# 5    How Does Technology Affect Language Use?

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## Summary of key points

In this chapter, we explore language use and change as they apply to electronically mediated communication – more specifically text messaging. We discuss how technology affects communication and how users adapt to the ever-changing affordances and limitations of technology to achieve their communicative goals. We examine some of the shifts in language use that can be linked to the evolution of text messaging, describe some of the peculiarities of "textspeak" (Crystal, 2009) and reflect on the relationship between the medium of communication and individual, social and situational variables. Finally, we conclude with a brief discussion of the advantages and drawbacks that text messaging may bring for language users.

## Guiding questions

What communicative goals does text messaging support?
Is texting spoken or written communication?
What are the linguistic features of text messaging?
How does variation apply to text messaging?
Is text messaging changing the way we communicate?

## What communicative goals does text messaging support?

It may seem perfectly normal to pick up a smartphone and send a text message or SMS (Short Message Service); if you are like the majority of smartphone users in the world, you probably do this every day. According to the business SMS provider, textrequest. com, text messaging is "the single most used feature on a smartphone" (Burke, 2016, How does texting fit section), and it is estimated that nearly 20 billion text messages are sent daily worldwide. This is especially true of younger users: a report (Rideout & Robb, 2018) on social media use indicated that, for teenagers, texting is the preferred way of communicating with friends; in-person communication was rated second-best by the participants in this study. SMS is also an important means of communication in developing countries, as it tends to be more accessible than Internet-based services (Willcox, Dobson, & Whittaker, 2019).

The pervasiveness of text messaging is extraordinary if we think that phone messaging did not exist before the 1990s; the first SMS – wishing "Merry Christmas" – was sent in 1992 (Arthur, 2012), but it took a few more years before SMS technology

became mainstream in the late 1990s (McIntosh, n.d.). Since then, text messaging prac-tices have changed considerably, as technology has evolved, and users have adapted to its new affordances and challenges.

What has remained relatively stable, however, is the strong social nature of text mes-saging, although it is evident that SMS can also be sent for utilitarian purposes. Crystal (2009) describes the following as some of the key functions of text messaging (all exam-ples have been created by the authors using iFake text message, https://ifaketextmessage.com/):

- Social functions:
    • Expressions of affection, support, sympathy, good wishes (Figure 5.1)
    • Offering help and advice (Figure 5.1)
    • Requests for contact (Figure 5.2)
    • Exchanging personal news and gossip (Figure 5.3)
    • Arguing and breaking relationships
    • Overcoming boredom
    • Joking and language play (Figure 5.4)

- Informational functions:
    • Planning trips, organising meetings and events (Figure 5.5)
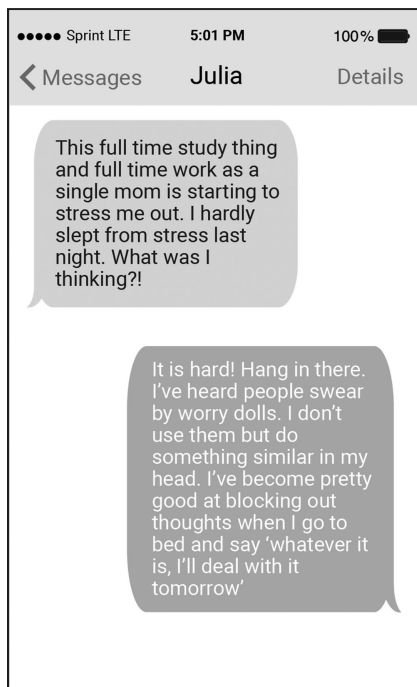    • Requesting and providing specific information (e.g. a person's contact details)



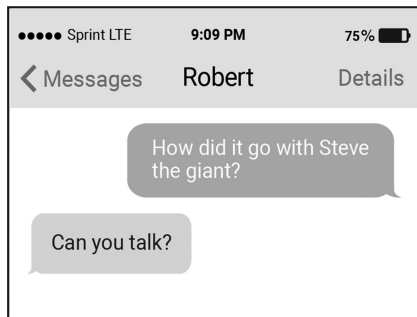*Figure 5.1* Expression of support; offering help and advice.

*Figure 5.2* Request for contact.



*Figure 5.3* Personal news.



*Figure 5.4* Joke.

*Figure 5.5* Logistics (finding a friend at the stadium).

Although the examples above highlight the predominantly private nature of much text messaging (Thurlow & Poff, 2013), business and service providers have increasingly recognised the potential of text messaging for attracting their customers and clients' attention (e.g. Bentz, 2015). As a result, text messaging is now frequently employed to send "pushed" notifications to users (Sendgrid, 2021). These notifications tend to fulfil informational functions, such as reminders of payment dates, notifications of school timetable changes or weather alerts.

In the following sections, we explore how language reflects and adapts to changes in technology and communicative practices. Despite the chapter's focus on text messaging, we must acknowledge that SMS is only one of many electronically mediated commu‐ nication technologies available, and that there are significant differences between these technologies in terms of their cultures-of-use (Thorne, 2003) and linguistic features (Herring, 2020).

Chrystal (2006) analyses five types of digital communication technologies in terms of their similarity with "traditional" spoken and written communication and shows how email, for example, shares many traits with written texts, whereas instant messaging meets many of the criteria associated with spoken language. It is important to keep this variation in mind, as what we learn about text messaging may not apply to other forms of electronically mediated communication. We must also clarify that, for the purpose of this chapter, we will focus mainly on text messages that are exchanged through mobile phones, such as SMS, Apple iMessage and similar messaging services – for example, Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp.

In the next section, we focus on the relationship between mobile phone text messaging and non-digital forms of spoken and written language.

## Is texting spoken or written communication?

This question has puzzled researchers since SMS technology was introduced (Baron, 2010; Herring & Androutsopoulos, 2015). In its early days, SMS was exclusively text-based; in other words, until Multimedia Messaging Services (MMS) became available in the mid-2000s, images, audio or videos, could not be sent via text messaging. With the increasing popularity of multimedia messaging apps, such as Apple's iMessage, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp and Snapchat, things have clearly changed. It is now common for text messages to contain links to websites, images and even audiovisual material.

Despite the multimodal nature of modern electronic messaging, written text continues to be used extensively (Herring, 2020). While it cannot be denied that text messaging is, technically, written, it is quite common for users and researchers alike to consider text message exchanges as "conversations" (e.g. Baron, 2010). This is because text messaging shares features of both written and spoken communication. In fact, much online text-based interaction is referred to as "chat". It should also be noted that the writing–speaking distinction is not absolute. For example, Biber (1988) observes that texts can be placed at different points on a written–spoken continuum.

Features of speech and writing can be analysed within the notion of *Register,* and especially the concept of *Mode,* which is discussed in Chapter 3. In Systemic Functional Linguistics, *Mode* is described in terms of textual interactivity, spontaneity and communicative distance (Coffin, 2006). Let's examine where spoken, written and text messaging are positioned in relation to each of these three parameters.

### *Textual interactivity*

Face-to-face conversation is usually synchronous and interactive: the participants share a physical and temporal space; they take turns speaking and listening and can negotiate meaning – for example, by asking questions for clarification purposes. On the other hand, written texts tend to be one-way and asynchronous. The reader may access the written text long after the writer has produced it and does not usually have opportunities to interact with the author in real time.

Interactivity in spoken texts results in *disfluency* (i.e. disruption in the flow of speech), for example, pauses, repetitions, interruptions and overlaps, which are speakers' responses to challenges posed by the flow of the conversation. Ordered turn-taking in speech is facilitated by non-verbal cues such as *intonation*, *stress*, *gestures* and *facial expressions*. Non-verbal cues also facilitate *disambiguation* (i.e. establishing one single interpretation) and help minimise misunderstandings.

Non-verbal cues are absent from written texts, where they may be replaced by verbal cues such as words or sentences that attempt to clarify the writer's intentions. Access to other visual content is also possible in written texts; for example, information can be conveyed through graphic elements and images.

Like writing, text messaging can be asynchronous; however, it is frequently interactive, and users expect that replies to their messages will be almost immediate. Therefore, texting can be considered a quasi-synchronous form of communication (Garcia

& Jacobs, 1999; Giles et al., 2015), while interactive, text messaging does not provide access to non-verbal cues. As we will see in the next section, users have adapted to the affordances and limitations of the text messaging environment by developing special ways of managing discourse. Much of the research on computer-mediated communication has focused on these aspects (e.g. Herring & Androutsopoulos, 2015).

### Spontaneity

Spoken conversation is usually transient and spontaneous, whereas written text can be stored and accessed for a long time. Therefore, written texts are used for permanent or long-term records, for example, of business transactions. Spoken conversation allows very little time for planning, which may result in false starts and unplanned topic switches. Conversely, written texts can be produced over a relatively extended period of time, which may involve several drafts and revisions and a great deal of planning.

Written texts strive for clarity by providing all the relevant information readers need to interpret them within the texts themselves. Consequently, their language tends to be denser, more precise and grammatically correct. For example, in professional contexts, written texts tend to include specific vocabulary, such as technical terms (e.g. "diphthong" when referring to vowel combinations), whereas spoken language contains many fillers (e.g. "um", "well", "okay", "I mean") and non-technical words. Lexical density and grammatical correctness are facilitated by the greater time available for planning and revision, compared with spoken conversation.

Also because of lack of planning time, spoken conversations tend to include short sentences and simple syntactical structures, such as *coordinate clauses* (i.e. independent sentences that are combined using conjunctions such as "and", "or", "so" and "but"), whereas written texts may contain long sentences with several *subordinate clauses* (i.e. independent sentences and related dependent clauses that add meaning, combined through conjunctions such as "although", "because", "before" or "if").

Text messaging lies somewhere in the middle of this dimension. It does provide more time for planning and revision, and more opportunities for long-term storage, than spoken conversation. However, its quasi-synchronous nature means the time available for planning is limited, and opportunities to correct the course of the conversations may not be available. Its interactive nature also translates into language that is very much anchored to the context, so that ellipsis and vague references are very frequent, as we will further discuss below. Finally, because of its predominantly social function, text messaging tends to contain common vocabulary and simple sentences, therefore appearing informal and spontaneous.

### Communicative distance

Communicative distance is about *text cohesion*. Text cohesion is enhanced through tight connections between words, for example, between pronouns and the nouns they replace. Spoken text tends to be highly context-dependent, in the sense that it contains many references to the immediate context shared by the speakers, such as *deictic expressions* (words and phrases that point to time, place or people and can only be understood in context, as described in Chapter 4). Therefore, conversational partners that are co-present are usually able to assign meaning to deictics without much difficulty.

In a written text, all relevant contextual information is usually included in the text itself. There may be exceptions; for example, when we write a quick note to ourselves or to people we know very well. However, written texts of medium to high formality, such as newspaper articles, business letters or academic essays, are usually less context-dependent and more cohesive than speech.

On this dimension, text messaging is again somewhere in the middle: if the users are in different physical locations, then some information about their surroundings may need to be provided. In fact, the purpose of many text messages is to inquire about the recipients' current location or activity (see Figure 5.5). On the other hand, given the quasi-synchronous nature of SMS, temporal references can usually be resolved without explicit mentions.

Many text message exchanges may not make any sense to an external observer, as their cohesion is built through knowledge shared by the interactants but not available to others, such as knowledge about persons, places or objects (see Figures 5.2 and 5.3 above). The issue of cohesion between messages is also peculiar to text messaging, as we observe further below, when we discuss discourse management.

In sum, although comparing text messaging to speech or writing allows us to understand how this type of communication relates to other types, as Herring and Androutsopoulos (2015) noted in relation to computer-mediated discourse more broadly, text messaging "does not fit easily into either modality" (p. 128). While it shares some features with other forms of writing or speech, it also presents unique characteristics. We explore these unique features in the next section.

### What are the linguistic features of text messaging?

Since the introduction of electronically mediated communication, much has been written about its peculiarity in terms of spelling, vocabulary, grammar and syntax, as well as *discourse management*. Such peculiarity can be explained, at least partially, with reference to the limitations and affordances of the technology used.

When SMS technology was first introduced, each message could only contain up to 160 characters. Telecommunication companies charged users by the message; in other words, each 160-character SMS sent attracted a cost. Therefore, users strived to remain within the 160-character limit when composing their messages. Because of the reliance on keypads rather than touchscreen technology, composing messages "was cumbersome and time consuming" (Taylor & Vincent, 2005, p. 78). Each numeric key could produce three or four letters, depending on how many times it was pressed. For example, to type the letter "s", the "7" key had to be pressed four times. If two letters were under the same key, pausing was required before the second letter could be produced. T9 predictive technology was introduced in 1995, but it was far from being as effective as the predictive text we know and use today.

These limitations encouraged users to avoid typing unnecessary characters, including punctuation, to save on keystrokes (Herring, 2020). Abbreviations and symbols were commonly used for this purpose, which led to SMS language being described as a new form of communication, variably named "Textspeak" (Crystal, 2009), "SMS Argot" (Taylor & Vincent, 2005) or "Textese" (Herring, 2020).

Herring summarises much of the literature on the language of text messaging into a detailed description of what she terms *e-grammar*, that is, "the set of features that characterize the grammar of electronic language" (2020, p. 522), In this section, we follow

this definition and describe text messaging grammar in terms of language (typography, orthography, morphology, syntax) and discourse management. We will also briefly discuss the role of *emoticons* and *emojis* in supporting meaning-making.

In relation to **typography**, e-grammar is characterised by:

- Non-standard capitalisation. For example, complete lack of capital letters in messages; all caps to simulate shouting
- Non-standard punctuation. For example, absence of full stop at the end of one-sentence messages; full stop at the end of each word to indicate emphasis (e.g. "I.do.not.like.it"); repeated punctuation signs (e.g. "!!!")
- Substitution of numbers for words (e.g. "gr8")

From the perspective of **orthography**, we may observe:

- Frequent use of abbreviations and acronyms (e.g. "pls", "LOL")
- Irregular spelling (e.g. "2moz" for "tomorrow")
- Mimicking sounds such as "hehehe" for laughter

While non-standard forms often have a utilitarian function, they can also be used for stylistic purposes. This is especially true of more recent forms of text messaging that provide access to *predictive text* (i.e. input technology that facilitates typing on a mobile device by suggesting words) and do not impose character limits. In these cases, production of non-standard forms may require deliberate effort to circumvent the predictive system, evidencing the users' "conscious intent to be playful or creative" (Herring, 2020, p. 523).

This view is supported by changes observed between early and later samples of text messaging. For example, Baron found a considerable frequency of abbreviations, acronyms and emoticons in her 2004 instant messaging corpus; however, in her 2010 study, she noted that these devices were "relatively infrequent". These changes likely reflect new developments in technology, such as the greater efficacy of predictive text, which make some of those abbreviations and acronyms unnecessary.

In terms of **morphology and lexicon**, new word-formation processes have been observed which include *clipping* or *shortening* ("bot" for "robot"), *blending* (e.g. joining the beginning of a word with the end of another, such as in "animatronics" from "animation" and "electronics") and *compounding* (different word parts joined together, e.g. "podcast" from "iPod" and "broadcast"). These processes have led to the creation of new words, some of which have entered mainstream language. Finally, e-grammar **syntax** is characterised by simplicity and elliptic forms. Incomplete sentences are common; for example, articles and subject pronouns may be omitted.

### *Discourse management*

Discourse construction and management is one of the main areas of difference between face-to-face and text messaging. As previously mentioned, in text-based environments, discourse management is impacted by the lack of non-verbal cues, such as *prosody* (i.e. rhythm and intonation) and *gaze* (i.e. looking at people), that facilitate *turn-taking* in face-to-face conversation. Users may also not attend to incoming messages immediately,

or they may have to wait for their interlocutor to type in their message before they can respond. Therefore, text messaging has been described as quasi-synchronous (Garcia & Jacobs, 1999), as we previously observed.

Due to its quasi-synchronicity, turn-taking in text messaging may violate the "no-gap, no overlap" principle observed in spoken conversation (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1978). This principle suggests that speakers do their best to avoid overlap (i.e. speaking at the same time) while at same time avoiding silent pauses between turns. Text message users, however, can potentially type at the same time (i.e. overlap), and there may be a noticeable lag between asking a question and receiving an answer, which is equivalent to a silent pause in speech. These disruptions in the ordered turn-taking sequence may lead to insertions of irrelevant content and changes in the conversation trajectories (Crystal, 2006). Consider the following example:

In Figure 5.6, the two participants are watching two separate soccer games and updating each other on actions and events. They begin discussing a yellow card and penalty kick awarded against their team (Topic A), then after a reaction emoji and asking, "What for", the second user introduces a second topic (Topic B): "I hate Charlie". The first speaker continues Topic A by answering the "What for" question and then adding further information about the penalty kick, while the second speaker adds remarks on Topic B.
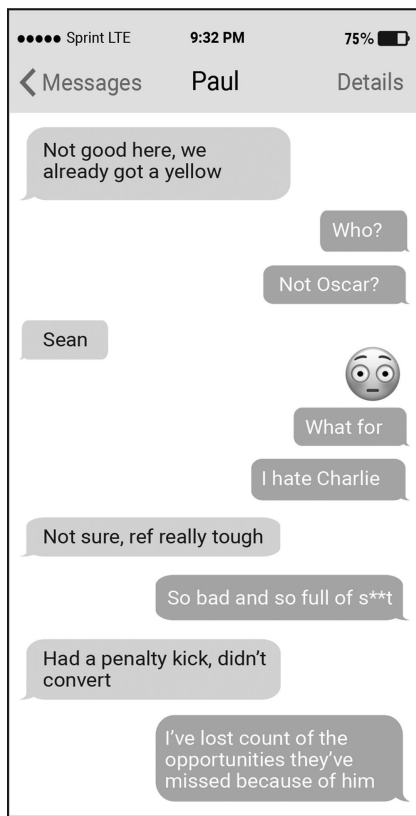


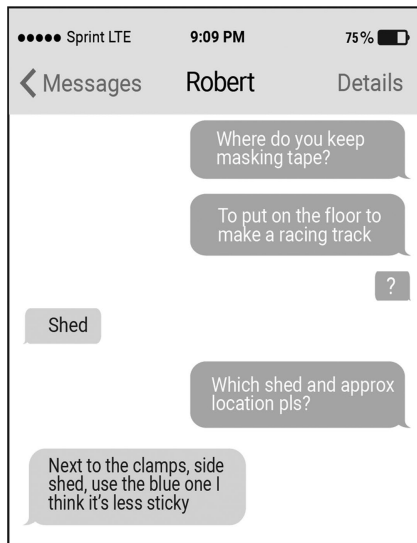*Figure 5.6* Parallel conversation trajectories.

*Figure 5.7* Split turns.

Having two parallel conversation trajectories, like in this exchange, would be rather unusual in a face-to-face exchange. However, these text message users appear at ease and able to manage their conversation without difficulty. According to Herring, users' ability to discuss several topics at once is facilitated by "access to a persistent textual record of the interaction [which] enables a different strategy of discourse processing, one that is in fact more efficient than the one-turn-at-a-time model" (2010, p. 2).

Another common feature of text messaging discourse is the breaking of turns into short messages that are posted in a sequence, rather than composing one long message. We can see this in the example above, where "Who" and "Not Oscar?" are typed as two separate messages. This practice is partly explained by the longer time it takes to compose a message, compared to uttering a sentence in spoken conversation. As a result, sending a short message allows the "speaker" to hold the floor (Baron, 2010) while they type the next message and the recipient reads the first.

Baron (2010) suggests that users may also engage in this practice to mimic intonation units and the faster pace of communication experienced in speech. Here is another example (Figure 5.7):

### Emoticons and emojis

As observed in the previous section, one of the most notable features of text messaging is the absence of non-verbal cues, such as prosody, facial expressions and gestures. This is partly compensated through *typography* (i.e. printing format) and *orthography* (i.e. spelling and punctuation), as also discussed above. However, since the early days of text messaging, users have sought some form of visual representation that would supplement text and enable them to express feelings and emotions. The most common devices used for this purpose are emoticons and emojis.

Emoticons are strings of characters, such as mathematical operation symbols and punctuation, which usually represent facial expressions when viewed from a sideway angle (Nishimura, 2015). The first emoticons are believed to have been produced in a 1982 email message, when the smiling face symbol, composed through a colon–dash–closed round bracket sequence, :-) was suggested as a "joke marker" to indicate sarcasm, while the colon–dash–open round bracket sequence, :-(represented its opposite (Baer, 2015).

While emoticons constitute an improvement over text-only communication, the range of meanings they can express is relatively limited. To address these limitations, emojis were introduced at the end of the 1990s. Emojis are pictograms, or icons, depicting not only facial expressions but also a range of gestures, objects and environments. Figures 5.4 and 5.5, at the beginning of this chapter, contain two of the most frequently used emojis: the laughing emoji and the thumbs up emoji. Thanks to their popularity, emojis have experienced continuous growth and expansion: the first set of emojis, created by Japanese designer Shigetaka Kurita, comprised 176 icons; as we write this chapter, there are over 3,000 (Buchholz, 2021).

In addition to conveying general emotions, such as happiness or sadness, emoticons can be employed to modify the illocutionary force of speech acts (see Chapter 4) or to clarify the speaker's conversational intent. For example, a smiling face that follows a negative remark may suggest irony. In fact, communicating "playfulness or non-seriousness" is recognised as a common function of emoticons (Herring & Androutsopoulos, 2015, p. 134).

Emoticons and emojis can also be used without text, either in isolation or in a sequence. Consequently, researchers have explored the question of whether these symbols can be considered a language of its own (Cohn, 2015), and whether we can think in emojis independently from written text. While some studies have found that text message users are able to interpret single emojis without much effort (Weissman & Tannen, 2018), other researchers have noted that correct interpretation is not always straightforward (Crystal, 2011). For example, a smiley face may suggest a range of meanings, including happiness, joking, sympathy, sarcasm and amusement; such ambiguity may lead to misunderstanding, if no other clues are available to disambiguate meaning (Miller, 2016).

Interpreting the meaning of emojis is especially challenging when several symbols are combined to form sentences and are not accompanied by text (Cohn et al., 2019). Researchers have also identified cultural differences in the use and interpretation of emoticons and emojis. Similar to codified gestures and non-verbal expressions, different communities may assign particular meanings to emojis and emoticons, as in a dialect. For example, players of the online game, World of Warcraft, use the carat symbol [) ] to indicate agreement with another person. In the same group, an arrow-shaped symbol [<–] signals volunteering for a task, much like raising one's hand (Collister, 2012). These symbols may be understood differently, or not at all, by users who are not familiar with the group's conventions.

These observations are a reminder that language users encode and interpret meaning with reference to the broader sociocultural context, and that the same users may behave differently depending on situational variables, such as with whom they are communicating and for what purpose. Situational variables may change the interpretation of emojis, as users rely on contextual cues to decode their meaning. We will further discuss sociocultural and situational variation in the next section, as we explore how it applies to text messaging more broadly.

From the perspective of change, as can be expected, the introduction of emojis has reduced usage of emoticons. In turn, the availability of a broad range of meanings through emojis, coupled with effective predictive text, may have contributed to a reduction of non-standard language in text messages (Pavalanathan & Eisenstein, 2016, cited in Herring, 2020). Gawne and McCulloch have noted that emojis are finally allowing text message users to have "a body" which can be used to "express those things that we want to express in conversation again" (2019). In Herring's words, it is possible that emojis "are taking over some of the expressive and pragmatic functions of textual 'Netspeak'" (2020, p. 526), thus reducing the need to employ those elements of e-grammar we previously discussed.

## How does variation apply to text messaging?

As we mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, there is significant variation in the language and discourse practices observed in distinct types of electronically mediated communication. In other words, variation is certainly influenced by the medium of communication employed; however, the *Mode* variable interacts with other axes of variation, including individual, sociocultural and situational factors (see Chapter 6 for more on variation in language). As Thurlow and Poff put it: "no two texters necessarily text in the same way, although friends and peer groups no doubt establish their own local stylistic norms. Nor, of course, does the same texter necessarily make the same stylistic choices for all messages" (2013, p. 175).

Among users' individual variables, gender and age are likely to influence text messaging styles. For example, it has been suggested that women send longer, more frequent and more involved SMS compared to men (Ling, 2005, cited in Thurlow & Poff, 2013). In terms of age, the differences observed between younger and older generations of users reflect similar differences observed in speech. Youth language is characterised by innovation and playfulness, as well as strong elements of self-representation and in-group solidarity (McCrindle & Wolfinger, 2011; Thurlow, 2003). Some linguistic innovations enter everyday language and become standardised. When this happens, they lose their novelty and appeal for the younger generations, who thus create new expressions.

Age-related differences in texting practices are further promoted by changes in preferences for messaging platforms. For example, while Facebook was the platform of choice for younger users when it was first introduced, it lost its appeal when it was adopted by the older generations (Sweney & De Liz, 2018). Younger users thus migrated to newer platforms, such as Snapchat and Instagram. Given that each platform has its own rules of engagement and communication styles, changes in platform preferences can be expected to affect users' text messaging practices. For instance, messages exchanged through Snapchat are more likely to contain images, with or without text.

As previously mentioned, variation is influenced by other sociocultural variables, such as membership of subcultural groups (for example, gaming communities). Online and offline communities may have their own "special" communicative styles, which are reflected in the way users construct their messages. Cross-cultural differences have also been observed on a larger scale, across national groups. In their review of the academic literature on this subject, Thurlow and Poff (2013) report on studies identifying differences in the text messaging practices of German, Italian, Japanese and Kuwaiti users. The differences seem to reflect sociocultural norms of communication operating in these countries.

From the perspective of regional variation, therefore, text messaging can be expected to operate in similar ways to spoken language, in the sense that local communities may employ their regional varieties or dialects (Herring & Androutsopoulos, 2015) and multilingual users may engage in code-switching or code-mixing (Androutsopoulos, 2013). Consider the following examples, provided by users who are English/Italian bilingual (Figures 5.8 and 5.9):

The authors of the above messages switch effortlessly between Italian and English within the same sentence or across messages; in some cases, one of the users writes in one language, whereas the other writes exclusively or predominantly in the second language. Chapter 6 focuses more on variation in language. It should also be noted that, when interacting with global communities, English is often selected as a *lingua franca*; in other words, speakers of different national languages may interact in English online, as it is the only language that they all share. Chapter 7 focuses on English as a global language.

Finally, while, overall, text messaging tends to be perceived as informal (Herring, 2002, p. 121), the growing tendency for businesses and services to use text messaging means some variation can also be observed in terms of formality. Consider the following examples:
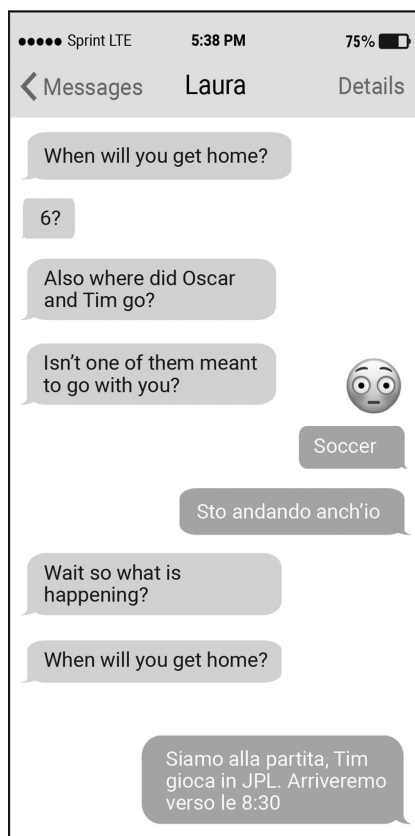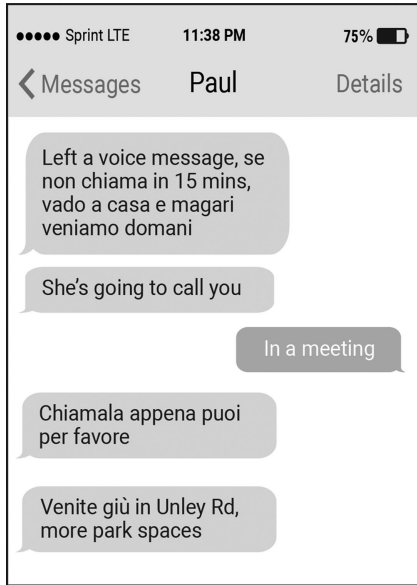


*Figure 5.8* Code-switching.
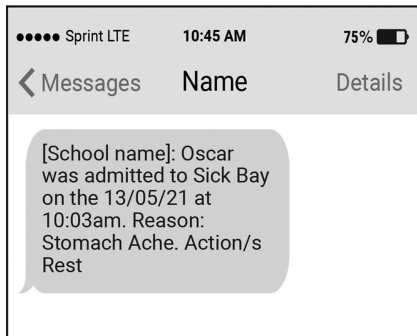
*Figure 5.9* Code-switching and code-mixing.



*Figure 5.10* School notice.

Figure 5.10, received from a public school, does not contain a salutation (e.g. "Dear Mr Smith"), whereas Figure 5.11, received from the Australian Taxation Office, does ("Hi Anna"), but it is more informal than could be expected in written communication, such as a letter, as it contains an informal greeting ("Hi") followed by the recipient's first name. Figure 5.11 also contains contractions ("we're", "we'll") and does not have a closing (e.g. "Sincerely"), although it is signed. Figure 5.10 is very synthetic and clearly focused on communicating key information, as it only contains the reason for admission to the sick bay, and the date and time, whereas there is no attempt at establishing a personal connection. These messages therefore appear more formal than those observed previously in this chapter, which were exchanged between people who knew each other well. However, they still retain a level of informality, compared to traditional business communication.

One of the reasons for this observed informality is that the ephemeral nature of text messaging contributes to this medium being used mainly to communicate short notices and perhaps refer to other documents, such as webpages (Sendgrid, 2021), whereas email is preferred when a long-term record of the transaction must be kept. As an example, consider this SMS exchange between a home buyer and a conveyancer (Figure 5.12):

The "formal reply" alluded to in the SMS consisted of the following email:

Anna's email message (Figure 5.13) is less formal than a business letter might be. For example, only first names are used for both the recipient and the senders; and the text
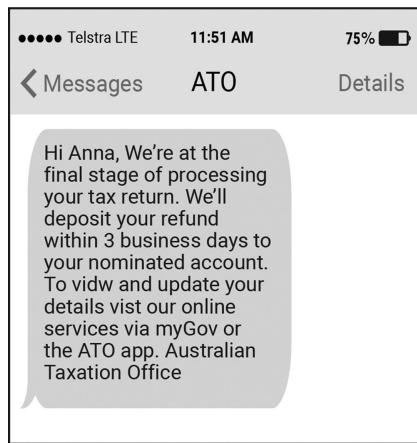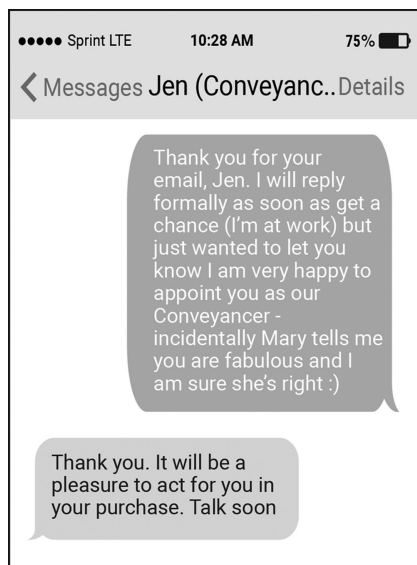


*Figure 5.11* Taxation Office notice.



*Figure 5.12* Conveyancer appointment.

Anna R <annar02@yahoo.com
**To:** Jennifer McAllister
Sat, 27 Mar at 2:19 pm
Dear Jennifer,
Thank you for providing a quote for your services. Paul and I would be very happy for you to represent us for the purchase of the property at 10 Sydney Road.
I have attached a copy of the contract. Please note that p. 13 is missing our initials, but we have since sent an initialed copy to the agent.
The agent is Slvia Jones from AAA Real Estate in Adelaide. I have provided your details to Sylvia, who may be in touch.
We are expecting to receive the Form 1 on Monday and we would love for you to review it. We will do that as well and don't anticipate any issues, but it is always good to have another set of eyes to double-check, just in case.
Many thanks and best wishes.
Anna and Paul

*Figure 5.13* Email to conveyancer.

contains abbreviations and contractions ("p. 13", "don't"), as well as colloquialisms ("another set of eyes to double check, just in case"). However, compared to the previous SMS (Figure 5.12), the email contains more detailed and precise information, which approximates it to "written" more than to "spoken" language (on the formality of email and business letters, see also Herring, 2002). Anna's text message, on the other hand, includes: a reference to the mutual acquaintance who recommended Jen to her; a compliment; and a smiling emoticon, which all contribute to establishing the relationship as more personal and less formal, though not as intimate as in some of the previous examples.

The examples presented in this chapter demonstrate that text message users skilfully use technology to achieve their communication goals. While text messaging does present some general features that compensate for the limitations of technology, SMS language also varies depending on individual, sociocultural and situational factors.

## Is text messaging changing the way we communicate?

From the discussion in the previous sections, it is clear that text messaging has changed the way we communicate. However, we must remember that the history of human communication has always been shaped by technological innovations. For instance, the invention of the printing press provided impetus for the cultural exchange that fuelled the Renaissance in Europe and enabled literacy to become widespread (Baron, 2008). Similarly, the invention of the telegraph and telephone allowed instant communication across geographical distances in a way that was previously impossible. These technological changes affected linguistic and communicative practices, for example, through the introduction of new vocabulary and conversational routines.

Similar observations can be made about "textspeak" (Crystal, 2009). As we have observed previously, some expressions that were generated in online informal environment have become widespread, if not standardised. Examples mentioned by Herring (2020) include acronyms such as LOL or phrases referring to popular internet memes such as *because + noun* or *I can't even*. As a result of these changes, deep concerns have been expressed in relation to the detrimental effect that textspeak might have on young

people's development of literacy and on English grammar more broadly (e.g. Texting Troubles Teachers, 2003).

Seasoned linguists (e.g. Crystal, 2009), however, have pointed out how some of the practices we are observing in text messaging language, such as abbreviations, are not at all new, and that it is a trait of languages to evolve and adapt to support their users' communicative needs. In linguistics, we consider this evolution process as a natural phenomenon, and we refer to it as *Language change*. We also identify different *varieties* of language that may exist at the same time; each of these varieties may be appropriate for specific communicative purposes.

As we also saw in the previous section, the way we communicate – whether we use non-standard spelling or syntax, the abbreviations we use – is dependent on context as well as on the medium through which we are communicating. Internet vocabulary can be likened to slang or jargon; it serves a particular purpose within an in-group, like professional language, and it keeps evolving with technology changes. From this per-spective, textspeak can be considered one of the language varieties users hold in their *communicative repertoire* (Rymes, 2010).

Anxiety around young people's use of textspeak is reminiscent of the arguments supporting suppression of multilingualism. As described in Chapter 6, parents of bilin-gual children – especially when they speak a dialect, creole or a language that is seen as inferior to the standard variety – are often advised that the second language or dialect should be suppressed, so as not to interfere with development of the standard variety. However, access to a greater number of linguistic and communicative varieties should be viewed as a resource, rather than a deficit, as it allows speakers to draw on a rich lan-guage repertoire that is more likely to fulfil their communicative needs. What matters is that speakers develop *communicative competence* (Hymes, 1972), which enables them to select the varieties that are most appropriate to any given context.

### Conclusion

In this chapter, we have explored the notions of *variation* and *change* as they apply to the language of text messaging. Although texting continues to be used predominantly for informal exchanges, we have noted that businesses and service providers are in-creasingly using SMS technology to connect with their customers and clients. These changes in function, as well as in the technology that supports them, are reflected in the language and structure of text messages. We have explored the question of where text messaging should be positioned on the spoken–written continuum and noted how texting shares features of both modes of communication. Some generic features of SMS language, or e-grammar, can be identified; these include abbreviations, acronym, pe-culiar discourse management patterns and the use of emoticons and emojis. However, users enact different communication strategies depending on situational and sociocul-tural factors, which means that variation can be observed not only in relation to *Mode* (i.e. the technology used to communicate) but also in terms of formality and commu-nicative styles. Finally, we have briefly discussed how text messaging has evolved over the past 30 years, and how changes in technology have contributed to linguistic and attitudinal changes.

Despite the concerns often expressed by language purists, nearly three decades of widespread electronic communication have demonstrated that speakers learn to switch confidently and accurately between varieties of language, and that they use language

creatively to achieve their purposes. It has also been suggested that, because of its written nature, text messaging may in fact contribute to literacy development, rather than hinder it. As Herring (2020, p. 527) has put it:

> e-grammar per se does not reduce literacy skills; creative use of e-grammar might actually be a mark of growth and proficiency in literacy rather than a deficit. Meanwhile, electronic language continues to evolve in response to developments in CMC technology.

### Key concepts

***Discourse management:*** Refers to the ways in which speakers organise and negotiate their contributions to the conversation. For example, considers how speakers negotiate turn-taking and topic selection.

   ***Communicative competence:*** A person's ability to select from their communicative repertoire the most appropriate variety for a given situation or context, so that they achieve their goals.

   ***Communicative repertoire:*** The collection of linguistic varieties that individuals have in their own communication "toolkit", and that they can select from when producing any text.

   ***Mode:*** In Systemic Functional Linguistics, refers to one of the three components of Register. It describes linguistic features associated with the channel or medium of communication (e.g. spoken v. written).

   ***Register:*** Refers to a specific variety of language that is associated with a particular purpose or situation.

### Activities for reflection and discussion

1   Analyse the text messages you have sent over the past week and create a set of tables or charts to present your findings. You may also create an infographic, if you like. Categorise your messages according to:

  - Service or app used (e.g. SMS, Facebook Messenger)
  - Topic or purpose of messages
  - Types of message recipients (e.g. close friends, members of a special-interest group, businesses)
  - Text-only or message containing images, videos or links to websites.

   Compute frequencies (i.e. count) for each category.

   Report your findings to the class and compare your usage with your classmates'. Can you identify similar trends?

2   Do you use emoticons? What about emojis? Do you have preferred ones (i.e. emoticons or emojis you use more often)? For what purposes do you use them? Find examples from your text message history.

3   Ask an older member of your family or acquaintance if they remember when SMS were only text and had a fixed number of characters. Did they use more abbreviations back then? Have they changed the way they text now, for example, using text prediction and complete words?

4   Find examples of text messages containing e-grammar features (e.g. non-standard spelling, abbreviations, punctuation used for emphasis). Are non-standard forms mainly used to save keystrokes, or do they have other functions?
5   Research differences in text messaging practices across age groups. For example, do older people use messaging services that younger generations do not use, or vice versa? Do younger and older people send messages for different purposes? Survey friends and/or family members in different age groups.
6   If you speak more than one language, do you code-switch or code-mix when text messaging? Do you use a special keyboard or app that has predictive text in multiple languages? Do you get frustrated when the technology does not allow you to code-switch easily?
7   Do you change your communication style when you text people in different age or social groups, for example, your close friends, older members of your family, businesses, special-interest groups you belong to? For example, do you use opening and closing formulae in some cases and not others, or special terms that people outside your group would not understand? Review your message history and identify some of these differences.

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