

## The language of text-messaging\*

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Important things are being done with text-messaging.<sup>1</sup> Interesting things are happening because of text-messaging. And a lot of things are being said about text-messaging – some of them important, some of them interesting. A lot of them neither. On the day we were putting the finishing touches to this chapter, soon-to-be-President Barack Obama announced his choice of vice-presidential running mate by sending a text message to journalists and Democratic Party senators and supporters.<sup>2</sup> One restrained *New York Times* journalist characterized the event: “Mr. Obama’s use of the newfound medium is the widest use of texting by a presidential candidate in history.” The following morning, an *NPR* journalist talked about “the most highly anticipated text message in human history”. An already newsworthy event was once again being given an added mediatized spin thanks to texting. This use of text-messaging by the Obama campaign was also a communicative event loaded with pragmatic and metapragmatic force. Why choose to use texting to deliver the message? Why should this choice warrant such media interest? (After all, supporters could just as easily have chosen to be notified by the age-old technology of email.) Was this really a moment of historical proportions?

In this chapter, we want to examine these and other questions by stepping back a little from the hyperbolic commentary of journalists and the entertaining observations of popular writers like David Crystal (e.g., his 2008 book *txtng: the gr8 db8*). To this end, we start with a comprehensive review of the scholarly, research-driven literature on text-messaging; this work highlights the range of applications to which texting has been put as well as the ways in which sociolinguists, discourse analysts and other communication scholars have been attending to the “language” of texting. Shifting next to a more specifically pragmatic and metapragmatic focus, we present some of our own empirical research (Thurlow 2003) as a way to illustrate general phenomena covered in the wider scholarly literature and to ground text-messaging as a pragmatic phenomenon. We close our

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chapter with a few brief thoughts about gaps in the academic literature and possible directions for future research on the language of text-messaging.

### **1. Locating the linguistic: A literature review**

For a technology which went public in the mid-1990s, it has taken scholars a surprisingly long time to turn their attention to text-messaging. Particularly since the early 2000s, however, research from a range of disciplines and from a number of countries has been growing. While much of this work falls beyond the immediate interests of language scholars, it does reveal the increasing importance and application of texting – in both scholarly and public contexts. In this regard, studies in medicine include the use of text-messaging for patient reminders (e.g. Downer, Meara, Costa, and Sethuraman 2006; Leong, Chen, Leong, Mastura, Mimi, Sheikh, Zailinawati, Ng, Phua, and Teng 2006) and for aftercare treatment (e.g. Robinson, Perkins, Bauer, Hammond, et al. 2006; Weitzel, Bernhardt, Usdan, Mays, and Glanz 2007). In other fields, studies have looked at the use of text-messaging as library support (Herman 2007; Hill, Hill, and Sherman 2007), as a research methodology (Steeh, Buskirk, and Callegaro 2007; Bosnjak, Neubarth, Couper, Bandilla, and Kaczmirek 2008; Cheung 2008), as a pedagogical tool (Dürscheid 2002a; Naismith 2007), as a recruitment strategy (Maher 2007), as a means for cutting school truancy (Allison 2004), and, in environmental/development studies, as a way to assist Bangladeshi villagers locate clean water sources (Opar 2006). Other, more common areas of focus, have been the use of text-messaging in business and commerce (e.g., Hsu, Wang, and Wen 2006; Bamba and Barnes 2007; Mahatanankoon 2007), in political campaigning (Prete 2007) and in media broadcasting (Enli 2007). Moving a step closer to human communication research, psychologists have also looked at compulsive texting (Rutland, Sheets, and Young 2007) and so called *cyberbullying* via text message (e.g. Raskauskas and Stoltz 2007; Smith, Mahdavi, Carvalho, Fisher, Russell, and Tippett 2008).

When it comes to language and communication, scholarly interest has been even slower to take off, and texting continues to be, relatively speaking, an under-examined area of research. As with other fields, however, this too has been changing. A growing body of linguistic (and/or sociolinguistic) research is also attending to text-messaging in languages other than English. Our own literature review here, for example, covers work done in Finland, Sweden, Norway, France, Germany, Italy, South Africa, Nigeria, New Zealand, Kuwait, Malaysia, Japan, Korea, China,

Taiwan and Hong Kong, as well as the UK and USA which, like CMC research more generally, tends to dominate the field. Pragmatically-oriented studies have addressed, amongst other things, turn-taking, code-switching, openings and closings, and communicative intent more generally. They have also considered, explicitly or not, the pragmatic implications of message length, textual complexity, grammar and punctuation, spelling and orthography, and the use of emoticons. In every case, these sorts of pragmalinguistic contexts are themselves contextualized by cultural and relational variations which has important implications for any generalizations made about the generic or stylistic features of text-messaging – a point we return to below.

### **1.1. Cultural contexts**

In a range of different linguacultural settings, researchers have confirmed that teenagers and young adults are typically the most avid text-messagers (e.g. Ling 2005; Spagnolli and Gamberini 2007) which is not to say that it is exclusive to, or has relevance only for, young people. Perhaps not surprisingly, young people and older people have also been found to use text-messaging in different ways (Kim, Kim, Park, and Rice 2007). From other research, we know the following: that 32% of adult texters in Malaysia cannot use their mobile phones without texting (Tanakinjal, Amin, Lajuni, and Bolongkikit 2007); that text-messaging is a status symbol among college students in Hong Kong, with texters predominantly male and with a high household income (Leung 2007); that young adults with lower social skills in Hong Kong (Leung 2007) and Japan (Ishii 2006) prefer texting to voice communication; that, in the US, Filipino mothers with children overseas use texting to maintain real-time relationships with their children (Uy-Tioco 2007); and, that subtle gender relations are negotiated using texting in Taiwan (Lin and Tong 2007).

Various sex differences have also been found in different settings. In Norway, for example, female teens and young adults use texting most frequently, with more than 40% of young women texting daily (Ling, 2005). From the same study, we learn that young women send more, longer, and more complex messages, with 52% containing complex sentence structures. Young Norwegian women also use capitalization and punctuation more prescriptively, are more adroit at innovating new forms, prefer to coordinate events in the immediate future (as opposed to the middle future as do boys), and are more likely to use texting for managing emotionally “loaded” communication. In Germany, similarly gendered

differences have been found (Schmidt and Androutsopoulos, 2004). German girls send more and longer text messages (Höflich and Gebhardt, 2005) as do South African girls (Deumert and Masinyana, 2008). In Finland, Kasesniemi (2003) reports that teenage girls are heavy texters and often place greater emphasis on providing emotional exchanges, contemplating reasons behind interpersonal incidents, and discussing how incidents have affected them. Finnish boys, meanwhile, typically place greater emphasis on speed; their messages tend to be brief, informative, practical, often single-word or question-answer texts in a single sentence, and are about the facts of events. In the same study, girls say that, when communicating with boys, the text messages should therefore be very plain and properly written for the boys to understand them.

Research has increasingly shown variable patterns of text-messaging use in different countries. Texters in Germany (Dürscheid 2002b), Italy (Spagnolli and Gamberini 2007), France (Rivière and Licoppe 2005), Korea (Kim et al. 2007) and, for younger people, Japan (Ishii 2006) communicate predominately with family and those in their innermost social circles. Older Japanese texters use text-messaging more with those in extended social and even professional circles in efforts to preserve respect for the receiver by not risking interrupting their affairs (Rivière and Licoppe 2005). The cultural implications of Kuwaiti texters transcribing their Arabic texts into English is explored by Haggan (2007), while Spagnolli and Gamberini (2007) note that the Italians' use of the minimal allotted space of 160 total characters to send lengthy, elaborate refusals to invitations reflects an aspect of Italian culture.

## **1.2. Interactional contexts**

Some researchers have focused on the interplay between user relationships and language use. In terms of the role of texting in relationship formation and maintenance, Ling (2008) argues that texting assists in establishing new relationships (see also Thompson and Cupples' [2008] study of young New Zealanders). Ishii (2006), however, found that, in Japan, texting does not assist in creating new relationships, but rather in maintaining and reinforcing existing ones. Young Japanese people also rated their relationships as more intimate when texting was an aspect of the relationship (Igarashi, Takai, and Yoshida 2005). Ling (2008) also remarks on the ritualistic role of text-messaging in defining social boundaries through shared linguistic codes. By the same token, Schmidt and Androutsopoulos (2004) show how speech styles constitute different types

of social relationships and that style shifting provides a contextual cue for relationship maintenance and conflict management. The role of text-messaging in maintaining an “absent presence” in Japanese relationships is highlighted by Ito and Okabe (2005) as a key interactional function of text-messaging – what they call *ambient virtual co-presence*. French texters too have been found to use text-messaging for maintaining an absent presence among close friends (Rivière and Licoppe 2005).

With regards to issues of privacy, Weilenmann and Larsson (2002) found that text-messaging may be a collective, public practice, with young Swedes sometimes reading and composing aloud with co-present friends. French texters, however, appreciate the ability to engage in private communications in public places, freely expressing emotion absent inhibitions and modesties of their senders (Rivière and Licoppe 2005; Anis 2007). The privacy of texting can help maintain young people’s communities of practice by enabling exchanges which are autonomous of adults (Thompson and Cupples 2008). On the other hand, Latham (2007) indicates how social order is perceived to be under threat in China where texting facilitates the emergence of a covert forum for anti-government discussion.

Another area of research which speaks to the interactional contexts of text-messaging – and a topic that has received a lot of scholarly attention – is the thematic content or functional orientation of text messages. Chilwa (2008) classified Nigerian texters’ text messages into the three categories of economic (business and commerce), social (religion, politics, education, and other social concerns) and personal (greetings, feelings, prayers, etc.), with 60% of text messages falling into this last category. Other researchers have similarly found the overall purpose of texting to be primarily affective (Androutopoulos and Schmidt 2002; Kasesniemi 2003; Ling 2005; Rivière and Licoppe 2005), phatic, and socio-coordinative (Androutopoulos and Schmidt 2002; Ling 2005; Rivière and Licoppe 2005). This solidary function might entail, for example, the sending of “gifts” (akin to greeting cards) or a good-night message (Harper 2002; Laursen 2005; Ling 2005), managing a romantic relationship (Harper 2002), or the exchange of jokes and other word-play games (Rivière and Licoppe 2005). Content is often co-created (Harper 2002; Weilenmann and Larsson 2002) and because text-messaging is most often used to fill gaps in the day when texters are without direct, face-to-face interpersonal contact, it often takes on a chatty tone (Ito and Okabe 2005).

### 1.3. Pragmalinguistic contexts

Without doubt, the favourite topic of interest in writing about text-messaging, both lay and scholarly, has been its lexical and stylistic features. Thankfully, however, more and more data-driven research has sought to give a more measured, discursively situated perspective on popular stereotypes about the use of abbreviations (e.g. *txt*), letter-number homophones (e.g. *gr8*), and non-standard spelling (e.g. *luv*).

To start, research again shows a fair amount of cultural, social and personal variation in text-messaging language. So, for example, Swedish texters alter their spelling from the standard by spelling phonetically, splitting compounds, omitting vowels, using conventional and unconventional abbreviations, writing in either all caps or all lower case and exchanging longer words for shorter ones (Hård af Segerstad 2002). Norwegian teens do not use as many spelling alterations as the Swedes, with only 6% of participants in one study using abbreviations, acronyms or emoticons, and girls largely responsible for abbreviations and innovative spellings (Ling 2005). German text messagers commonly use reduction techniques (Androutsopoulos and Schmidt 2002), while French texters use phonetic reductions, syllabograms or rebus writing (e.g. as with the English *b4* for “before”), and logograms which are symbols, acronyms, and unilateral abbreviations (Anis 2007), and reduce spoken forms to writing (Rivière and Licoppe 2005). In the US, unambiguous abbreviations (e.g. *u* for “you”; *r* for “are”), vowel deletions and lexical shortenings (e.g. *Sun* for “Sunday”) are common (Ling and Baron 2007). Nigerian English texters employ spelling manipulations, abbreviations and phonetic spellings (Chiluwa 2008). South Africa provides an interesting case where texters are found to use abbreviations, paralinguistic restitutions and non-standard spellings when texting in English, but not at all when texting in isiXhosa (Deumert and Masinyana 2008). Capitalization, punctuation and blank spaces are often omitted in Swedish text messages (Hård af Segerstad 2002); apostrophes and sentence-final punctuation are omitted about two-thirds of the time in the US (Ling and Baron 2007). Emoticons, e.g. smiley faces, are rare but used in the US (Ling and Baron 2007) and in Sweden (Hård af Segerstad 2002).

Research on text-messaging also attends to a range of syntactical and textual features (i.e. looking at the composition, organization and coherence of messages). In this regard, message length has received some attention; for example, Hård af Segerstad (2002; 2005b; 2005a) found that, at 14.77 words per message, Swedish text messages are typically longer than German messages at 13 words per message (Döring 2002b; 2002a).

Averaging only 7.7 words each, (Ling and Baron 2007), US text messages are closer in length to those in Norway, which average 6.95 words per message for girls and even fewer, at 5.54 words per message, for boys (Ling 2005). The pragmatic significance of message length will become apparent when we turn to our own case study.

With reference to message “complexity” (i.e. messages containing more than one clause), Norwegian teenage girls’ messages are far more complex than their male counterparts, with 52% of girls’ messages classified as “complex” compared with only 15% of boys’ messages (Ling 2005). Similar results were found in Finland, where boys prefer to send one-sentence text messages while girls prefer longer and more complex messages (Kasesniemi 2003). These findings are consistent in the US, with Ling and Baron’s (2007) finding that 60% of their female university students’ text messages contained more than one sentence. Along these lines, the omission of auxiliary verbs, personal pronouns, and function words are common in Germany (Dürscheid 2002) and Sweden (Hård af Segerstad 2002), where omission of the subject pronoun is also the most common syntactical reduction (Hård af Segerstad 2002).

Turning more specifically to pragmatic and/or linguistic considerations, openings and closings are frequently dropped by Italian (Spagnolli and Gamberini 2007), Japanese (Ito and Okabe 2005) and German (Dürscheid 2002) text messagers which Dürscheid views as a function of the conversational frame of text-messaging (see also Anis 2007, Ito and Okabe 2005). Kasesniemi (2003) too has remarked on the increasingly dialogical nature of texting among young Finns. Other research suggests that turn-taking conventions may be even stricter in text-messaging than in speech, although this varies by cultural context and topic content (or communicative intent), and adheres to some highly standardized exchange patterns (Androustopoulos and Schmidt 2002; Spagnolli and Gamberini 2007). Texters in Italy (Spagnolli and Gamberini 2007) and Japan expect reciprocity and Japanese texters are highly sensitive to the amount of time that passes between turns, sending a text message prompt for recipients who take too long to reply (Ito and Okabe 2005). In the U.S., Laursen (2005) found expectations of reciprocity and immediacy with US texters where Harper (2002) had previously argued that messages did not necessitate a reply and certainly not immediately.

In terms of code-switching, Haggan (2007) found that Kuwaiti text messagers use a mixture of Arabic and English in their text messages while Finnish teens mix Finnish with a medley of foreign language words and expressions, drawing suitable expressions from any language mastered by the writer (Kasesniemi 2003), and South African text messagers blend

English with isiXhosa by writing English nouns with isiXhosa prefixes (Deumert and Masinyana 2008). In contrast, Nigerian texters completely avoid any “Nigerianness” in their succinct messages, preferring standard (British) English and, even in their personal texts, avoiding Nigerian English and other indigenous languages (Chiluwa 2008).

#### **1.4. Matapragmatic contexts**

Given this modest but growing body of research, it is surprising that public and policy-level discourse about text-messaging continues to fixate on its deleterious impact on literacy and standard language use – especially of young people (see Thurlow 2006, 2007). No review of the literature on texting would, however, be complete without briefly considering this broader metadiscursive framework. We want also to take this up again in our second case study. These are issues addressed by researchers writing/working in various languages (e.g. in German: Androutsopoulos and Schmidt 2002; Dürscheid 2002; in French: Anis 2007; in Nigerian English: Chiluwa 2008). While a few scholars insist that texting has a negative influence on standard writing, spelling and grammar (Siraj and Ullah 2007), most empirical studies focused on this issue maintain that text-messaging does not pose a threat to standard English teaching and learning. These scholars usually argue that, although there may be some diffusion of texting style into “formal” writing (e.g. school work), texters almost always recognize that language is context specific (Dürscheid 2002; Chiluwa 2008). By the same token, other scholars challenge the idea that the influence of texting on standard language practices is necessarily a bad thing. Androutsopoulos and Schmidt (2002), for example, propose that the loosening of prescriptive norms for text-messaging may be made understandable by: 1) “orthographic negligence reflects the reduction of cognitive resources allocated to spelling; 2) transgression of orthography implies deliberate discrepancies; 3) neography is an alternative orthography” (p. 95). Some of the most explicit (and conclusive) research on the issue of standard literacies comes from Plester and her colleague’s program of research which in fact reveals a *positive* relation between texting and literacy (Plester, Wood and Bell 2008; Plester, Wood and Joshi forth.).

## **2. The pragmatics of texting: A case study**

One “early” example of empirical research to be published on text-messaging was our own study (Thurlow 2003) which, being based on a corpus of *actual* text messages, presented a direct challenge to the kinds of largely unfounded claims being made in the media and offered a more properly pragmatic perspective on text-messaging. Much of the research reviewed above – especially those studies with a specific interest in linguistic and sociolinguistic matters – has used this modest study as a stimulus for greatly extending scholarly understanding of the “language” of texting. In summarizing the study here, our aim is to demonstrate the overall *pragmatic* nature of text-messaging by outlining the range of specifically pragmatic topics examined in this Thurlow study.

### **2.1. Communicative intent: Maximizing sociality**

That relationship-building and social intercourse are both central to, and strongly facilitated by, technologies for communication should be in no doubt, even though popular opinion still feeds on the once-popular scholarly idea that computer-mediated communication is necessarily asocial and/or antisocial (see Thurlow, Lengel and Tomic 2004 for more on this). Perhaps even more so than the landline telephone, the mobile phone and text-messaging are clearly “technologies of sociability” (Fischer 1988). That this is so, was evident not only in the specific linguistic/orthographic form of the messages in Thurlow’s (2003) corpus but also in their general functional or communicative orientation or intent.

Recognizing that, for anything other than analytical convenience, it is often impossible to separate interactional intent neatly from transactional intent, Thurlow’s text messages were overwhelmingly relational in their orientation, ranging from sending friendly salutations, to making social arrangements, to substantial friendship maintenance. Explicitly transactional (or informational) messaging accounted for as little as 15% of all the messages analyzed. Even those ostensibly transactional messages (e.g. hyper-coordinated practical arrangements) invariably served more social concerns like finding a friend during a night out or courteously letting someone know that the texter was running late. This solidary, often phatic function of texting was expressed also in the persistent use of humour and the “gifting” of chain messages (e.g. stock sentiments or saucy jokes). In this sense, it is clear that text-messaging is quintessential small-talk – none of which is to say that it is either peripheral or unimportant. On

the contrary. As Coupland (2000) reminds us, small talk is, interactionally speaking, big talk. Accordingly, most of what happens in/with everyday text-messaging can – and, indeed, should be – explained in the context of texters’ self-evident drive to maximize sociality. In this sense, text-messaging is a pragmatic technology par excellence.

In situating text-messaging in the broader context of computer-mediated (or at least technologically-mediated) communication, much the same need arises for establishing the interplay between what the technology itself allows (or affords) and what the communicator herself/himself brings to the technology. Most obviously, in the case of text-messaging, the equipment is small and, eponymously, mobile; it therefore affords texters an unobtrusive and relatively inexpensive mode of communicating. At the same time, text-messaging is also technically and practically restricted, allowing only a certain number of characters per message, and, like text-based CMC, is primarily QWERTY-driven.<sup>3</sup> Whether or not an aspect of the technology is a constraint or an opportunity, however, invariably depends on the user. For example, unlike the landline telephone, mobile calling and instant messaging, the asynchronicity of text-messaging affords greater control over when and how messagers respond to incoming messages. Ling & Yttri (2002:159) make the point that this allows texters time for reflection before having to respond which in turn allows greater face-management. Importantly, however, the degree of synchronicity is more in the hands of its texters (unlike email, IRC and the telephone) so that the time between receipt and reply may also be varied. Indeed, as other research (above) reveals, text-messaging is, for many texters, becoming increasingly dialogic and, as such, resembles online chat in its conversational structure in terms of turn-taking patterns and message length/complexity.

One technologically afforded (or supported) pragmatic phenomenon in Thurlow’s data was the openly sexual tone of many messages. Texting clearly facilitates an interesting mix of intimacy and social distance not unlike various other genres of CMC (e.g. instant messaging and, to some extent, email) which also complicates traditional boundaries between private and public. The technical rapidity and ephemerality of text-messaging seems to bring with it a relative anonymity even though the sender and receiver are invariably known to each other and/or revealed to each other through caller/number display. Nevertheless, it is this kind of “recognized anonymity” which might explain the relative licentiousness or flame-potential of some texters.<sup>4</sup> The face-saving capacity of this type of anonymity likewise accounts for texters who send messages to say something they would ordinarily avoid having to say face-to-face such as

breaking up with a romantic partner or, in the case of the Thurlow study, discussing an unexpected pregnancy.

Related to this sense of anonymity, and as another example of how text-messengers capitalize on technological affordances, the Thurlow (2003) corpus revealed instances where sender and receiver were apparently within viewing distance of each other. Texting facilitates this kind of co-present exchange, allowing texters to interact covertly in an immediate and potentially very intimate form of communication – what some have referred to as the “culture of concealed use” (Ling & Yttri, 2002:164). By no means replacing face-to-face interaction, text-messaging enhances communication in ways which allow for multiple (or even parallel) communication events, offering an attractive combination of mobility, discretion, intimacy and play.

## **2.2. Technological affordance, pragmatic force**

While much is made (in the media and elsewhere) about the technologically imposed need for brevity in text-messaging, texters seldom seem to use the space available. In Thurlow (2003), just as others have found, the average word length of text-messages was approximately 14 and the average character length of text-messages was only 65, although with quite a lot of variation ( $SD = 45$ ). As such, the length (and abbreviated linguistic forms) of texts would therefore seem to be more a function of the need for speed, ease of typing and, perhaps, other symbolic and pragmatic concerns such as a preference for more dialogic exchanges. In this sense, therefore, the *some* text-messaging looks more like the interactive written discourse of other new media genres like instant messaging. We say “some” because there is evidently a fair degree of personal choice/style involved.

It is in this way that texters are able to infuse an ostensibly asynchronous technology with a certain synchronicity. The technology is thereby co-opted and exploited to serve the underlying need for intimacy and sociability – what Thurlow (2003) refers to as the “communication imperative” (see also Thurlow et al. 2004). Other technological constraints of text-messaging also reveal substantial interpersonal gains; nowhere is this more obvious than in the linguistic/typographic *form* of text messages. Just as message length may easily be accounted for in pragmatic terms, so too are most of the supposedly distinctive, novel and/or unorthodox linguistic forms, such as shortenings (i.e. missing end letters), contractions (i.e. missing middle letters) and G-clippings and other clippings (i.e. dropping final letter), acronyms and initialisms, letter/number homophones,

“misspellings” and typos, non-conventional spellings, and accent stylizations. Having said which, Thurlow’s corpus demanded an important caveat.

In looking at actual text-messages, the Thurlow (2003) corpus revealed only about three abbreviations per message which meant that this supposedly defining feature of text-messaging style accounted for less than 20% of the overall message content analyzed. This initial finding immediately appears to run counter to popular ideas about the unintelligible, highly abbreviated “code” of text-messaging. In the same vein, relatively few typographic (as opposed to alphabetic) symbols were found throughout the entire corpus, almost all of which were simply kisses and exclamation marks usually in multiple sets (e.g. xxxxxx and !!!!!). Emoticons (e.g. ☺ ) too were noticeable by their absence. In spite of their notoriety in media reports and despite the title of Crystal’s (2008) book about texting, relatively few examples of letter-number homophones (e.g. *Gr8*) were found. Like many of the paralinguistic and prosodic cues found in older CMC technologies like IRC (see Werry, 1996), a much more frequent type of language play was found in the form of “accent stylizations” and “phonological approximations” such as the regiolectal spelling *novern* for “northern”. In addition there was a range of onomatopoeic, exclamatory spellings (e.g. *haha!*, *arrgh!*, *WOOHOO!*, *rahh*, *ahhh*) and a couple of other typographical-cum-linguistic devices for adding prosodic impact (e.g. *quick quick*, *wakey wakey* and *yawn*).

Assumptions about the ubiquity, consistency and homogeneity of text-messaging language are always confronted with cultural, social and personal variations. Which is not to imply that text-messaging is without its generic idiosyncrasies and stylistic curiosities. In fact, text-messages are simultaneously remarkable and unremarkable in their relative unconventionality.

### **2.3. The generic and stylistic features of texting**

In her paper on the language of email, Baron (1998) sought to grapple with the idea that email might herald a new linguistic genre; her conclusion was ultimately that email language rather represented a creolizing blend of written and spoken discourse. Like email, and indeed most new media discourse, text-messages have much the same hybrid quality about them – both in terms of the speech-writing blend but also in terms of old and new linguistic varieties. As Rössler & Höflich (2002) put it, text-messaging is “email on the move”. In its transience and ephemerality, however, text-

messaging is as much like instant messaging as it is like email – and, for that matter, speech. In keeping with Herring’s (2001) proposals, therefore, we are more inclined to view texting in its own terms; whatever formal similarities it may bear with other genres of CMC, the linguistic and communicative practices of text-messages emerge from a particular combination of technological affordances, contextual variables and interactional priorities.

*Example message*

Safe Hi babe!Angie + Lucy had words last nite-stood  
there arguing 4 ages,loads of people outside cobarna.Bit  
obvious they.....werent gonna fight tho cos they were  
there 4 so long!I was a bit pissed (woh!) Good nite tho!Spk  
2u lata xxBeckyxx

While the kinds of orthographic (or, technically speaking, typographic) choices which texters make in their messages are almost always pragmatically and communicatively intelligible, this is not to say that text-messages are without character or distinction. Removed from its physical context, the text-message above is somehow clearly a text-message. How is this? Does this not imply a specific text-message style? All genres and styles are necessarily hybrid; nonetheless, text-messages are communicative events characterized not only in terms of their linguistic form but also their conversational force. As we suggest, although some text-messages appear more informational or content-focused, the vast majority are clearly relational – so much so, that this solidary function becomes an almost genre-defining rule. With this in mind, what gives text-messages a distinctive (though not necessarily unique) generic feel is the *combination* of:

- (a) the *comparatively* short length of text-messages;
- (b) the *relative* concentration of non-standard typographic markers; and
- (c) their *predominantly* small-talk content and solidary orientation.

Key qualifications here are “combination”, “comparatively”, “relative” and “predominantly”; none of these generic features is individually sufficient to characterize text-messaging.

Once again, none of this is intended to suggest that text-messages are functionally unimportant and peripheral, or that they are uniform and strictly formulaic in form. Pragmatically speaking, this small-talk is big-talk. For example, as Androutsopoulos (2000) has demonstrated in the case

of fanzines, non-standard orthography is a powerful but also playful means for texters (and young texters especially) to affirm their social identities by deviating from conventional forms; in doing so, they differentiate themselves (from adults, for example) and align themselves with each other. To which we would add the opportunity also to personalize and informalize their messages.

### 2.3. The pragmatic “maxims” of text-messaging

Based the Thurlow corpus of text-messages, it is possible to think of texting being underpinned by three key pragmatic maxims (cf. Grice, 1975), all serving the principle of sociality which drives the messaging; these are:

- (1) brevity and speed;
- (2) paralinguistic restitution; and,
- (3) phonological approximation.<sup>5</sup>

As the first and foremost of these maxims, the dual maxim of brevity and speed is manifested most commonly in (a) the abbreviation of lexical items (including letter-number homophones) and (b) the relatively minimal use of capitalization and standard, grammatical punctuation (e.g. commas and spaces between words). Importantly, and as we have already suggested, the need for both brevity and speed appears to be motivated less by technological constraints, but rather by pragmatic demands such as ease of turn-taking and fluidity of social interaction. Likewise, in terms of the second and third maxims, where paralinguistic restitution understandably seeks to redress the apparent loss of such socio-emotional or prosodic features as stress and intonation, phonological approximation (e.g. accent stylization) adds to paralinguistic restitution and engenders the kind of playful, informal register appropriate to the relational orientation of text-messaging. On occasions, the second and third maxims appear to override the brevity-speed maxim, but in most cases all principles are served simultaneously and equally. So, for the sake of paralinguistic restitution, capitalization (e.g. *FUCK*) and multiple punctuation (*what???!!!*) may be more desirable; on the other hand, lexical items such as *ello*, *goin*, and *bin* serve both the need for abbreviation and phonological approximation. Nevertheless, some graphical punctuation seems more persistent, most notably the use of question marks (?) and full-stops (.). With reduction of typographic contrastivity (e.g. italics, bolding, underlining), however, the use of capitalization and punctuation becomes more semantically marked

and, in this way, grammatical marks are co-opted for other less grammatical effects (e.g. *wow!!!!* or *No wait...*). Another example of paralinguistic restitution in graphical form is the famous emoticon – a direct borrowing from older new media genres like IRC and a feature which appears to be similarly unpopular and, therefore, relatively infrequent – in spite of its exaggerated depiction in the media. (In their follow-up study, Ling & Baron 2007 found the same thing.)

Beyond the most obvious impact on linguistic forms of the sociolinguistic maxims, was most noticeable about the non-standard items (or 'new' linguistic forms) in the Thurlow study was how so few of them were especially new or especially incomprehensible. In practice, there are few text-messages which are not semantically recoverable, even in isolation of their original, discursive context. Much of what texters type in their messages would not be out of place on a scribbled note left on the fridge door, the dining-room table or next to the telephone – where precisely the same brevity-speed imperative would apply. In this sense, therefore, claims (both academic and lay) for the impenetrability and exclusivity of text-messaging language are clearly exaggerated and belie the discursive significance of situated language use. Like the fridge-door note-maker, texters surely recognize the obvious need also for intelligibility – in Gricean terms, for example, quantity and manner (Grice, 1975). One of the best examples of this, in terms of abbreviation, is the use of consonant clusters (e.g. THX) which rely on the premise (and metapragmatic awareness) that consonants in English usually have more semantic detail/value than vowels. Besides, many of the non-conventional spellings found in text-messaging are more widespread and pre-date the mobile phone anyway. Examples of this include the use of z as in *girtz*, the k in *skool*, as well as those which also entail phonological approximation such as US-Americanized forms like *gonna*, *bin*, *coz* and any g-clippings like *jumpin*, *havin*, etc..

In point of fact, the orthographic (or typographic) conventions and the sociolinguistic maxims which underpin the language of text-messaging evidenced in the Thurlow corpus are interesting but, in some respects, largely unremarkable. The notion of standardness in written language is itself a convention and always an abstraction from spoken language (see Cameron, 1995). In this sense, therefore, like the fridge-door note and the phonetic transcriptions of expert linguists, many of the typographic practices of text-messaging offer *more* “correct”, *more* “authentic” representations of speech to begin with. As Jaffe (2000) puts it:

The use of non-standard orthography is a powerful expressive resource. ... [which] can graphically capture some the immediacy, the “authenticity” and “flavor” of the spoken word in all its diversity. ... [and] has the potential to challenge linguistic hierarchies... (p. 498).

In their text-messages, texters “write it as if saying it” to establish a more informal register which in turn helps to do the kind of small-talk and solidary bonding they desire for maximizing sociality. The language texters use is, therefore, invariably mutually intelligible and almost always appropriate to the context of interaction. Furthermore, it is apparent that texters use language with a metapragmatic awareness and a robust sense of play, as in this second example:

*Example message*

hey babe.T.Drunk.Hate all luv.Have all men.Fuck  
them.how r u?We're ou utery drunk.im changing.  
Now.Ruth.xxx. Hate every1

It is this same metapragmatic awareness which may also account for texters' use of such apparently clichéd forms as letter-number homophones and emoticons which can be used with ironic effect and/or self-consciously to enact or perform “text-messaging”. In other words, in a Hallidayan sense (Halliday, 1969/1997), texting always fulfils both an interpersonal and textual function as people send messages not only for the kinds of communicative functions outlined above (e.g. relational bonding and social coordination) but also to be seen to be texting. Texting (and mobile phones) carries cultural capital in and of itself – as a lifestyle accessory and a ludic resource. Irrespective of message content, the very act of texting has cachet and communicates something about the sender. And part of buying into the cachet of texting means drawing on discursive-cum-identity resources such as ringtones, keypad covers, and popularized linguistic markers like initialisms, clippings and letter-number homophones. Or to reject them altogether. Sadly, it is precisely this kind of metapragmatic awareness and (life-)stylistic variation which is typically overlooked in media's own metapragmatic commentary about text-messaging (see Thurlow 2006, 2007).

### 3. Conclusion: New Directions

We started this chapter by referring to the decision by President Barack Obama and his campaign organizers to announce his vice-presidential running mate in August 2008. According to an Associated Press report at the time, his campaign aides wanted to attract additional supporters by soliciting their cell phone numbers and email addresses.<sup>6</sup> Undoubtedly, the choice was a strategic and practical one. However, whether intended or not, the medium was also a powerful message in itself. This was a presidential candidate promising to be a man of change and of participatory democracy. Like any successful presidential candidate of recent times, Obama had to impress upon the country that he was also a man of the people. "I'm asking you to believe. Not just in my ability to bring about real change in Washington ... I'm asking you to believe in yours." Attainable or not, true or not, what better way to *implicate* his vice-presidential announcement with a message of novelty, interactivity and, especially, sociability than to text it!

Umberto Eco (2002) notes that we are living in an age where the diminutive, the brief and the simple are highly prized in communication. Clearly, text-messaging embodies this zeitgeist. And like many earlier communication technologies, it evokes and/or embodies a range of projected fears and hopes. Indeed, the history of the development of so called new communication technologies is marked by periods of excessive hype and hysteria about the kinds of cultural, social and psychological impacts each new technology is likely to have. Which is not to deny that few people, professional, academic or lay, could have predicted the extraordinary rise in popularity of the cell phone and its sister technology texting. Not surprisingly, public discourse about texting (e.g. in the media) encodes any number of interesting metapragmatic comments about the nature of both texting and language. If, as Mey (2001: 5) suggests, the field of pragmatics "is interested in the process of using language and its *producers*, not just its *end-product*, language", then the kind of everyday, metapragmatic commentary about texting is decidedly non-pragmatic since, for the most part, it fixates on the structures, forms and grammars of language – or the perceived lack thereof. For example, in both media discourse and other popular commentary (e.g. Crystal's 2008, *txtng: the gr8 db8*) they prioritize and exaggerate the *look* of text-messaging language – its supposedly distinctive lexical and typographic style. Notwithstanding this, this kind of everyday talk about texting does offer important insights into people's beliefs (and concerns) about language (and technology)

which, as Pennycook (2004) notes, performatively establishes what language itself means.

It is for this reason that the study of text-messaging warrants continued research interest – especially from pragmaticians and other language and communication scholars. Specifically – and briefly – this research would do well to focus on situated (or ethnographic) analyses (i.e., the real, everyday contexts of text-messaging); to address the use of text-messaging across the lifespan; to pay even more attention to other linguacultures;<sup>7</sup> to link with other “short messaging” technologies such as micro-blogging (e.g. Twitter) which are sustained by text- and instant-messaging as well as by emailing; and, in the same vein, to undertake properly multimodal discourse analysis (e.g. use of ‘pxting’ in NZ, ring tones, wallpaper). As the technologies of texting are constantly changing so too are the practices and meanings of texting changing. Any research on text-messaging also needs to be constantly updated too.

## Notes

1. ‘Text-messaging’ or just ‘texting’ are commonly labels for the brief, textased – but not necessarily text-only – messages sent using the short message service (texting) of cell/mobile phones, PDAs (‘personal digital assistants’), smartphones and web browsers, or portable media players. Most often used for person-to-person communication, text messages are increasingly being used to interact with automated systems (e.g. buying products, participating in television contests, recruiting presidential voters).
2. See BBC Online feature (22 Aug 2008): <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/7575886.stm>
3. Although still predominantly text-based, “texting” is increasingly becoming something of a misnomer as “texters” take up opportunities to exchange more multimodal messages (e.g. photos). Nor can the “linguistic” content of messages be neatly distinguished from the visual significance of their typographic design – their look.
4. “Flames” and “flaming” are terms sometimes used to describe openly hostile or derogatory messaging in CMC (see Thurlow et al. 2004 for more on this).
5. In their recent study, Deumert and Masinyana (2008) found that these maxims were violated by isiXhosa texters who, it seems, prefer to text without any forms of paralinguistic restitution and/or phonological approximations.

6. See *Associated Press* release (22 Aug 2008): <http://ap.google.com/article/ALeqM5gxVW-aUPQsPkU0JKEleSPNCyxSsAD92NF8SG0>
7. In his chapter "How do other languages do it?", David Crystal (2008) makes some attempt to address the practices of text-messaging in languages other than English. His lists of "text abbreviations in other languages" do little, however, to move understanding beyond the stereotypical exaggeration of linguistic forms preferred by journalists.

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