

### **Adolescent “Text Speak” as a Form of Emancipation and Unification**

The introduction of mobile telephony has fundamentally changed the world that we live in. It has reorganized our daily lives, allowed us to play multiple roles simultaneously, and created a social model of constant contact. As Ling points out, it also gives the sender and receiver a shared experience (2004) and can aid in bonding, particularly through the use of specialized language.

This relatively new technology, along with other new media and digital devices, is still being interpreted and defined. There are potential functions still remaining to be discovered, but it is the user that “make[s] the difference in the ways that technologies shape and are shaped by culture and social practices” (Caron & Caronia, 2007). Pre-adolescents, adolescents, and young adults (from here forth adolescents) are the largest user of mobile technology (Ling, 2004), and are redefining the context of these technologies. Adolescents’ use of mobile telephony and their subsequent creation of a specialized language emancipates them from parents and constructs identity and bonds within a peer group.

There are a number of reasons why mobile technology is attractive to adolescents. It is convenient, timely, becoming increasingly affordable, and provides autonomy. Many demographics today use mobile communication, but there is something significant about the way that adolescents use it. In order to evaluate this use, we will first examine the characteristics of the group.

Adolescence is the time when the individual transitions from an ego-centered, to more decentered understanding of the world, and from concrete to abstract understandings of relationships (Piaget, 1984, as cited in Ling, 2004). Due to this transition, the individual is better able to align him or herself with a group. Fine suggests that “in this context... the adoption of the mobile telephone is not simply the action of an individual but, rather, of individuals aligning themselves with the peer culture in which they participate (1987, as cited in Ling, 2004). The mobile phone creates an independent channel for communication between peers, and helps them to build significant relationships.

Further, adolescent friendships are incredibly important. Adolescents generally spend more time with their friends than with their parents; 29% of their waking hours as opposed to just 13% with family (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006, as cited in Davis, 2009). And these friendships are based on more than just proximity and convenience, as is the case with many childhood friendships. The adolescent friendship is formed instead based on shared values, and “as a result, adolescent friendships are characterized by mutuality, intimacy, and reciprocal self-disclosure” (Youniss & Smollar, 1985, as cited in Davis, 2009). These bonds are stronger and more significant, and their maintenance often takes place over mediated channels.

Adolescence is a period during which self-esteem is established and popularity is perhaps the most important aspect of life. The cell phone, in this context, acts as a status object for the individual. Ling points out, “The ownership, display, and symbolic use of the mobile telephone are – in many cultures – an essential part of being an adolescent” (2004). And this makes sense with the way we use objects for status in society. Consider

the clothes you wear. The practical function of the clothing is to provide warmth, protection, and modesty. You choose your purple North Face coat on a winter day because the coat is warm. More importantly, though, you chose it because purple is your favorite color and you think it brings out your eyes. You chose it because North Face is expensive and others will know that you are of a certain status to be able to afford it.

There are both functional and symbolic meanings of the objects that we choose to display, and the cell phone is an example of this. The technology itself, as well as the way it is used, communicates certain things about the individual. Just the ownership of a mobile phone communicates that an individual is accessible and in demand. Ling calls the phone a “quantification of popularity” in which the number of messages received or number of contacts signify the reputation of the adolescent (2004). This is an important pull for adolescents to own and utilize mobile telephony.

Youth are also generally more accepting of new technology. This seems logical; children and adolescents have less formulated ideas about the world and are therefore more impressionable to new experiences, as opposed to their parents and other older counterparts. Marc Prensky helps to define this generational distinction. He says:

Today’s students have not just changed incrementally from those of the past, nor simply changed their slang, clothes, body adornments, or styles, as has happened between generations previously. A really big discontinuity has taken place. One might even call it a “singularity” – an event which changes things so fundamentally that there is absolutely no going back. This so-called “singularity” is the arrival and rapid dissemination of digital technology in the last decades of the 20th century. Today’s students – K through college – represent the first generations to grow up with this new technology. They have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, videogames, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age. Today’s average college grads have spent less than 5,000 hours of their lives reading, but over 10,000 hours playing video games (not to mention 20,000 hours watching TV). Computer games, email, the Internet, cell phones and instant messaging are integral parts of their lives (Prensky 2001).

He calls this technology-centered generation “Digital Natives” and their parents “Digital Immigrants” (Prensky 2001). As such, these “Natives” are quicker to adopt technologies such as mobile telephony, and can easily adapt to it. One such adaptation has occurred in the language used by adolescents.

### **Specialization of Language – “Text Speak”**

In order to discuss mobile telephony or text messaging as a specialized form of adolescent language, we first must establish how it is different from standardized language. Though the frequency of this specialized language is variable, a multitude of research confirms its presence (Caron & Caronia, 2007; Cingel & Sundar, 2012; Holtgraves, 2007; Skog, 2002). There are several unique features of text language or “text speak” – discovered both through personal research and borrowed from these other researchers – that I will outline:

#### **Abbreviation**

The most commonly accepted example of text speak is the extensive use of abbreviation and shortening in mobile communication. Holtgraves, among others, cites brevity as the primary cause of this feature (2011). Early text messages were limited to 160 characters. The keyboards on mobile phones were also in the format of a telephone dial pad. In order to text, an individual had to hit each number multiple times to get to the desired letter. Mobile telephony was therefore a relatively difficult and time-consuming communication technology. Even today, with phones sized and designed for typing, and QWERTY keyboards standard, the texting process is slow and thumb-reliant.

Abbreviation in this paper encompasses any method of shortening words or phrases, including acronyms and initialism, substitution, combination, and clipping. My personal imessage inbox yielded examples of each:

**Abbreviation:** Idk what I'm doing tbh lol

**Longhand:** I don't know what I'm doing to be honest, laugh out loud

This is an example of first letter initialism. Rather than typing out each word, these messages are condensed. With those accustomed to the texting language, abbreviations like "idk" are simply synonymous with "I don't know," and requires no translation in the recipient's brain. There is an inherent understanding between parties that each can interpret these condensed adaptations.

**Abbreviation:** I h8 u

**Longhand:** I hate you

In this example, phonetic substitution is being employed. Again, this is done for the purpose of shortening and adapting the language. Rather than typing out the full word, a homophone is utilized.

**Abbreviation:** Hmu if you wanna hang out later

**Longhand:** Hit me up [contact me] if you want to hang out later

This message contains both initialism and combination. The word "wanna" is an adaptation of "want to" that serves two purposes. First, yet again, this shortens the message. It also conveys the tone and speech of the sender, showing nonchalance about the subject.

**Abbreviation:** Don't go, I'm leavin the caf now

**Longhand:** Don't go, I'm leaving the cafeteria now

This is an example of “clipping” (Cook & Stevenson). Clipping may involve cutting a prefix, syllable, or individual letters from words. The clipped -g is very common, and a model of laziness in text speak. The second clipped word here – caf for cafeteria – shows familiarity on the parts of both sender and receiver with the location in question.

### **Complex Punctuation**

Adolescents de-emphasize the importance of traditional writing styles or structure in text speak.

**Example 1:** Oh dang ugh okay fine

**Example 2:** Hi!!!! How are you?!

It is common for punctuation to be entirely left out of messages as in example 1.

Moreover, correct punctuation may even be discouraged among adolescent texters. The use of proper grammar, suggests harshness and distance from the receiver, or condescendence. On the other hand, there is often an overuse of exclamatory or interrogative punctuation to convey excitement or confusion.

### **Stylistic Variation**

They also employ use of stylistic variation, or different styles for individual speakers, particularly through elongated or emphasized words. This is an interesting phenomenon, as Holtgraves points out, “because it stands in contrast to the predominate tendency to shorten words” (2011). This aspect of text speak suggests more reasons for specialized language than just brevity.

**Example 1:** I LITERALLY CANNOT EVEN

**Example 2:** Ohhhhhh. Hahahaha

In Example 1, capitalization is used to emphasize the words and convey a tone of the speaker. The second example shows elongation of words. As we will discuss later, this elongation functions as an indicator of inflection and speech for the receiver. Example 2 also shows the text conveyance of laughter, which is used interchangeably with acronyms like “lol” and “rofl.”


### **Multimedia**

With the rise of “smart phones,” there has also been a drastic rise of multimedia and external link use in mobile telephony. The ability to send and receive emoticons, pictures, videos, gifs, audio and links in texting adds another dimension to text. Emoticons, pictures, links, gifs, etc.

### **Words that Don’t Make Sense Out of Internet Context**

Hashtag, retweet

Emoticons – and pictures, links, gifs, etc.

**Example:**  ain't nobody tryna get that!

Words that don’t make sense out of internet context

Hashtag

RT/retweet

“slang/abbreviated slang terms (e.g., dunno), acronyms (e.g., LOL), g-drop (e.g., doin), number for sound (e.g., L8), letter omissions (e.g., R for are), emoticons (from the 2001 LIWC), abbreviations (e.g., x for kiss), combined words (e.g., nevermind) and expansions (e.g., bitchhhhhhhhhhh). The latter category is interesting because it stands in contrast to the predominate tendency to shorten words” (Holtgraves 95).

### **Content Motifs**

Vulgarity

Parody

Gossip

## **Relationship Between Texting and Speech**

Particular elements of text speak – particularly stylistic variation, strategic punctuation, and multimedia or links – seem more akin to speaking than to writing. Ling points out that texting often includes an immediacy that is typically reserved for face-to-face contact (2004). It is more ephemeral than most written communication, having limited searchability and the option of deletion. Like in-person contact, the messages are typically addressed to a specific individual. Finally, “among teens the dialogues can take on the characteristics of a conversation, with the development of topics, the inclusion of opening and farewell sequences, and indeed the interpretation of pauses in turn taking” (Ling 2004). The use of onomatopoeia is also prominent in adolescent texting.

Text speak favors use of inflection over voice. Voice is used in writing. It is a distinct personality or style that differentiates an individual’s copy. Inflection, however, is a characteristic of speech that makes the speaker persuasive, relatable, or emotive. Adolescent’s use text speak strategically in order to convey inflection, and make their texts more like an oral conversation than written discourse. “On a *paralinguistic level*, they often adopt non-standard pronunciation and show great talent in using language expressively to strongly convey personal stances towards what they say, to express value judgments and enthusiasm, and to endorse ideas” (Andersen, 2001, as cited in Caron & Caronia, 2007). The technology of text speak is McLuhanist in this aspect, how one talks is often more important than what they say – or text.

## **Texting as a Form of Emancipation**

As stated earlier, technology, and the use of it, constructs identity. The unique language used by adolescents in mobile telephony performs this identity making function,



differentiating the adolescent from the parents' culture and "affirming peer group membership" (Andersen, 2001, as cited in Caron & Caronia, 2007). Texting specifically is one of the primary signifiers of teens or adolescents, and simultaneously ignored by elders.

Prensky claims that this bridge of understanding cannot be gapped. Even those adults that have accepted and attempted to incorporate technology have what he calls "the digital immigrant accent" (2001). These users have a "foot in the past," whether conscious or not, that is an irreversible result of a different socialization. In effect, "While some teens are objectifying the device, incorporating it, and giving it a position in their everyday lives, their parents are still far back in the adoption process" (Ling, 2004). And this creates a fundamental, societal disconnect between parents and their children.

This disconnect may be a cause of the hostility often seen toward mobile technology, or new media in general, by older generations. "For adults who have not been immersed in this digital culture from an early age, and for whom new technology may be foreign, frightening, and/or frustrating, self-confidence (and consequently attitudes toward use) may be compromised" (Mahatanankoon & O'Sullivan, 2008, as cited in Skierkowski & Wood, 2012). Adolescents are quite literally speaking a language that their parents cannot understand, both in their content via the technology, and in the technology use itself. [Write more here]

Due to the reasons above, the gifting of devices like cell phones from parents to children is a complicated process. Caron and Caronia suggest that this is the modern rite of passage for adolescents. "As soon as one obtains one's own phone or computer, something has changed. Freedom to manage information and communication tools and

privatization of their use say that a child is no longer a child” (Caron & Caronia, 2007).

This gift giving happens during adolescence because the adolescent is a liminal character.

They are neither a child, nor an adult, and therefore must use technology and language to differentiate from both.

It is a complex stage of the parent-child relationship because this device and its subsequent use emancipate the adolescent from the adult. This emancipation is often gradual and negotiated by the parent; initially the phone must be returned to the parent each night, or the parent has access to the messages sent and received, or the adolescent can use only limited features. The adolescent may not even be gifted the device, but instead have to pay for it him or herself, another important act of independence and emancipation. Prensky suggests that the segmentation that occurs during this passage is even more important in today’s society. It is necessitated by the very nature of the adolescent’s brain, which is far different than the parent’s due to the technological world in which the adolescent grew up (Prensky, 2001).

Ultimately, the purpose of the cell phone as a rite of passage is to prepare the adolescent for the realities of independence and autonomy. In this way, it is a natural technology for this phase of life.

One of the main tasks of adolescence is to progressively learn how to function outside the sphere of the family. Adolescents are asked to master a set of skills upon which they will rely in later life. These skills include, among other things, the mastery of their personal economy; interaction with various institutions and bureaucracies; dealing with friends, acquaintances, and even those with whom they are less disposed to be on friendly terms; the role of sex and sexuality; securing work and the expectations within the working world, and a sense of personal style and integrity (Ling, 2004).

## **Texting as a Means of Peer Group Unification**

The technology and use of specialized language not only separates the adolescent from parents, but also simultaneously strengthens their bond in a peer group. The technology and language allows them to develop a parallel social world (Ling, 2004) through which to understand each other. Caron & Caronia outline three hypotheses about technologies that will structure this discussion about texting as a means of peer group unification:

**1. Possession of technologies, and ways of using them, function like a language and indicate membership in a group (2007).** Not only do the technologies function like a language, but text speak is a new language that develops as a result of this new technology, mobile phones. It is this linguistic alteration that marks out adolescents from groups both younger and older. Caron and Caronia ask, “Do adolescents use technologies in a certain way because they are adolescents, or are they adolescents because they use technologies in a certain way?” (2007). The word language could be easily supplanted for technology in that statement, and in either case, the language used by adolescents in texting creates a clear distinction between outsiders and insiders, between the adolescent and the “other.”

In his acknowledgement of text speak, Holtgraves says, “Linguistic alterations most likely developed because of the speed and brevity requirements of texting, but were then coopted to serve as relationship markers” (2011). This analysis would explain counter-examples of text speak as a way to type more efficiently, such as the [elongated words]. These types of variations in standardized language establish membership and familiarity between participants, and cannot be attributed simply to an attempt at brevity.

This connectedness and shared language has become an important aspect in the adolescent's life. In a study by Skierkowski & Wood, it was found that adolescents felt disconnected or lonely when restricted from texting, despite other communication options being available (2012). There was a sense of exclusion from the group when this key and preferred medium of communication was withheld.

## **2. New technologies create new forms of interaction and social participation.**

[Write more here].

The social participation of adolescents has become increasingly mediated. This is because “belongingness is facilitated through frequent connections with others, which is achieved by leaving one's phone on at all times” (Walsh et al., 2009, as cited in Skierkowski & Wood, 2012). This is a cause for concern for many parents and educators, who worry about the lack of real experiences, social interactions, and traditional education of these adolescents. [Write more here].

Though many worry that increasing use of texting is isolating adolescents, it actually strengthens friendship bonds, and confirms one's place within social groups. In fact, Holtgraves found that people aren't isolating themselves at all, “as there were more instances of texting when others were present (60%) than texting when one was alone (40%)” (2011). [Write more here]

The phases of relationships are often mediated through mobile telephony as well. The indirect nature and purposeful delays of messages allows adolescents the opportunity to prepare a “face” and control their image to the recipient (Ling 2004). Ling notes that this makes texting a good medium for early relationships, as individuals can learn about each other from a comfortable distance. For friends that are already close, mobile

telephony strengthens bonding by supplementing face-to-face contact and creating more common friendship material. An interesting phenomenon in adolescent relationships is the text-message-break-up. Ling explains, “Where at the outset of a relationship texting serves to restrain the tempo as we carefully think through the messages we send, the use of texting at the end of a relationship, in effect, re-erects the barriers” (2004). The values of this type of communication are being defined in the process of use, and reshaping adolescent social participation.

**3. People use technologies to communicate with one another, but they also communicate about the technologies (2007).** One of the forms of linguistic alterations that divides adolescent and parent is the use of words in text speak that do not make sense out of internet context. Technology, and the social medium that arise from it, are a point of common reference for adolescents. It is not only through their restructured language, but through their understanding and conceptualization of the technology itself that adolescents connect to each other and disconnect from elders.

Adolescent’s interpretation of mobile telephony and novel use of language perform a number of functions. It incorporates the power of speech into written discourse. It emancipates the adolescent from the role of the child, and from the authority of the parent. It constructs identity, both as an individual and in relation to the peer group.

Caron and Caronia point out, however, “the identity-creating function of such variations entails that most are temporary. They are abandoned by adolescents themselves as they get older” (2007). Adolescence is a transitory phase of life, and the text speak developed and utilized during this time is ultimately temporary as well. But it is a vital

part of the passage, and gives adolescents the independence and social skills necessary to successfully develop into adulthood.

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