

Young people: how does texting affect their use of language?



R. McMahon/Corbis

The joy of **txt**

Bung Abk! Ist die jüngere Generation vor lauter SMS-Schreiben dabei, ihr Sprachgefühl zu verlieren und ihre Ausdrucksweise zu verhunzen? Der Sprachwissenschaftler David Crystal hat diese Vorwürfe untersucht. MIKE PILEWSKI führte ein exklusives Interview mit ihm. [easy](#) [www](#)

Language has always been changing and will continue to change — and David Crystal is there to document it. The honorary professor of linguistics at the University of Wales, Bangor, wrote the *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*. More recently, as the author of *Language and the Internet*, Crystal has kept his eye on the way new technology is affecting our use of language.

His latest subject is **texting**, or text messaging. In *txtng: the gr8 db8*, Crystal looks at the strange and wonderful possibilities that telephone **keypads** offer, from textonyms (words produced by pressing the same **sequence** of keys) to textisms (words or **abbreviations** invented for use in the medium). The book's 240 pages also include a glossary of text-message abbreviations in 11 languages. Crystal's central theme, though, is how and why people are writing text messages and what effect this might be having on language. *Spotlight* asked him what he's discovered.

What is the "great debate" about texting?

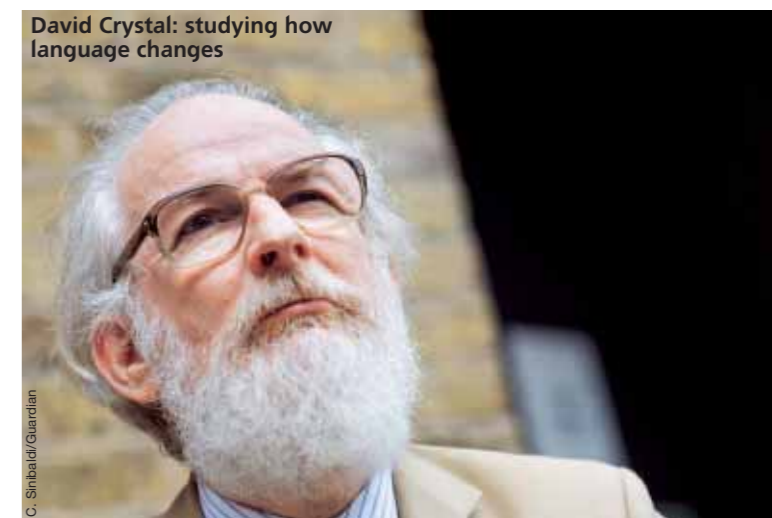
"Debate" is probably the wrong word for it, because a debate is usually two sides arguing about a particular point where there's some basis in fact. Here we have a situation where the debate is based entirely on an **urban myth** that started soon after texting arrived.

Now, texting is less than ten years old. Suddenly this phenomenon arrived, and it **generated** an **extraordinary** reaction — a moral panic, almost — about the nature of this **beast**. In Britain, a media piece appeared around 2003, describing an essay **supposedly** written by a schoolchild entirely in abbreviations of the text-messaging kind. She passed it to her teacher, who couldn't understand a word of it.

The report then said that this shows how modern children are **incapable** of using standard English, how it's a breakdown in the educational system, how children will grow up not knowing how to spell, how they will fail their examinations. They will become adults who will not know how to use the language, and **eventually** the English language and other languages will **go down the drain**, and it'll be an absolute disaster. Well, nobody ever questioned

abbreviation [əˌbrɪːvi'eɪʃən]	Abkürzung
affect sth. [ə'fekt]	etw. beeinflussen
beast [biːst]	Kreatur; hier: Ding
eventually [ɪ'ventʃuəli]	schließlich
extraordinary [ɪk'strɔːdnəri]	außergewöhnlich
generate sth. ['dʒenəreɪt]	etw. auslösen/erzeugen
go down the drain [gəʊˌdaʊn ðə 'dreɪn] <i>ifml.</i>	vor die Hunde gehen
hoax [həʊks]	Täuschung
incapable: be ~ of doing sth. [ɪn'keɪpəbəl]	unfähig sein, etw. zu tun
keypad ['ki:pæd]	Tastatur
literacy ['lɪtərəsi]	Lese- und Schreibfähigkeit
novel ['nɒvəl]	neu(artig)
sequence ['si:kwəns]	Abfolge
so far ['səʊ fɑː]	bis zu einem gewissen Punkt
supposedly [sə'pəʊzɪdli]	angeblich
texting ['tekstɪŋ] UK	SMS-Nachrichten schreiben
urban myth [ˌɜːbən 'mɪθ]	Großstadtlegende; hier: moderne Legende

David Crystal: studying how language changes



C. Simhael/Guardian

“People like to believe that text messaging will destroy language”

that essay, which turned out to be a complete **hoax**. Nobody has ever found that essay or found the teacher or anything. It was a myth.

But that's what people believe, and if you asked all your readers of *Spotlight* or any newspaper, "Do you believe this?" people would say, "Yes, I believe this. I believe that text messaging is full of abbreviations and that it's a disaster for **literacy**." Now, I wrote my book because I never believed that. You can demonstrate quite clearly that all those things are wrong.

How do you do this?

First of all, text messaging is not full of abbreviations. Ninety per cent of the words are in perfectly standard English, standard German, standard whatever. That's because, when you're sending messages, you want to understand each other, and abbreviations will only take you **so far** in that direction.

Second, the abbreviations that are used are not **novel**. They're not invented by the children. Most of the abbreviations that are used in text messaging, like "c u l8r" (for "see you later"), have been around for hundreds of years, and there's nothing new about them at all. People have always abbreviated in English and in German. You can find abbreviations going back centuries, right to the beginnings of English in Anglo-Saxon times.

Third, most of the text messages in the world are not written by children, but by adults and by institutions:



Mauritius