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Instant Messaging: The Language of Youth Literacy

The English language is under attack. At least, that is what many people would have you believe. From concerned parents to local librarians, everybody seems to have a negative comment on the state of youth literacy today, and many pin the blame on new technology, saying that teachers often must struggle with students who refuse to learn the conventionally correct way to use language.

In the Chronicle of Higher Education, Wendy Leibowitz quotes Sven Birkerts of Mount Holyoke College as saying that students “strip-mine what they read” on the Internet. Those casual reading habits, in turn, produce “quickly generated, casual prose” (A67). When asked about the causes of this situation, some point to instant messaging (IM), which coincides with new computer technology.

Instant messaging allows two individuals to engage in real-time, written communication; however, many messagers disregard standard writing conventions. For example, here is part of an IM conversation between two teenage girls:¹

Teen One: sorry im talkinto like 10 ppl at a time

Teen Two: u izzyful person

Teen Two: kwel

Teen One: hey i g2g

¹ This transcript of an IM conversation was collected on 20 Nov. 2003. The teenagers' names are concealed to protect privacy.

As this brief conversation shows, participants must use words to communicate via IM, but their words do not have to be in academic or professional English.

Some people feel that instant messaging threatens youth literacy because it creates and compounds undesirable reading and writing habits and discourages students from learning standard literacy skills. However, the critics' arguments don't hold up. In fact, IM seems to be a beneficial force in the development of youth literacy because it promotes regular contact with words and the use of a written medium for communication.

Regardless of one's views on IM, the issue of youth literacy does demand attention because standardized test scores for language assessments, such as the verbal section of the

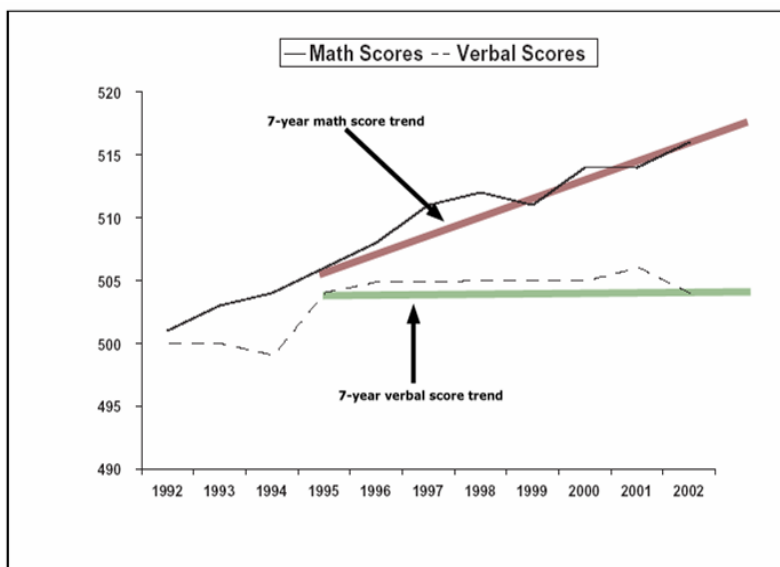


Fig. 1. Comparison of SAT math and verbal scores (1992 - 2002), from Kristin Carnahan and Chiara Coletti, Ten-Year Trend in SAT Scores Indicates Increased Emphasis on Math Is Yielding Results; Reading and Writing Are Causes for Concern (New York: College Board, 2002), 9. Trend lines added.

College Board's SAT, have declined in recent years.

This trend is illustrated in a chart distributed by the College Board as part of its 2002 analysis of aggregate SAT data (see Fig. 1).

The trend lines, which I added to the original chart, illustrate a significant pattern that may lead to the conclusion that youth literacy is on the decline. These lines display the seven-year paths (from 1995

to 2002) of math and verbal scores, respectively. Within this time period, the average SAT math score jumped more than ten points. The average verbal score, however, actually dropped a few points—and appears to be headed toward further decline. Corroborating this evidence is a report from the United States Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics. According to this agency’s study, the percentage of twelfth graders whose writing ability was “at or above the basic level” of performance dropped from 78 to 74 percent between 1998 and 2002 (Persky, Daane, and Jin 21).

Based on the preceding statistics, parents and educators are right about the decline in youth literacy. And the trend is occurring while IM usage is on the rise. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 54 percent of American youths aged twelve to seventeen have used IM (qtd. in Lenhart and Lewis 20). This figure translates to a pool of some thirteen million young instant messagers. Of this group, Pew reports, half send instant messages every time they go online. American youths apparently spend, at a minimum, nearly three million hours per day on IM. What’s more they appear to be using a new vocabulary.

To establish the existence of an IM language, I analyzed 11,341 lines of text from IM conversations between U.S. residents aged twelve to seventeen. Young messagers voluntarily sent me chat logs. I went through all of the logs, recording the number of times IM language was used in place of conventional English. During the course of my study, I identified four types of IM language: phonetic replacements, acronyms, abbreviations, and inanities. An example of phonetic replacement is using ur for you are. Another popular type of IM language is the acronym; a common one is lol, for laughing out loud. Abbreviations are also common in IM, but I discovered that typical abbreviations, such as etc., are not new to the English language. Finally “inanities” include completely new expressions and nonsensical variations of other words.

In the chat transcripts that I analyzed, the best display of typical IM lingo came from conversations between two thirteen-year-old Texan girls, who are avid IM users. Figure 2 graphs how often they used certain phonetic replacements and abbreviations. The y-axis plots frequency

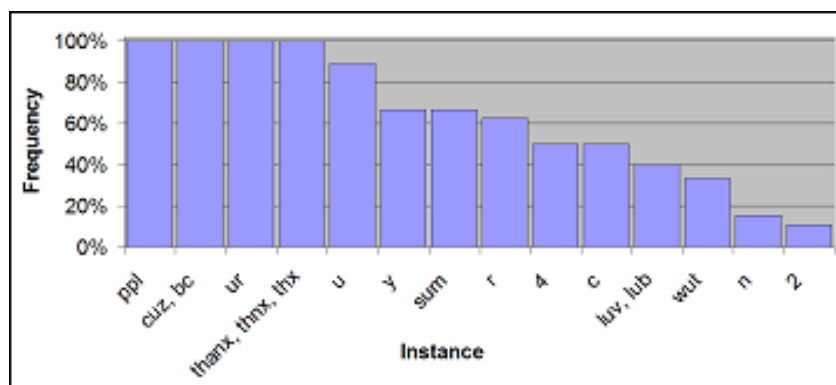


Fig. 2. Usage of phonetic replacements and abbreviations in IM.

of replacement, comparing the number of times a word or phrase is used in IM language with the total number of times that it is communicated. The x-axis lists specific IM words and phrases.

My research shows that the Texan girls use the first ten phonetic replacements or abbreviations at least 50 percent of the time in their normal IM writing. For example, every time one of them wrote see, there was a parallel time when c was used in its place. It appears that the popular IM culture contains at least some elements of its own language. Much of this language is new: no formal dictionary yet identifies the most common IM words and phrases.

While messaging is certainly widespread and does seem to have its own vocabulary, these two factors alone do not mean it has a damaging influence on youth literacy. However, some people claim that the new technology is a threat to the English language:

“Abbreviations commonly used in online instant messages are creeping into formal essays that students write for credit,” said Debbie Frost, who teaches language arts and social studies to sixth-graders. . . . “You would be shocked at the writing I see. It’s pretty scary. I don’t get cohesive thoughts, I don’t get

sentences, they don't capitalize, and they have a lot of misspellings and bad grammar," she said. "With all those glaring mistakes, it's hard to see the content." ("Young Messengers" par. 2)

Echoing Frost's concerns is Melanie Weaver, a professor at Alvernia College, who taught a tenth-grade English class as part of an internship. In an interview with the New York Times, she says that students try to "make a point in a paper" with a "smiley face in the end [:])" and "present an opposite view" with "a frown [:(]" (Lee, par. 11).

The critics of instant messaging are numerous. Scholars of metalinguistics, on the other hand, support the claim that IM is not damaging to those who use it. One of the most prominent components of IM language is phonetic replacement, in which a word such as everyone becomes every1. This type of wordplay has a special importance in the development of an advanced literacy. According to David Crystal, an internationally recognized scholar of linguistics, as young children learn how words string together to express ideas, they go through many phases of language play. The rhymes and nonsensical chants of preschoolers are vital to their learning language, and a healthy appetite for such wordplay leads to a better command of language later in life (182).

Crystal uses metalinguistics to refer to the ability to "step back" and analyze how language works. "If we are good at stepping back," he says, "at thinking in a more abstract way about what we hear and what we say, then we are more likely to be good at acquiring those skills which depend on just such a stepping back in order to be successful—and this means, chiefly, reading and writing. . . . [T]he greater our ability to play with language, . . . the more advanced will be our command of language as a whole" (181).

Metalinguistics also involves our ability to write in a variety of distinct styles and tones. Many critics assume that either IM or academic literacy will eventually win out and that the two

modes cannot exist side by side. However, human beings ordinarily develop a large range of language abilities, from the formal to the relaxed and from the mainstream to the subcultural. Mark Twain, for example, had an understanding of local speech that he employed when writing dialogue for Huckleberry Finn. Yet few people would argue that Twain's knowledge of this form of English had a negative impact on his ability to write in standard English.

Of course, just as Mark Twain used dialects carefully in dialogue, writers must pay careful attention to the kind of language they use in any setting. The anonymous owner of the language Web site The Discouraging Word backs up this idea:

What is necessary, we feel, is that students learn how to shift between different styles of writing—that, in other words, the abbreviations and shortcuts of IM should be used online . . . but that they should not be used in an essay submitted to a teacher. . . . IM might even be considered . . . a different way of reading and writing, one that requires specific and unique skills shared by certain communities.

The analytical ability necessary for writers to choose an appropriate tone and style in their writing is metalinguistic in nature because it involves the comparison of language systems. Thus, young people who possess both IM and traditional skills stand to be better off than their peers who have been trained only in traditional or conventional systems. Far from being hurt by their online pastime, instant messagers can be aided in standard writing by their experience with IM language.

Youth literacy does seem to be declining. But the possibility of instant messaging causing the decline seems unlikely when there is evidence of other possible causes. According to the College Board, which collects data on several questions from its test takers, enrollment in English composition and grammar classes has decreased in the last decade by 14 percent

(Carnahan and Coletti 11). Simply put, schools in the United States are not teaching English as much as they used to. Rather than blaming IM alone for the decline in literacy and test scores, we must also look toward our schools' lack of focus on the teaching of standard English skills.

I found that the use of instant messaging does not threaten the development or maintenance of formal language skills among American youths aged twelve to seventeen. Diverse language skills tend to increase a person's metalinguistic awareness and, thereby, his or her ability to use language effectively to achieve a desired purpose in a particular situation. The current decline in youth literacy is not due to the rise of instant messaging; rather, fewer young students seem to be receiving an adequate education in the use of conventional English. Unfortunately, it may always be fashionable to blame new tools for old problems, but in the case of instant messaging, that blame is not warranted. Although IM may expose literacy problems, it does not create them.

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