

Language in Crisis? An Overview of Textese

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Abstract

Due to the recent developments in technology, and especially due to the rise of digital communication, people have access to a new form of rapid and easy communication. Almost everybody owns a mobile phone, however, this device is no longer used nowadays just for transmitting oral messages under the form of voice calls, but it turned into a mini-computer, through which people communicate by text messages, be they under the form of SMS or messages sent through e-mails and applications such as WhatsApp or posted on social media networks (Facebook or Twitter, for example). Out of the necessity to be informative and comprehensible, text messaging offers the possibility of a quicker interaction through the use of modified forms of words, shortened or abbreviated phrases and sentences and even symbols. This new emerging register has come to be known as textese or textism.

Based on the already existing lists of the most frequent textese (with the exclusion of symbols), the present paper aims to depict the patterns according to which this new register is formed. It also aims to underline the impact texting has had on the English language.

Keywords: *textese; numbers; letters; abbreviations; acronyms.*

1. Introduction

Nowadays, communication between people is facilitated by the existence of mobile phones, but it seems that people prefer texting messages rather than using voice calls. Studies show that text messaging is so trendy that it has surpassed voice calls in frequency (Reardon 2008; Drouin 2011).

This seemingly perpetual type of communication has brought about a change that is to be noticed in the manner of language use, that is characteristic to the diverse virtual platforms. Studies regarding this issue have been carried out over time; a few examples include Campbell (2007); Zappavigna (2012); Socket (2014); Boștină-Bratu (2015).

People, especially the young, are more and more involved in a sort of texting frenzy, which came with a new vocabulary that got different names: it is most commonly called *textese* (Nenagh & Abbie 2017), but it is also referred to as *textism(s)* (Crystal 2004, 2013), or *internetese* (Campbell 2007).

The term *textese* encompasses the use of letter/number homophones, abbreviations, acronyms or emoticons and symbols. It is an abbreviated writing style that is appropriate for casual contexts.

The appearance of textese was justified in the early years of mobile phones usage, when there were constraints on the number of characters allowed per message. One could have expected a reduction in the number of abbreviated words, phrases and even sentences on account of recent technical advances. However, textese seem not to have lost their popularity; on the contrary, new abbreviated forms are still being coined.

Many textese (especially the short acronyms and the letter/number homophones) can be easily understood by everybody, as they contain features of standard English (Crystal 2006). Some textese, on the other hand, cannot be easily deciphered, as they are too long acronyms or the acronyms can be misunderstood for words.

There has been much debate concerning the influence the textese may have on the correct use of standard English, still with no clear conclusion; studies on the relations between textese and literacy (Massengill-Shaw et al. 2007; Plester et al. 2008; Kemp 2010; Rosen et al. 2010) reported mixed results. These studies pinpointed that there are many aspects of this new register that need attention from the part of analysts before answering the question: can we speak of a language crisis? Many voices speak about a sort of alienation of the English

speakers from their mother tongue, while others claim that texting is connected less to writing and more to spoken language.

Therefore, it is impossible at the moment to state whether this new way of writing “enriches modern English by adding a new register to it, or it fractures the language drastically” (Al Kadi 2019: 30).

What is undoubtable, however, is the fact that textese is continually growing, new and more sophisticated forms being added by the users.

This paper will depict the patterns according to which this new register is formed, aiming to underline the impact texting has had on the English language.

2. The positive influence of textese on the English language

First of all, the use of textese represents an easier way to communicate in writing, as long words, phrases or even sentences are reduced just to numbers or a few letters. Using textese in writing, people save both time and space. Communication is more effective through texting due to “its instantaneous purpose” (Totanes and Lintao 2019: 16).

At the same time, textese are a form of “hybrid register” (Tagliamonte & Denis 2008, cited in Drouin 2011) that can cover both formal and informal contexts of communication.

The tone of written messages based on textese resembles the one used in conversations. At the same time, the symbols and emoticons that are part of this new language, stand for the nonverbal signs of the communication process and help the decoding of the message.

Totanes and Lintao (2019) studied the way in which both teachers and students used textese. Their conclusion reveals that it is “a *conscious* activity to violating grammar and lexical rules”, shortening text messages being “reserved for various purposes and functions: for language play and flexibility, for language economy, for group identity, and for directness to communication” (Totanes and Lintao 2019: 27).

Other researchers (Crystal 2013; Gorney 2012) even advanced the idea that the use of textese reflects, at the linguistic level, the changes

in society and helps improve the lexicon of the language. Crystal (2008) considers that textese, far from being deviant from the norm, helps people become “better communicators, not worse.”

3. The negative influence of textese on the English language

For many researchers, textese is just a “deformed type of contemporary English” (Al Kadi 2019: 30), characterized by strange word-formation, in a constant defiance of traditional linguistic rules.

The prolonged use of textese may lead to a replacement of the standard English terms with the shorter, abbreviated ones regardless of the context or the channel of communication. Drouin (2011), for example, considers that “continued exposure to textisms (...) could lead to forgetting (or decay) of the SE representation” (68). Well-known linguistic standards such as proper orthography or morpho-syntactic features may be disregarded in textese (Segerstad 2002).

The users of textese get accustomed to the abbreviated forms and unintentionally transfer them to general writing, thus proving poor written language skills and poor literacy in general. The language users’ competence in terms of spelling, grammar and discourse is lowered by the use of textese.

Researchers (Boștină-Bratu 2015; Sockett 2014; Wardyga 2012) studied the impact that texting has on writing and have concluded that the quality of the latter decreases because of the use of textese, as it leads not only to incorrect spelling and odd punctuation, but also to poor grammar and vocabulary.

4. Research question

Starting from the idea that, due to the growth of electronic communication, various language features linked to shortenings have triggered some rules that make textese a “unique variety of contemporary English” (Bernicot et al. 2014, cited in Al-Kadi 2019), this paper aims to offer an overview of the different manners in which textese are linguistically constructed, trying to find an answer to the

following research question: What are the most dominant patterns of textese construction?

5. Methodology, data and analysis

After consulting several lists concerning this type of register¹ we gathered a number of 500 different textese. Out of these, 5 are letter/number homophones, 36 are combinations of letters and numbers and 459 are acronyms and abbreviations.

a) Numbers

Some numbers stand, in texting, either for the actual numbers or for prepositions and/or adverbs:

Example 1

Textese	Word
2	two, to, too
4	four, for

Other numbers are used to convey coded messages, as there is no overt relationship between the numbers and the meaning they stand for:

Example 2

Textese	Word
143	I love you
404	I don't know
9	Parent is watching
99	Parent is no longer watching
88	Hugs and kisses

b) Number + letter/letter + number

¹

<https://www.netlingo.com/acronyms.php>, <https://www.grammarly.com/blog/texting-abbreviations/>,
<https://ro.pinterest.com/pin/551409548118375925/>,
<https://www.opentextingonline.com/textspeak>

In some cases, the spelling of both the number and the letter completely renders the word/ words and can be read as full words:

Example 3

Textese	Word
4u	for you
b4	before

In other cases, the sound and the spelling of the number render the word/ words:

Example 4

Textese	Word
h8	hate (/heit/)
l8	late (/leit/)
m8	mate (/meit/)

Sometimes, the similarity in spelling is not complete. The sound and the partial similarity with the spelling of the number render the word/ words:

Example 5

Textese	Word
f8	fight (/fait/, with /it/ from /eit/)
f9	fine (/fain/, with /ain/ from /nain/)

In a limited number of textese, there is no obvious relationship between the spelling of the numbers/letters and the word they stand for:

Example 6

Textese	Word
a3	anytime, anywhere, anyplace (the number seems to indicate the fact that the textese refers to three words)

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beginning with the same letter, *a*, indicating complete disponibility - linked to time, place, location - of the one conveying the message)

Some words or expressions are rendered by textese in which the letter stands for a word and the number stands for the number:

Example 7

Textese	Word
n1	nice one

c) Letters + number

There are several ways of rendering the words with the help of letters and numbers:

- Two consonant sounds and the spelling of the number, linked by a vowel sound:

Example 8

Textese	Word
cr8	create (/kri <u>e</u> it/)

- Two sounds and the spelling of the number render the word:

Example 9

Textese	Word
gr8	great (/gre <u>i</u> t/)

- The spelling of the letters and that of the number create the word:

Example 10

Textese	Word
dv8	deviate (/di:vi <u>e</u> it/)

d) Letter(s) + number + letter(s) – the creation of phrases

A large number of phrases are created on the above-mentioned pattern. What makes the distinction between them is the way in which the component elements are interpreted (as letters, as sounds or even

words) or the way in which the user attributes meaning to them. Thus we can find:

- spelled letters + sound + spelled number + sound

Example 11

Textese	Word
cul8r	see you later

- letter standing for/replacing a word to which the user attributed a particular meaning + number (standing for a preposition) + letters that have the same spelling with two words:

Example 12

Textese	Word
g2cu	good to see you

- another way of rendering a phrase is by extended replacement of elements: a letter (replaces a word) + number (replaces a preposition) + two letters that have the same spelling with two words + one letter that stands for a word:

Example 13

Textese	Word
h2cus	hope to see you soon

- a manner of expressing a sentence is by using two letters that are words in themselves, the spelling of one letter, a sound and the spelling of the number:

Example 14

Textese	Word
ilbl8	I'll be late

- the letters stand for words, the number for a preposition and the last letter completes the formation of the phrase with the help of its spelling, similar to a word:

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Example 15

Textese	Word
n2u	new to you

- two letters (standing for the same word), separated by the number (standing for a preposition):

Example 16

Textese	Word
f2f	face to face

- two letters standing for words, separated by the number (that stands for a preposition):

Example 17

Textese	Word
f2t	free to talk (This example is different from the previous one (f2f) as another meaning is attributed another to f)
g2g	got to go (the example differs from the above-mentioned g2cu, as another meaning is attributed to g)
g2r	got to run
ig2r	I got to run

- a word and a number that stands for the number:

Example 18

Textese	Word
no1	no one

e) Abbreviations

Some textese are abbreviations, shortened forms of words, created in different ways.

1. The last part of the word is deleted/clipped and the first part remains unchanged:

Example 19

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Textese	Word
add	address
cam	camera
prob	probably

2. The last part of the word is deleted and in the first part the spelling is changed:

Example 20

Textese	Word
cuz	cousin

3. Having no equivalent sound in the spelling of the word, the last letter is no longer present; it is deleted:

Example 21

Textese	Word
lyk	like
tym	time

4. The first part of the word is deleted and the rest of the word is misspelled, being written in the same manner in which it is spelled:

Example 22

Textese	Word
cos	because
coz	because

5. The middle part of the word is deleted:

Example 23

Textese	Word
gd	good
kl	cool
prolly	probably
yr	your

6. The vowels are deleted:

Example 24

Textese	Word
cnt	can't
dnt	don't
hv	have
msg	message
ppl	people
slp	sleep
spk	speak
wrk	work

7. Two letters are kept from the word:

Example 25

Textese	Word
bc	because
cz	because
dl	download
ul	upload

8. Sometimes the word is abbreviated to only one letter:

Example 26

Textese	Word
k	okay
n	and

9. In some cases, the letter is similar to the spelling of the whole word:

Example 27

Textese	Word
b	be
c	see
r	are
u	you
y	why

f) Acronyms

A special type of abbreviations are the acronyms, which are formed with the help of the initial letters of words. This is the biggest category of textese, which can stand for:

1. Phrases:

Example 28

Textese	Word
aap	always a pleasure
afaik	as far as I know
bbs	be back soon
brb	be right back

2. Sentences:

Example 29

Textese	Word
diku	do I know you?
ficcl	frankly I couldn't care less
icbw	it could be worse
idawtc	I don't agree with that comment

Some of the acronyms may have different meanings, depending on the context:

Example 30

Textese	Word
ld	1. later, dude 2. long distance
lol	1. laugh out loud 2. lots of love
nw	1. no worries 2. no way

A special case is represented by the acronyms which form meaningful words. In this situation, a good knowledge of the textese is necessary, in order to correctly unfold the meaning of the message:

Example 31

Textese	Word
cob	1.(noun) the hard cylinder-shaped part of the maize plant on which the yellow or white grain grows (https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/cob) 2. (acronym) close of business
hand	1. the part of the body at the end of the arm that is used for holding, moving, touching, and feeling things (https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/hand) 2. (acronym) have a nice day
kiss	1. (verb) to touch with your lips, especially as a greeting, or to press your mouth onto another person's mouth (https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/kiss) 2. (acronym) keep it simple, stupid
slap	1. (noun) a quick hit with the flat part of the hand or other flat object (https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/slap) 2. (acronym) sounds like a plan
toy	1. (noun) an object for children to play with (https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/toy) 2. (acronym) thinking of you

Conclusions

This article intended to bring into discussion various points of view regarding the rapport between textese and standard English and, at the same time, to offer an overview of the most common patterns of textese formation. We underlined the idea that linguists do not agree on a point of view as regards the respective rapport. While some authorized voices are afraid that its use might have bad consequences on standard English (affecting its spelling, grammar and vocabulary), others consider it nothing else but a register of the language that proves

its evolution and that is meant to save time in the communication process via modern technology.

After consulting several lists concerning this type of register and in answer to our research question, we can state that the most dominant patterns of textese construction are, by far, the abbreviations and the acronyms. A limitation of this study would be the fact that we concentrated our analysis solely on predetermined lists of textese. As for future research, we consider that it would be interesting to expand the analysis in terms of usage and understanding of (English) textese in the Romanian context, as well.

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