



| David Crystal on language |

IN DEFENCE OF TEXT MESSAGING

Dedicato a tutti coloro che tuonano contro gli SMS, presunti nemici dell'ortografia. Niente affatto, sostiene David Crystal. Abbreviazioni e sigle sono sempre esistite, non sono segno di ignoranza ma denotano acume linguistico, e comunque tranquilli: stanno passando di moda... BY MARK WORDEN

C1 ADVANCED

SPEAKER
MARK WORDEN

TRACK 19

In this final **instalment**¹ of his talks on the English language, David Crystal discusses his book *Txtng – The gr8 db8*, in which he defends **text messaging**² against the accusation that it is destroying the English language:

David Crystal

(Standard British accent)

The reasons why people objected to texting and said things like, "Text messengers are causing deterioration in language" – same thing happened in Italian, of course, it's not just English, I mean, any language that used text messaging – "They're filling their messages full of abbreviations and they are introducing **newfangled**³ abbreviations and nobody knows how to spell any more!" And this was all **a huge myth**⁴ because text abbreviations were never more than about 10 per cent of the words in a text message, anyway. Most of the abbreviations were not new, they'd been in the language before: you know, an abbreviation like the letter c for the word see (s-e-e) isn't a modern phenomenon, it's been in English for over 100 years.

And, certainly, text messengers knew how to spell because, if it's cool to leave letters out, you've got to know that the letters are there in the first place, in order to leave them out! And **it turns out**⁵ that the best texters are in fact the best spellers, and texting **does improve literacy skills**⁶, rather than causes them to deteriorate.

NOT COOL

Now, all of this happened in the early 2000s. It was a novelty, all the young people in particular, although it was never exclusively a young person's phenomenon. All the young people thought this was the coolest thing ever, to put all these abbreviations in. Ten years on, and they're going out of fashion.

I was in a school just the other day with a group of sixth formers, that's kids aged round about 17, 16, 17, one of the things we did was we collected a lot of their text messages, to analyse them: there were no abbreviations there at all! I said to the kids: "Where are your abbreviations?" and they looked at me and said "Oh, we used to do that when we were young," they said. They said,

"It's just not cool any more." One kid said to me, "I stopped abbreviating when I realised my parents were starting to do so!" In other words, when the older generation takes on the younger person's **patterns**⁷, it ceases to be cool. And so, you know, text messaging in that distinctive sense seems to be **on its way out**⁸. It's probably a relatively brief period in language history that we're talking about here.

THE INTERNET EFFECT

So will the impact of texting on English be less than that of the Internet?

GLOSSARY

- 1 **instalment**: puntata
- 2 **text messaging**: SMS
- 3 **newfangled**: nuove (v. Speak Up explains)
- 4 **a huge myth**: un'enorme bufala
- 5 **it turns out**: salta fuori
- 6 **does improve literacy skills**: migliora in effetti le competenze nel campo del leggere e scrivere
- 7 **patterns**: modelli di comportamento
- 8 **on its way out**: in declino
- 9 **features**: elementi
- 10 **laughing out loud**: ridere a crepapelle
- 11 **word endings**: desinenze
- 12 **drop**: goccia
- 13 **capitalisation**: uso delle maiuscole
- 14 **straightaway**: subito
- 15 **key**: tasto

Txtng

The gr8 db8

DAVID
CRYSTAL

David Crystal's book (the title is a text message version of "Texting: The Great Debate"). He defends texting against the accusation that it is "destroying the English language."

David Crystal

The impact of texting on the English language is minimal. If you mean: what features⁹ of text messaging language have actually become part of the English language as a whole? The answer is: Well, none really! Well, OK, one or two examples, like *LOL*, meaning "Laughing Out Loud¹⁰," which was a texting abbreviation. You will now hear that in the speech of young people, and it's actually got into the dictionary, but that's just one example. You know, think of a second or a third, and you find it really rather difficult.

The question of the Internet as a whole, you see, even that hasn't had that much impact on the English language or, you know, on the Italian language or the German language or whatever. And if you think about it, what new grammar has come into English as a result of the Internet? You know, there's just none. We're using the same kinds of syntax, the same kinds of word endings¹¹ that we were doing 30 years ago. Just because they're on the Internet, the sentences might be a bit shorter, for example, but that's just a stylistic thing, it's not a novelty.

One asks about vocabulary, what new words have come into the English language as a result of the Internet?

And, of course, there have been several words like *blog* and *tweet* and all of these, but, if you add them all up, you're not

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going to get more than a couple of thousand or so, maybe even as many as 5,000, which people say, "That's a lot!" No, it isn't a lot! That's a drop¹² in the ocean! With a vocabulary of a language over a million, what's another 5,000? You know, it's not a radical change in English that's resulted from the Internet.

FANTASTIC!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

The only area of the Internet which has had a noticeable impact is in orthography, where punctuation has been affected, and capitalisation¹³ and spelling, to some extent. One notices it straightaway¹⁴: you can receive an email with no punctuation marks in it at all. It doesn't affect the meaning, you don't need punctuation most of the time for clear meaning. And there is this minimalism in punctuation, which you notice.

There is also a maximalism, an exaggerated use of punctuation you see on the Internet, which is novel. You know, somebody saying, "Fantastic!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" and putting in 20 exclamation marks after it because it's just so easy to do now; just keep the exclamation key¹⁵ pressed down, and it just comes out. So, you do see novelty in orthography, but at the same time, when you look at these strange uses of punctuation, or perhaps I should say "novel uses of punctuation," in social networking, on Facebook and YouTube and the like, and then you compare it with the Internet as a whole, with the worldwide web, where the vast majority of pages are in absolutely standard punctuation, you realise that, actually, not that much has changed. ☹

Newfangled. Nuovo, moderno. Questa strana parola significa letteralmente "nuova moda", e si riferisce a una novità che è difficile da capire.

And it turns out that. È venuto fuori che. Il phrasal verb *to turn out* ha vari significati. Ad esempio parlando del tempo si dice *it's turned out nice*, che vuol dire "è venuta fuori una bella giornata (anche se non sembrava così all'inizio)". Qui invece si usa nel senso di scoprire come si rivela la situazione.

Speak Up
EXPLAINS