

## the revenge of e.e. cummings

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*(Item: A new study warns that writing text messages could hurt a writer's command of standardized English.)*

WE HAD to LOL when we read how txt-msg lingo is replacing stndrd english in student academic pprs. 1 casualty of da trend is uz of capital letter to start a sentence. kids feel free to lowercase everything. pnktu8n is also dissed. tchaz try to help but its often 2 l8.

new paragraphs r not uzed in txtng either. kids prolly think all dis iz ok cuz even Richard Sterling, emeritus xecutiv director of the ntl riting prjct, gives it the nod. natl riting prjct is sposd 2 improve riting instruxn in americas schoolz.

"i think in the future, capitalization will disappear," he sed in the nytimes. 4 lazy students dis is 2G2BT!

a big natl study by the College Board and Pew Project on the Internet and American Life finds teenagers riting more b/c of txtng but in a hybrid language with conventions of its own: call it Textlish. they don't consider it frml english but 64 percent admit it seeps into their writing at school.

we get da need for shorthand when thumbs fly on tiny keypads. but we thot technology wd enhance communication, not blur every boundary b/w frml language and slang. and dont even get us started on emoticons!

1 yng friend of rs recently sent us a hand-written thank-u note. we were thrilled at 1st but her spelling wuz awful b/c deres no spellcheck for pen and ppr. same ish w/ txtng. ppl get uzd 2 slang and 4get the real words. btw, all of us w/ email addresses r guilty 2, since email usernames r all lowercase and include many weird squiggles. somehow, tho, gnr8ns of secys managed to transl8 Gregg or Pitman shorthand squiggles n2 grammatically correct correspondence 4 their bosses.

well, tempora quid faciunt. dis not lingo but latin: times change. early america's founders wud uppercased almost every noun; maybe Sterling really is a visionary. Still, on the 25th anniversary of "A Nation at Risk," the seminal report on America's educational challenges, who wudda thot the big threat to riting wd b the cellphone?

## **Texting damages standards in English, says chief examiner**

The emergence of the mobile phone and the rise of text messaging poses a significant threat to writing standards in English, according to the Department of Education's chief examiner in the subject, writes Seán Flynn, Education Editor.

In a review of standards in last year's Junior Cert [Junior Certification Exam, Ireland's national test given halfway through high school as practice for the Leaving Exam, similar in some ways to America's PSAT and SAT system, though as mandatory as the high school exit exam], the examiner, whose identity is not released to protect the integrity of the system, laments how "text messaging, with its use of phonetic spelling and little or no punctuation, seems to pose a threat to traditional conventions in writing".

Reviewing higher-level or honours papers, he says the frequency of errors of grammar, punctuation, idiomatic usage and appropriateness of register was of concern.

"The emergence of the mobile phone and the rise of text messaging as a popular means of communication would appear to have impacted on standards of writing as evidenced in the responses of candidates. Expertise in text messaging and e-mail in particular would appear to have affected spelling and punctuation."

The popularity of text messaging may also explain the penchant among the Junior Cert students for short, sharp answers with little elaboration. The examiner complains how many candidates were "choosing to answer sparingly, even minimally, rather than seeing questions as invitations to explore the territory they had studied and to express the breadth and depth of their learning and understanding".

While pointing to some exceptionally impressive answers, the examiner says a "significant number of candidates need to further develop their proficiency in the basic elements of personal expression through writing . . . In many cases, however, candidates seemed unduly reliant on short sentences, simple tenses and a limited vocabulary."

Despite these criticisms, more than three-quarters of the 37,000 students at higher level secured grade C or higher.

Critics of academic standards in schools - particularly those in the universities - may see this as further evidence of "dumbing down" in the Irish education system.

However, research indicates that literacy standards among Irish 15- year-olds compares well with those across the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Irish teenagers were among the top three performers in an international league table on literacy standards compiled by the organisation four years ago.

The chief examiner also says students should "listen to more than one radio station to hear the variety of ways in which people speak."

## Linguists mixed on effects of text messaging

MILWAUKEE (AP) — The text messages on Margarete Stettner's cell phone are filled with shortcuts — "G2G" for "got to go" and "LOL" instead of "laugh out loud." The 13-year-old sometimes even slips into text-messaging lingo in her homework.

"It does affect, sometimes, how I do my schoolwork," the girl from Hartland, Wis., said as she shopped in a mall, where cellular phones are as common as low-cut jeans. "I do put, instead of a Y-O-U, I put a U."

That alarms some linguists, who worry that the proliferation of text messaging — where cell phone users type and send short messages to other phones or computers — will enforce sloppy, undisciplined habits among American youths.

However, other experts believe it will fail to leave its mark on standard English, as have dozens of slang words before.

In June 2001, wireless phone users sent 30 million text messages in the United States, according to the Cellular Telecommunications and Internet Association, an industry trade organization. By June 2002, that number had increased to nearly 1 billion.

The method is most popular among teenagers, according to Upoc, a New York-based firm that helps users of mobile devices share information on everything from the rapper Bow Wow to celebrity sightings. A study by Upoc in 2001 found 43% of cellular phone users ages 12 to 17 used text messaging, compared with 25% of those 30 to 34.

Those teenagers, hampered by limited space and the difficulty of writing words on numeric phone keypads, have helped create the text-messaging lingo.

Words become abbreviated ("WL" for "will") and common phrases become acronyms ("by the way" becomes "BTW").

There are even dictionaries to sort out exactly what "AFAIK" means. ("As far as I know.")

"SOL" can mean "sooner or later" or "sadly out of luck," but if you're unclear on which was meant, simply message back a "W" (what?) or "PXT" (please explain that) for a clarification.

Jesse Sheidlower, principal editor of the U.S. office of the Oxford English Dictionary, said text messaging is going through the natural progression of language.

Much text-messaging lingo was first used in instant-messaging programs on personal computers, and some phrases, such as "SWAK" for "sealed with a kiss," have been used for decades, Sheidlower said.

As text messengers discover and share new abbreviations and acronyms, the language becomes familiar to a growing population of cell phone users. And as more people use the lingo for text messaging, Sheidlower said, it is more likely to spill into speech or writing.

That worries American University linguistics professor Naomi Baron, who said text messaging is another example of an established trend in written communication.

"So much of American society has become sloppy or laissez faire about the mechanics of writing," Baron said.

Problems arise when people use the quick-casual language in other forms of written communication, such as e-mail, in which the sender may not receive the message for some time, or writings in which the reader may not even know the author, she said.

But other linguists said a simpler, more relaxed vernacular is acceptable for talking or text messaging.

"Language and languages change," said Carolyn Adger, director of the Language in Society Division of the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington. "Innovating with language isn't dangerous."

And besides, Adger said, text messaging, like e-mail and instant messaging, is making it easier for people to communicate.

"I think that all of this stuff is really wonderful, because it's expanding the writing skills of people," she said.

Text messaging hardly appears to have hurt written language in Europe, where 10 billion text messages are sent each month, said Charles Golvin, senior analyst with Forrester Research.

In fact, as more adults began using text messaging in the United Kingdom and Germany, the lingo fell out of favor, said Alex Bergs, a visiting linguistics professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Even teenagers use the language for only a while, he said.

As a cell phone store employee, Jeremy Rankin spends quite a bit of time using and working with wireless devices. The 18-year-old college student in Milwaukee admits he sometimes finds himself abbreviating when he types.

"I might do it by accident, but I don't think that's a problem as far as school papers go," he said. "I proofread my stuff."