to find it difficult to shrug this off our shoulders, having once been under the British rule. And it is precisely here that the problem (as depicted below) begins, and continues, unabated.

### The problem

A sizable chunk of messaging is handled by young children, teenagers and middle aged people, who use English language as a vehicle of communication.

The language of texting is a different kettle of fish altogether. It demands maximum ***quantum of content delivered with a minimal use of words***. This urge is driven by financial considerations (chiefly) as well as by the urge to spend a limited period of time, per text.

This is where the problem begins. Users begin to create their own “words”, that help ***to convey MORE, while consuming less space and time***. But importantly there is no standard, at least, so far. Nor is a national or international standard really necessary, to push the wrong horse. Texting is penned down in highly specialized, compact and severely abbreviated “words”.

Maybe a set of “standard” words (more aptly, jargons) will emerge over a large period of time, without any real need for such a phenomenon to occur. The reason being that, texting is spread out over a large number of small groups, each group comprising of a limited number of people. These small groups have their own group - specific jargons (including abbreviations for technical terms or other specialized terms). Different groups essentially have their own set of jargons. Group jargons ***differ mildly to heavily***. A simple example will serve as a good illustration. The standard “how are you?” is texted variously as “Hru”, or “hw r u?”. The second, being in a more understandable fashion, simply because of the presence of the letter “w”.

It is a recognized fact, of course, that text language can be a quick and efficient method of communicating with one another in an informal environment. Abbreviations such as ‘tbh’ instead of ‘to be honest’ or ‘u’ instead of ‘you’ are certainly practical ones in the hectic lifestyles of the denizens of the twenty-first century. There simply isn’t the time to write messages in full, many will argue, yet it is feared that these lazy spelling forms are gradually penetrating the official English language.

I once received a text from a student of mine asking me...”Sir, ven r d prax xams?” Albeit, perfectly understandable even by a person of my age. But the same message may also have come as “Wenar d practlxams, Sir?”. On a comparative note the first one is a little shorter and crisper, though both serve to ask the same question.

This is still a tolerable state of affairs.

The danger lies in the fact that, in texting there is no respect for rules of syntax, grammar, structure or construction. Nesfield must have turned a billion times in his grave! No check and control exists on the SPELLING of texted words. It is neither necessary, and also because there is no standard, as pointed out earlier. The single and sole aspect that matters is the conveyance

of a simple message, a simple thought or a simple idea, which can be done fairly and efficiently, despite the limitations cited above. This makes the situation all the more serious and is, by far, the area that needs distinct attention from all quarters. Especially from those who are involved at frontal levels and entrusted with the specific responsibility of the teaching of English, Which, as a language, already enjoys a firm foothold, in the global context and certainly (along with American English ) commands a wide popularity.

And add to this misery and woe the fact that commercial ads from different business houses are worded in the language of texting. These are directed to young children and teenage groups, who are easily mouldable and more gullible. With the result that the proliferation of this “low level type of the language” is easier to propagate into the masses. And the users do not care a fig about (or give a damn to) properly worded commercials, as it simply keeps them in their comfort zones.

There is then a decline in the repertoire of words that the average person uses (in written or oral communication). A weaker vocabulary takes over and has already begun to reign. It is no longer surprising that many school - going children and even college goers haven't heard about a Thesaurus, leave alone its proper usage. Surprisingly a large segment of the students' population has never possessed a good English Dictionary (Oxford, Chambers, Webster's and their likes).

Another significant killer arm is the efforts to create some kind of a cocktail ***or punch that has English as a solvent and a local language as a solute***. The resulting mix may be palatable to a few while being irritating to a large cross section of the users of proper English. This practice is also penetrating into a good part of the texting phenomenon, just described. The combination languages are “Banglish” ( a combination of Bengali and English) or “Hindlish” (a combination of Hindi and English). If these manage to survive in whatever form, it will spell disaster and death to formal English.

Into this fray has joined so called “professional Institutes “who profess to teach spoken English. The quality of the output leaves much to be desired.

### **So where is the trade off, what sort of remedial measures can we take to arrest this (unfortunately disastrous) trend?**

The people who matter (teachers again, professional societies and bodies involved in enhancing the quality of the English language and its teaching) should continue to rely on proven pedagogy, with time tested methods of teaching, which have worked wonderfully well, for ages now. **Translation** from one language to another provides a good avenue to learn an alien (as distinct from the mother tongue) language. A German cannot learn Dutch, or vice versa unless there is adequate emphasis in translation from the one language to the other. And Institutions which are English medium **MUST** bring more and more exposure of the language, upfront to the students. The language spoken by students, during school or college hours and inside the Institute premises, **MUST STRICTLY be English only**.

There must be adequate emphasis on classroom elocution. Loud reading profoundly helps in proper pronunciation of words, and is an overall help to the learning process, apart from being a complement too. Last but not the least one should not forget that English in its proper form properly belongs to the English. We must keep abreast of what is happening within the shores of England. I had read, at least ten years ago, that texting was affecting the quality of English in The British children. If our policy makers wish to project India as a significant power in the World economy, in SOME timeframe, it MUST take the basic steps to continue promoting the English language, in a purer form.

We cannot allow any kind of decline in English, in a purer form. That would be a crime to our progeny. What will they think of us when they become uncommunicative with a large portion of the globe, simply because of poor English standards in our country? We, on our part, will have NO ANSWER for them.

And, as for the language itself, it will die a natural death and enter itself in its own grave. Progeny will remember it as some form of unpleasant legacy of the past.

Living languages are always changing. The English of today is very different from the English of thousand years ago and even the English of hundred years ago. That languages change is a linguistic fact. Is text messaging destroying the English language? Changing it? yes. Destroying it? no. Language users determine language use. Text messaging is changing the English language.