

The truth about Internet slang

By Cameron Hunt McNabb, Salon

In 2007, BBC reporter and presenter John Humphrys wrote an essay pointedly titled: "I h8 txt msgs: How texting is wrecking our language." In it, Humphrys lamented that: "the relentless onward march of the texters, the SMS (Short Message Service) vandals who are doing to our language what Genghis Khan did to his neighbours eight hundred years ago. They are destroying it: pillaging our punctuation; savaging our sentences; raping our vocabulary. And they must be stopped."

"Of course, texting and Internet slang are just the most recent object of such hyperbolic metaphors, and while Humphrys' piece is an extreme example of this genre of opinion writing, his rhetoric is consistent with the battle cry of texting's many adversaries.

However, eminent linguist David Crystal is far more nonchalant about texting's impact on language, and responded directly to Humphrys' alarms in his rebuttal, "2b or not 2b?," arguing that "all the popular beliefs about texting are wrong" and that "texting has added a new dimension to language use, but its long-term impact is negligible. It is not a disaster."

Whatever that impact may be – pure destruction or barely noticeable annoyance – texting's use of various spellings, abbreviations and speech patterns is actually nothing new for English. There was no standard spelling for the first 1,000 years of the language's development, giving rise to four or five spellings per word. When the Oxford English Dictionary admitted "OMG" and "FYI" into the official lexicon in 2011, many people were likely surprised to find that the first usages of these abbreviations predate the Internet age, with

OMG first occurring in 1917 and FYI in 1941. Similarly, the popular “haha” of modern texting actually first appears in roughly 1,000 AD in Aelfric’s “Grammar.”

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