

I h8 txt msgs: How texting is wrecking our language

By JOHN HUMPHRYS

A good dictionary is a fine thing - I yield to no man in my love for one. If I stretch out my right arm as I type, I can pluck from my shelves the two volumes of the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary.

They are as close to my heart as they are to my desk because they are so much more than a useful tool.

Leafing through a good dictionary in search of a single word is a small voyage of discovery - infinitely more satisfying than looking something up on the internet.

It's partly the physical sensation - the feel and smell of good paper - and partly the minor triumph of finding the word you seek, but it's rare to open a dictionary without being diverted somewhere else.

The eye falls on a word you've never seen before or one whose meaning you have always wanted to check, and you close the dictionary just a little bit richer for the experience.

But my lifetime love affair with the OED is at risk. The sixth edition has just been published and - I feel a small shudder as I write these words - it has fallen victim to fashion.

It has removed the hyphen from no fewer than 16,000 words.

So in future we are required to spell pigeon-hole, for instance, as pigeonhole and leap-frog as leapfrog. In other cases we have two words instead of one. Pot-belly shall henceforth be pot belly.

You may very well say: so what? Indeed, you may well have functioned perfectly well until now spelling leapfrog without a hyphen.

The spell-check (sorry: spellcheck) on my computer is happy with both. But that's not why I feel betrayed by my precious OED.

It's because of the reason for this change. It has happened because we are changing the way we communicate with each other, which means, says the OED editor Angus Stevenson, that we no longer have time to reach for the hyphen key.

Have you ever heard anything quite so daft? No time to make one tiny key-stroke (sorry: key stroke).

Has it really come to this? Are our lives really so pressured, every minute occupied in so many vital tasks, every second accounted for, that we cannot afford the millisecond (no hyphen) it takes to tap that key?

Obviously not. No, there's another reason - and it's far more sinister and deeply troubling.

It is the relentless onward march of the texters, the SMS (Short Message Service) vandals who are doing to our language what Genghis Khan did to his neighbours eight hundred years ago.

They are destroying it: pillaging our punctuation; savaging our sentences; raping our vocabulary. And they must be stopped.

This, I grant you, is a tall order. The texters have many more arrows in their quiver than we who defend the old way.

Ridicule is one of them. "What! You don't text? What century are you living in then, granddad? Need me to sharpen your quill pen for you?"

You know the sort of thing; those of us who have survived for years without a mobile phone have to put up with it all the time. My old friend Amanda Platell, who graces these pages on Saturdays, has an answerphone message that says the caller may leave a message but she'd *prefer* a text. One feels so inadequate.

(Or should that have been *ansafone*? Of course it should. There are fewer letters in that hideous word and think how much time I could have saved typing it.)

The texters also have economy on their side. It costs almost nothing to send a text message compared with a voice message. That's perfectly true. I must also concede that some voice messages can be profoundly irritating.

My own outgoing message asks callers to be very brief - ideally just name and number - but that doesn't stop some callers burbling on for ten minutes and always, always ending by saying: "Ooh - sorry I went on so long!"

But can that be any more irritating than those absurd little smiley faces with which texters litter their messages? It is 25 years since the emoticon (that's the posh word) was born.

It started with the smiley face and the gloomy face and now there are 16 pages of them in the texters' A-Z.

It has now reached the stage where my computer will not allow me to type the colon, dash and bracket without automatically turning it into a picture of a smiling face. Aargh!

Even worse are the grotesque abbreviations. It is interesting, in a masochistic sort of way, to look at how text language has changed over the years.

It began with some fairly obvious and relatively inoffensive abbreviations: 'tks' for 'thanks'; 'u' for 'you'; 4 for 'for'.

But as it has developed its users have sought out increasingly obscure ways of expressing themselves which, when you think about it, entirely defeats the purpose.

If the recipient of the message has to spend ten minutes trying to translate it, those precious minutes are being wasted. And isn't the whole point to 'save' time?

Then there's the problem of ambiguity. With my vast knowledge of text language I had assumed LOL meant 'lots of love', but now I discover it means 'laugh out loud'. Or at least it did the last time I asked.

But how would you know? Instead of aiding communication it can be a barrier. I can work out BTW (by the way) but I was baffled by IMHO U R GR8. It means: "In my humble opinion you are great." But, once again, how would you know?

Let me anticipate the reaction to this modest little rant against the text revolution and the OED for being influenced by it. Its defenders will say language changes.

It is constantly evolving and anyone who tries to get in the way is a fuddy-duddy who deserves to be run down.

I agree. One of the joys of the English language and one of the reasons it has been so successful in spreading across the globe is that it is infinitely adaptable.

If we see an Americanism we like, we snaffle it - and so we should. But texting and 'netspeak' are effectively different languages.

The danger - for young people especially - is that they will come to dominate. Our written language may end up as a series of ridiculous emoticons and everchanging abbreviations.

It is too late to save the hand-written letter. E-mailing has seen to that and I must confess that I would find it difficult to live without it. That does not mean I like it.

I resent the fact that I spend so much of my working day (and, even more regrettably, weekends) checking for e-mails - most of which are junk.

I am also cross with myself for the way I have adapted my own style. In the early days I treated e-mails as though they were letters. I tried to construct proper, grammatical sentences and used punctuation that would have brought a smile to the lips of that guardian of our language, Lynne Truss.

Now I find myself slipping into sloppy habits, abandoning capital letters and using rows of dots.

But at least I have not succumbed to 'text-speak' and I wish the OED had not hoisted the white flag either. I recall a piece of doggerel which sums up my fears nicely: *Mary had a mobile*.

She texted day and night. But when it came to her exams She'd forgotten how to write.

To the editor of the OED I will simply say: For many years you've been GR8. Don't spoil it now. Tks.

- In what ways is the reader likely to be convinced by this article?