

Broken English

Katie Cincotta looks at how texting is changing our language.

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THE prophets of doom say technology is killing the English language. All that evil shortcut lingo spawned on mobile phones, instant messaging and chat forums is slaughtering our vocabulary, savaging our sentences into silly acronyms and bad-mannered abbreviations - all in the name of high-speed communication.

Who has the time and the space to write properly when you're limited by 160 characters in an SMS or when three friends are chatting to you at once on messenger? "Will c u 2moro arvo" followed by a smiley face seems to make perfect sense under that pressure.

But critics argue the digital dialect has all but obliterated the Queen's English - describing webspeak as a virus, a communicable disease, a bleak, bald, sad shorthand that is penmanship for illiterates. And stoking the fears are statistics that show there will be 2.4trillion text messages sent worldwide by 2010.

But British linguist Professor David Crystal disagrees with the naysayers after researching the effects of technology on language for his latest book, *Txting: The Gr8 Db8*.

Crystal believes new gadgets and habits have enhanced the language, adding a few hundred new words to the one million that already exist in English. He says the internet has revolutionised communication by advancing the original format with its ability to add symbols, links and dynamics to the way we write, which has encouraged clever new plays on words. All the hysteria about English languishing is unjustified, he says, and his book sets out to prove it.

"All the 'bad news' stories about texting are based on urban myths," says Crystal, who adds that the story of a child who wrote an essay entirely in text-messaging abbreviations was a hoax.

In his research, Crystal found that 90% of text messages are actually written in perfectly normal, standard English, not secret squirrel code. The sentences might be short and the style informal, but spelling and grammar haven't been ditched for gobbledegook.

"It isn't a cause of bad spelling: you have to know how to spell before you can text. Texting actually improves your literacy, as it gives you more practice in reading and writing," says the academic and author.

Many linguists say that with the ascent of web-based and mobile messaging tools over the past few years, the uninitiated may not have had time to adjust.

"If you think about it, texting is less than 10 years old. People are still coming to terms with it," Crystal says. Taking shortcuts with words isn't new - we've been doing it for centuries. He notes that Anglo-Saxon scribes wrote their homilies for priests with symbols and that 100 years ago Queen Victoria used to play games using abbreviations.

What is genuinely new is the rise of chat acronyms - bizarre shorthand used in real-time instant messaging to save time and bamboozle intruders.

Most people will recognise LOL (laughing out loud) as the pioneer in this category. Web dictionary NetLingo deciphers hundreds of the cryptic codes, with some of them as ridiculous as they are confusing - such as 2BZ4UQT (Too Busy for You Cutey), @TEOTD (At the End of the Day) and P911 (Parent Alert).

US lexicographer Grant Barrett says hardly any of this new slang makes it to dictionaries because it's not actually being used.

"Those lists of 'chat slang' that are passed around are full of rubbish. Just the worst sort of made-up nonsense. They are passed on with some admonishment like, 'Know what your kids are doing online!' Even police departments pass them around, which is really pathetic. Most of those terms exist only on those lists -nobody uses them," says the dictionary author.

Barrett estimates that only 20 chat acronyms or abbreviations are in common use, as young people limit them to remain intelligible.

"They are more interested in being understood ... and too much abbreviation, too many acronyms and too many innovations can interfere with that," he says.

Dr Jean Mulder, linguist and senior lecturer at Melbourne University, believes many of the concerns about e-language eroding literacy are grounded in fear, with older people frightened by the unfamiliar tech talk pulsing across computer screens and mobile devices.

"It's another way of focusing worry or disempowerment when you aren't on top of new technology or find it really threatening," she says.

Dr Mulder says language, like fashion, has loosened up a bit over the decades and compares formal written letters on paper to the "three-piece suit and starched white shirt".

In her 15 years of teaching university students she has seen no evidence of technology's bad influence on language skills - only positives, like being able to express emotions through graphics.

"Emoticons (emotional icons) allow another layer of expression, making the message more conversation-like," she says.

The Canadian-born linguist regards digital speak as an exciting new direction for English that is perhaps only shocking in the speed at which it has spread to the mainstream, including seniors who now text.

"I don't see e-language as a degradation of the language but a continuing evolution. This is yet another genre of English, another string to the bow," Dr Mulder says.

Crystal believes shortcut English has also encouraged creativity, with texting poetry competitions in Britain set to rival Japan's famous three-lined verse, the haiku.

"The competitions are very common and bring to light some highly creative uses," he says. The Guardian ran the world's first SMS poetry contest back in 2001.

A book of six-word memoirs - Not Quite What I Was Planning - is another example of the "less is more" literary movement, with 1000 contributions ranging from the poignant "One long train ride to darkness" to the mischievous "Catholic school backfired. Sin is in!" and the humorous "Seventy years, few tears, hairy ears".

At 22, writing graduate Josephine Mandarano admits she's a Gen Y tech head who stays in touch by email, mobile, messenger and Facebook every day. But she feels she's swimming against the current in her bid to protect traditional English. While she values emoticons and acronyms for adding tone and context in those tech zones, she thinks netspeak is encouraging bad habits.

"Rarely do I receive an email from friends that is grammatically correct and abbreviations such as 'dere' (there) and 'dis n dat' (this and that) make me cringe," she says. "I'm a bit of a word nerd. It frustrates me when folk say, 'Who cares? It's only an email.'

"We're a generation who've grown up with spelling and grammar checkers on our computers. It gives us an excuse to be lazy because our computers can do all the work for us."

McCrindle Research, a group that tracks generational trends, reports that Gen Ys may not be as word-perfect as their predecessors.

"As Gen Ys move into the workplace a lot of employers are saying that they can't articulate their thoughts as well and their written skills aren't as great because they've relied on the spellcheck or the texting language," says social researcher Mark McCrindle.

In analysing last year's 120,000 baby names, Mr McCrindle says there's also been a sharp trend towards phonetic alternatives including Jaymz, Tayla and Aren - an offshoot of the new digital speak.

"We're used to seeing words spelt in different ways," he says. "People can read words joined together without spaces because of URLs, so we are changing in our capacity to interpret language without punctuation and capitals."

In Word Up, Mr McCrindle's lexicon of Gen Y and Z slang, many of the words are American in origin and spelling, which he attributes to the globalised nature of Microsoft, Google and YouTube.

Sadly, only two words in the lexicon are uniquely Australian, including "maggot" (to get drunk) and "devon" (the NSW luncheon meat, which rates something as average or passe).

"It's pretty hard to find a unique Australian term. Those allusions to our past language culture are not recognised by young people today," Mr McCrindle says.

Which means Home & Away's

Alf Stewart may be youth's last connection to the dying Aussie slang made famous by Summer Bay's tough-talking local businessman. Stone the flamin' crows, that's crook.

SMS SPEAK

- BRB - be right back
- CYA - see you
- BTW - by the way
- BF/GF - boyfriend/girlfriend
- GR8 - great
- GTG - got to go