

Has txt kild the ritn wd?

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Shane Warne isn't the only one who loves to text. Like it or not it's coming soon to a phone near you, writes Geoff Strong.

It wd b :-) 2 rite ths in txt spk but like any other jargon that would be gobbledegook to those not in the know. Anyone not using it now better get ready because SMS text speak, such as chatroom speak, email speak and that most infuriating of all - geek speak, is working its way into the English language.



Photo: Frank Maiorana

It has spread wherever the technologies of computers and SMS enabled mobile phones have entwined their electronic tentacles. The result has been an emotionally stunted, encrypted creole that has left language purists reaching for their smelling salts and linguistic adventurers salivating.

Before proceeding further, those unfamiliar with txt spk should go back and examine the :-) in the opening sentence. The cognoscente of the idiom can jump two paragraphs.

:-) is not a colon followed by a dash and a parenthesis, it is an emoticon, a pictograph designed to convey the emotion mostly missing in text messages. To understand it the head should be tilted 90 degrees to the left and should see a smiling face conveying a pleasant emotion. Thus :-(will be the inverse.

The online dictionary [NetLingo](#) lists several hundred of them, many of considerable complexity such as *[:-) for Santa Claus. Curiously the Japanese who are capable of writing their language left to right, right to left or top down, have evolved a whole vocabulary of emoticons that can be viewed without head tilting. For example @(*0*)@ represents their favourite of our marsupials - the koala..

Each year some 500 billion text messages are sent worldwide. A new book brings together a selection of them sent over a 24 hour period. Entitled *200 Characters* it was edited by Melbourne cultural management agent Pip Carroll, who believes it's the first book devoted to SMS.

She compiled it by asking friends and contacts to supply their favourite undeletable text messages. Carroll thinks a lot of people prefer the emotional neutrality of a text message over the more confronting possibilities of voice communications or worse still meeting someone face to face.

The book cites as an example a circuitous text conversation between Annaand and Jesse:

"Hey, you wann grab a coffee at 11?" proposes Annaand.

"Yeah, that'll be good."

"How about we get takeaway coffees?"

"Where are we going to take them away to???"

"To the airport!"

"What the f--k?"

"I need a lift to the airport."

Others are encrypted communications that may only be understood by those sending and receiving. "Hostage situation at Sunhill," writes Lester to Chris in message 159.

Carroll says the book is a document of our times. "We live in an age of short attention spans and the text message reflects that. It also allows you to avoid uncomfortable confrontations. If you don't feel like going to someone's party, it is easier to text with an excuse than call on the phone where the real reason might be revealed by tone of voice."

An extreme example of this has surfaced in Malaysia, where under Islamic sharia law it is possible for a man to divorce his wife by texting her (providing he makes it clear that is what he is doing).

English has always been a language that has sponged up other linguistic and cultural influences. Unlike French which has a rigid system of rules controlled by an academy, neologisms (newly invented words) abound in English. The word emoticon itself is a good example - a synthesis of emotion and icon, the latter word being used not in its religious art form rather in the form given it by geek speak.

Even the most technologically insulated will encounter the linguistic Frankenstein concocted by geeks just by using a computer and encountering a problem. How many have been told their computer has "encountered an unhandled exception," and knew what it meant.

A dictionary definition of geek might help explain. Its original meaning is not the harmless computer isolate of recent use - rather a circus freak who used to bite the head from a live chicken or snake and swallow it.

The website SearchStorage.com describes geek speak as a term that was used initially in press coverage of the 1998 Microsoft antitrust case in which a great deal of industry jargon was heard. "Geek speak often sounds like normal English that doesn't quite make sense because familiar words have been given a new meaning. A port is no longer where a ship docks and a spool is no longer what thread comes on. And executing a program is not at all the same thing as killing it."

Spare a thought for the snake or chook.

Monash University PhD student Sarah Pasfield-Neofitou has made a study of the linguistics of new communication forms. Because of her language speciality of Japanese she has taken a particular interest in the evolution of Japanese and western emoticons.

"Emoticons are also used in emails and chat rooms because these forms of electronic communications lack the emotional content of speech or face-to-face communication. Lack of emotional content is a particular problem with SMS because each message is usually limited to 200 characters so the abbreviated form has evolved to try to fit as much in each message as possible.

"It is interesting how this language is appearing in spoken English. Kids might say, 'LOL', which is text code for 'laugh out load' or the young girl's favourite exclamation, 'OMG' meaning 'Oh my God!' "

She cites other examples where computer technology has crept into mainstream speech. "People might say it is their turn to download, they might be multi-tasking, going offline and so on."

RMIT University's Julie Faulkner, who studies trends in popular culture, says texting has been described as a form of "linguistic botox". "But is that a useful metaphor for a new (and vigorous) discursive form?"

She recently gave a talk entitled "2B or not 2B".

"The implication is that the language of Shakespeare has witnessed a decline but isn't Shakespeare as heavily coded a form of communication as txt itself?"

Linguistic puritans might moan and long for a golden era of "proper" usage but they forget Shakespeare invented every tenth word he wrote and we still use many of them daily from aggravate to homicide and submerge. Others he invented such as "tortive" meaning twisted and "vastidity" meaning immensity have dropped out of use. Unhandled exception and p(^-^)^q could well suffer the same fate.

<http://www.theage.com.au/news/in-depth/bsmsb-shane-warne-isnt-the-only-one-who-loves-to-text/2007/10/01/1191091026508.html>