A Level English Language

Transition Pack

➲ INSTRUCTIONS

In this pack, you'll find a range of resources and activities designed to help prepare you for the first few weeks of the A level English Language course. You need to bring your completed workpack with you to your first English Language lesson. ALL TASKS MUST BE COMPLETED.

Task 1: A Day in the Language Life

In your pack, you'll find an article from *eMagazine* titled 'Here's me on a Wednesday' by Michael Rosen. In it, he outlines the ways in which he uses language in a typical day.

After reading the article, write an account of a typical day in your own life in which you focus on the various ways in which *you* use language. You should write around 500 words. Remember the level of detail Rosen has written in, and ensure you include examples of your language to demonstrate how you use it.

Task 2: Articles on Text Messaging

This pack includes two articles on text messaging: 'I h8 txt msgs' by John Humphrys, taken from *The Daily Mail* newspaper, and '2b or not 2b?' by David Crystal, takenfrom *The Guardian*. When you start your studies after the summer, we will be considering other technological and social influences on language so these articles provide a good introduction to contextual and historical changes.

You should read both articles carefully, **highlighting** the key points, before doing the following:

- Write a 10 bullet-point summary of each article, considering what each writer thinks of text messaging, and how they use language to communicate their contrasting opinions. Don't forget to use quotations to back up your assertions.

- Write an essay expressing your views in response to the question: **Text Language: Laziness or Evolution**?

- You should make reference to the arguments put forward by Humphrys and Crystal. Use quotations from the articles and explain what they mean (your bullet point summary should be useful here)

- **You should aim to write about 750 words (a bit more if needed, but no less)**

- **There should be an introductory paragraph, a main argument and a conclusion**

- **Your opinion needs to be clear – we are interested in YOUR ideas. What do you think of John Humphrys/David Crystal's point of view?**

- **This should be word processed. Font size 12. Your name in the Header and Page numbers in the Footer.**

- **Proofread thoroughly – errors will not be impressive or taken lightly at this level.**

Don't forget to bring your completed workpack (including the essay) to your *first* English Language lesson.

If you have any questions, or need help, don't hesitate to contact Miss Bent by email.

zbent@wigstonmat.org

P.S Why not follow our English Blog, where you'll find a range of resources, including this pack. **https://englishatwmat.wordpress.com**

Here's me on a Wednesday...

A day in the (language) life of Michael Rosen.

Michael Rosen takes us on a journey through the typical forms of language he uses and experiences on a daily basis.

People often talk about 'the language' or 'the English language' as if it's like a statue, a fixed, single lump of a thing that you can walk round and examine. A quick look at how you or I talk and write reminds us that language isn't like this at all. I've been thinking about how I use language in any given day, or even hour, and it reminds me of just how different and diverse my language activities are across time.

Here's me on a Wednesday.

The cab
I get up and creep about the house really early not talking to anyone because I have to get a cab. This means checking what is known in the entertainment business as a 'call sheet'. This is like a timetable, with people's telephone numbers on it. It also has the code I have to use to get my tickets out of a machine on Paddington station. So this is a mix of names, numbers, times and codes. There's nothing there to do with emotions and feelings, nothing to do with ideas. Every letter and number has to be exactly right or I will turn up at the wrong place or at the wrong time, or press the wrong buttons on a machine. If any of that happens, the work of a whole day will go wrong and the radio programme I'm supposed to make, won't get made.

The cab arrives and very soon I'm having a conversation with the cabby. He's a Greek Cypriot about the same age as me (that's nearly 60), and we're soon talking about our adult sons. He tells me a story about how his son moved out but he, the cabby, comes home one night and his wife is ironing some shirts. He asks whose shirts they are and she says they belong to their son. He tells me he couldn't believe it. 'He's nearly thirty, he's moved out and she's ironing his shirts!' He tells me he rang his son, got him over, bundled the shirts into a suitcase and told him to get out. I tell a story about my son living in what used to be my office at the end of our garden. I notice that we're using the same patterns of speech. Every story we tell each other seems to be about proving things: that our sons are having a really cushy time and we're suckers to be helping them. Our expressions are very similar, same little asides, like 'I don't believe it!' and 'phah!' This is a conversation that seems to be about confirming our own separate world pictures. It's affirming our roles as male guardians and providers but there is an underlying anxiety. Have we been over-indulgent? Our stories are ways of exploring this without actually saying that that's what we're doing.

The station
Then I get to Paddington, we tell each other to have a good day with a kind of ironic laugh, as if it's not possible to have a good day. I tap in the code, get my tickets, and read the tickets and signs very closely to make sure I get on the right train. Back with that detailed accurate read language again.

The train
On the train, I do the crossword and check over my script. I try to do what's known as a cryptic crossword. This is, in a way, similar to the accurate language of timetables, except that everything is in a code that I have to unlock. This is language as a game. Here's a clue: 'Day empty after born in want (5)'. I figure out that the whole word means something to do with 'want'; 'day empty' is a coded way of saying that I have to take the 'a' out of 'day' leaving me 'd,y'; as it says 'after' this means it comes at the end of the word leaving

me three letters to mean 'born'. When a woman changes her name if she gets married, people write, 'MrsJones, née Smith', 'née' means 'born' in French. Put 'née' before 'dy' and you have 'needy' which means something to do with 'want'. An utterly useless game, that keeps me amused for an hour or so. It involvesworking out synonyms, playing around with letters, reading off hints and double meanings. It is 'metalinguistic' – in other words it involves a lot of language about language, just as this article does.

The script
Then I look at the script I'll be reading today. This is full of jargon and in-group language. Things like, 'WOM6', meaning Word of Mouth (that's the programme I present, and it's the sixth one in a series of 8). It talks of 'items' – which to listeners means five or six conversations on a topic. It says 'clip' meaning a recording of music or speech that will come before or after I've said something. It says, 'IN', 'OUT', and 'DUR'. But there's nothing next to these words. 'IN' will be the person's opening words, 'OUT' will be their last words and 'DUR' is how long the whole clip will last. It stands for 'Duration'. Lower down it says, 'WOMBAC UPDATE'. This means that we're going to have an 'item' on our competition which is about inventing your own acronyms and the competition is called Word Of Mouth Brilliant Acronyms Competition. So, here is language in highly functional mode, working with almost its own dialect to fit the job I do. Most jobs are like this.

I start to scribble all over the bits of paper, coming up with ideas for me to say. I'm revising, re-jigging and editing. There are also some questions that I'm going to be asking a famous etymologist (someone who knows about the origins of words): why we say envy is green, cowardice is yellow, unhappiness is blue. I start thinking about the questions. I'm using language to plan.

Announcements
Then, it's out of the train at Bristol (after listening to the various announcements about 'tea, coffee, light refreshments and snacks, apologies for the late arrival of this train'). I've had a think about announcements and why the people saying them often develop a strange sing-song way of delivering them, and why the job descriptions of the people have changed: 'This is your conductor speaking...'; 'My name's Doreen and I'm your buffet supervisor for today...'. I think about how often in a week people ask me how I describe my job and I have to ask people I'm interviewing 'how they would like to be described.' It seems to be very important this matter of naming and defining who we are.

The team
Once I arrive at Bristol and meet up with the team of people working on Word of Mouth, we begin with a bit of mild joshing. Stuff about football, weather, cabs, TV last night. It's all a general feely-feely time, reminding each other that we have common territory and that we have to work together for the next eight hours, hopefully without tearing each other to pieces. I say that I've listened to a CD that one of the researchers has made and I liked it. (I did.) I'm 'stroking' him, as one sociologist put it. He says thanks andthat 'strokes' me back.

I've got an interview to do with a reviewer. It's about the language he uses when he's writing reviews in the Times Literary Supplement. I ask one of the researchers if she's got some questions for me to ask. She says that they're the same as the ones I asked the other reviewer. I have forgotten to bring them with me. I apologise. She says it's OK. I sense that they think I'm a bit of a klutz that (a) I still need them to give me questions – why can't he work out his own questions?! and (b) I've forgotten to bring the ones they've already given me twice! I think about why I need questions. It isn't because I can't work out questions for myself, but making a programme means that the questions have to fit into the overall pattern of the programme. Asking questions is not like a real conversation. They are a means to an end: to get an 'item'

right. Producers and researchers have a better sense of this end, the item, than me. I relegate myself to being a servant to the system. It's better that way.

The studio
I get into the studio and there's a lot of technical stuff about 'lines to London', 'faders', 'howl round', 'echo','compression', 'popping' and then we get through to the man I'm interviewing. Without really thinking about it, I do some feely-feely stuff with him about how he is, what he's been doing, how he got into the studio. I tell him that I read the journal that he writes for (true), and ask him about someone who writes
ratty, fuddy-duddy articles. He explains to me that it's really a sort of joke. He isn't really like that. I say thatI didn't realise that. All this has achieved a couple of things: we've worked out if he sounds OK for the microphones, the studio manager has 'balanced' us, and the interviewee has got into his stride. He's on home ground and he's just proved that he knows something that I don't. Everyone feels good. More stroking.

The interview
In the interview, I have to remember to wait for him to finish speaking (which we don't do in real life) because listeners find it very hard to listen to two people speaking at the same time. I have to remember to stick to the questions and not go off on tangents because this makes life hard for the producer who is going to 'cut' the interview later. And I have to remember not to 'upstage' the interviewee. The programme is not about me, it's about language and people want to listen to what the experts and contributors have to say. I'm monitoring my use of language. I'm trying to be informal, encouraging. I'm also thinking of ways that will link my next question into what he's saying so that it won't simply sound like question, answer, question, answer. In other words, I'm 'producing' myself even as we're talking.

The script
Then, it's off to work on the script. More editing. A bit of researching. I have to look up a quote. Did Shakespeare really write 'green-eyed monster'? I google it. I've internalised a whole set of procedures that enable me to do this in several seconds: things like interpreting which keys to press, which menus and boxes to click on, how to use shortcuts, how to use cut and paste and the like. In other words I've developed a language-use where I don't have to think about the 'how' any more than I have to think about where to put my tongue when I say the letter 't'.

In the afternoon, I have to perform the script. This involves turning written language into a kind of spoken language. But it isn't speech – more like a speech. Prepared spoken language. If it's too formal, listeners complain. If it's too informal, they complain. I knock out some of the long sentences full of 'which' and 'who' and make them shorter beginning with 'it' and 'she'. I start to read. The producer tells me that it's coming out too sing-song. I go back, re-do it, listening to myself as I do. I'm altering the cadences of what I'm saying, as if I'm changing the tune. I put in little asides and hmmm's to suggest that I'm thinking about what I'm saying, as I'm saying it.

It all goes fine. A lot of stroking goes on. Lots of 'great', 'see you soon', 'it's been good', 'nice programme' – that sort of thing. We know we do it, but we all need it. After all, doing radio is strange. It's like talking a lot to no-one. You talk into a silence. There are none of the usual feedbacks and face-to-face help that we give each other in real life. So we do it in the studio instead.

The train (again)
On the train back, I do some translating from German. I only speak a bit of German. I use a dictionary. I'm making decisions about whether 'schlafen bei dir' means 'sleep with you' meaning 'have sex' without saying

it, or, literally 'sleep alongside you', or, as the dictionary says, 'spend the night at your house'. Languages match up but don't match up. If I say, 'spend the night with you', I lose the sense of sleeping, but if I say, 'sleep' it will sound like sex. What did the German author intend? A bit of both. How do I convey that? I'm trying to create a sense of something here. Using words to paint pictures, to denote and connote, to indicate and suggest, to reveal and invoke...I drift off wondering if dreams have words, images or both...

Michael Rosen

This article first appeared in emagazine 30.

I h8 txt msgs: How texting is wrecking our language

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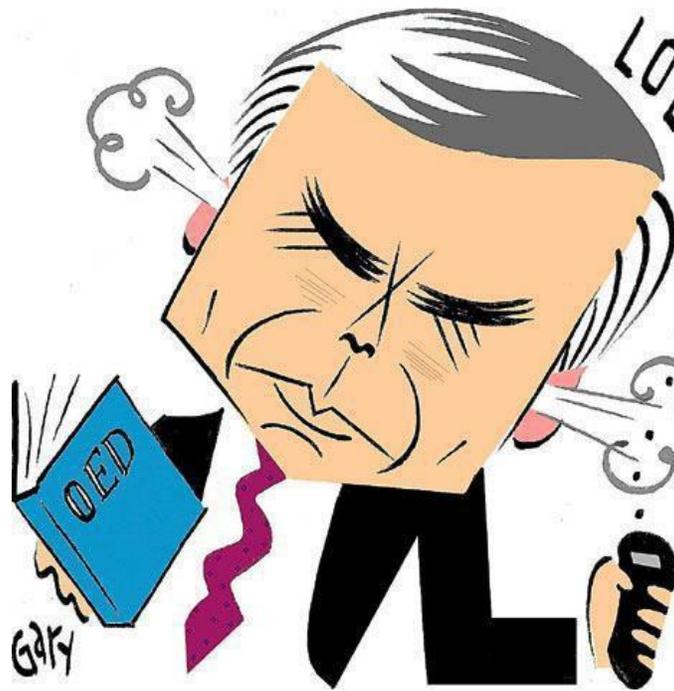
A good dictionary is a fine thing - I yield to no man in my love for one. If I stretch out my right arm as I type, I can pluck from my shelves the two volumes of the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary.

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 onthe 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.

As the Oxford English dictionary ditches the hyphen, John Humphrys explains why texting is wrecking our language

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 asmall 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 hideousword 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 ever changing 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.

2b or not 2b?

Despite doom-laden prophecies, texting has not been the disaster for language many feared, argues linguistics professor David Crystal. On the contrary, it improves writing and spelling
David Crystal

Last year, in a newspaper article headed "I h8 txt msgs: How texting is wrecking our language", John Humphrys argued that texters are "vandals who are doing to our language what Genghis Khan did to his neighbours 800 years ago. They are destroying it: pillaging our punctuation; savaging our sentences; raping our vocabulary. And they must be stopped."

As a new variety of language, texting has been condemned as "textese", "slanguage", a "digital virus". According to John Sutherland of University College London, writing in this paper in 2002, it is "bleak, bald, sad shorthand. Drab shrinktalk ... Linguistically it's all pig's ear ... it masks dyslexia, poor spelling and mental laziness. Texting is penmanship for illiterates."

Ever since the arrival of printing - thought to be the invention of the devil because it would put false opinions into people's minds - people have been arguing that new technology would have disastrous consequences for language. Scares accompanied the introduction of the telegraph, telephone, and broadcasting. But has there ever been a linguistic phenomenon that has aroused such curiosity, suspicion, fear, confusion, antagonism, fascination, excitement and enthusiasm all at once as texting? And in such a short space of time. Less than a decade ago, hardly anyone had heard of it.

The idea of a point-to-point short message service (or SMS) began to be discussed as part of the development of the Global System for Mobile Communications network in the mid-1980s, but it wasn't until the early 90s that phone companies started to develop its commercial possibilities. Text communicated by pagers were replaced by text messages, at first only 20 characters in length. It took five years or more before numbers of users started to build up. The average number of texts per GSM customer in 1995 was 0.4 per month; by the end of 2000 it was still only 35.

The slow start, it seems, was because the companies had trouble working out reliable ways of charging for the new service. But once procedures were in place, texting rocketed. In the UK, in 2001, 12.2bn text messages were sent. This had doubled by 2004, and was forecast to be 45bn in 2007. On Christmas Day alone in 2006, over 205m texts went out. World figures went from 17bn in 2000 to 250bn in 2001. They passed a trillion in 2005. Text messaging generated around $70bn in 2005. That's more than three times as much as all Hollywood box office returns that year.

People think that the written language seen on mobile phone screens is new and alien, but all the popular beliefs about texting are wrong. Its graphic distinctiveness is not a new phenomenon, nor is its use restricted to the young. There is increasing evidence that it helps rather than hinders literacy. And only a very tiny part of it uses a distinctive orthography. A trillion text messages might seem a lot, but when we set these alongside the multi-trillion instances of standard orthography in everyday life, they appear as no more than a few ripples on the surface of the sea of language. Texting has added a new dimension to language use, but its long-term impact is negligible. It is not a disaster.

Although many texters enjoy breaking linguistic rules, they also know they need to be understood. There is no point in paying to send a message if it breaks so many rules that it ceases to be intelligible. When messages are longer, containing more information, the amount of standard orthography increases. Many texters alter just the grammatical words (such as "you" and "be"). As older and more conservative language users have begun to text, an even more standardised style has appeared. Some texters refuse to depart at all from traditional orthography. And conventional spelling and punctuation is the norm when institutions send out information messages, as in this university text to students: "Weather Alert! No classes today due to snow storm", or in the texts which radio listeners are invited to send in to programmes. These institutional messages now form the majority of texts in

cyberspace - and several organisations forbid the use of abbreviations, knowing that many readers will not understand them. Bad textiquette.

media hysteria about the novelty (and thus the dangers) of text messaging was misplaced. In one American study, less than 20% of the text messages looked at showed abbreviated forms of any kind - about three per message. And in a Norwegian study, the proportion was even lower, with just 6% using abbreviations. In my own text collection, the figure is about 10%.

People seem to have swallowed whole the stories that youngsters use nothing else but abbreviations when they text, such as the reports in 2003 that a teenager had written an essay so full of textspeak that her teacher was unable to understand it. An extract was posted online, and quoted incessantly, but as no one was ever able to track down the entire essay, it was probably a hoax.

There are several distinctive features of the way texts are written that combine to give the impression of novelty, but none of them is, in fact, linguistically novel. Many of them were being used in chatroom interactions that predated the arrival of mobile phones. Some can be found in pre-computer informal writing, dating back a hundred years or more.

The most noticeable feature is the use of single letters, numerals, and symbols to represent words or parts of words, as with b "be" and 2 "to". They are called rebuses, and they go back centuries. Adults who condemn a "c u" in a young person's texting have forgotten that they once did the same thing themselves (though not on a mobile phone). In countless Christmas annuals, they solved puzzles like this one:

YY U R YY U B I C U R YY 4 ME

("Too wise you are . . .")

Similarly, the use of initial letters for whole words (n for "no", gf for "girlfriend", cmb "call me back") is not at all new. People have been initialising common phrases for ages. IOU is known from 1618. There is no difference, apart from the medium of communication, between a modern kid's "lol" ("laughing out loud") and an earlier generation's "Swalk" ("sealed with a loving kiss").

In texts we find such forms as msg ("message") and xlnt ("excellent"). Almst any wrd cn be abbrvted in ths wy - though there is no consistency between texters. But this isn't new either. Eric Partridge published his Dictionary of Abbreviations in 1942. It contained dozens of SMS-looking examples, such as agn "again", mth "month", and gd "good" - 50 years before texting was born.

English has had abbreviated words ever since it began to be written down. Words such as exam, vet, fridge, cox and bus are so familiar that they have effectively become new words. When some of these abbreviated forms first came into use, they also attracted criticism. In 1711, for example, Joseph Addison complained about the way words were being "miserably curtailed" - he mentioned pos (itive) and incog (nito). And Jonathan Swift thought that abbreviating words was a "barbarous custom".

What novelty there is in texting lies chiefly in the way it takes further some of the processes used in the past. Some of its juxtapositions create forms which have little precedent, apart from in puzzles. All conceivable types of feature can be juxtaposed - sequences of shortened and full words (hldmecls "hold me close"), logograms and shortened words (2bctnd "to be continued"), logograms and nonstandard spellings (cu2nite) and so on. There are no less than four processes combined in iowan2bwu "I only want to be with you" - full word + an initialism + a shortened word + two logograms + an initialism + a logogram. And some messages contain unusual processes: in iohis4u "I only have eyes for you", we see the addition of a plural ending to a logogram. One characteristic runs through all these examples: the letters, symbols and words are run together, without spaces. This is certainly unusual in the history of special writing systems. But few texts string together long sequences of puzzling graphic units.

There are also individual differences in texting, as in any other linguistic domain. In 2002, Stuart Campbell was found guilty of the murder of his 15-year-old niece after his text message alibi was shown to be a forgery. He had claimed that certain texts sent by the girl showed he was innocent. But a detailed comparison of the vocabulary and other stylistic features of his own text messages and those of his niece showed that he had written the messages himself. The forensic possibilities have been further explored by a team at the University of Leicester. The fact that texting is a relatively unstandardised mode of communication, prone to idiosyncrasy, turns out to be an advantage in such a context, as authorship differences are likely to be more easily detectable than in writing using standard English.

Texters use deviant spellings - and they know they are deviant. But they are by no means the first to use such nonstandard forms as cos "because", wot "what", or gissa "give us a". Several of these are so much part of English literary tradition that they have been given entries in the Oxford English Dictionary. "Cos" is there from 1828 and "wot" from 1829. Many can be found in literary dialect representations, such as by Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, Walter Scott, DH Lawrence, or Alan Bleasdale ("Gissa job!").

Sending a message on a mobile phone is not the most natural of ways to communicate. The keypad isn't linguistically sensible. No one took letter-frequency considerations into account when designing it. For example, key 7 on my mobile contains four symbols, pqrs. It takes four key-presses to access the letter s, and yet s is one of the most frequently occurring letters in English. It is twice as easy to input q, which is one of the least frequently occurring letters. It should be the other way round. So any strategy that reduces the time and awkwardness of inputting graphic symbols is bound to be attractive.

Abbreviations were used as a natural, intuitive response to a technological problem. And they appeared in next to no time. Texters simply transferred (and then embellished) what they had encountered in other settings. We have all left notes in which we have replaced an and by an &, a three by a 3, and so on. Anglo-Saxon scribes used abbreviations of this kind.

But the need to save time and energy is by no means the whole story of texting. When we look at some texts, they are linguistically quite complex. There are an extraordinary number of ways in which people play with language - creating riddles, solving crosswords, playing Scrabble, inventing new words. Professional writers do the same - providing catchy copy for advertising slogans, thinking up puns in newspaper headlines, and writing poems, novels and plays. Children quickly learn that one of the most enjoyable things you can do with language is to play with its sounds, words, grammar - and spelling.

The drive to be playful is there when we text, and it is hugely powerful. Within two or three years of the arrival of texting, it developed a ludic dimension. In short, it's fun.

To celebrate World Poetry day in 2007, T-Mobile tried to find the UK's first "Txt laureate" in a competition for the best romantic poem in SMS. They had 200 entrants, and as with previous competitions the entries were a mixture of unabbreviated and abbreviated texts.

The winner, Ben Ziman-Bright, wrote conventionally:

The wet rustle of rain

can dampen today. Your text

buoys me above oil-rainbow puddles

like a paper boat, so that even

soaked to the skin

I am grinning.

The runner-up did not:

O hart tht sorz

My luv adorz

He mAks me liv

He mAks me giv

Myslf 2 him

As my luv porz

(The author of the latter was, incidentally, in her late 60s.)

The length constraint in text-poetry fosters economy of expression in much the same way as other tightly constrained forms of poetry do, such as the haiku or the Welsh englyn. To say a poem must be written within 160 characters at first seems just as pointless as to say that a poem must be written in three lines of five, seven, and five syllables. But put such a discipline into the hands of a master, and the result can be poetic magic. Of course, SMS poetry has some way to go before it can match the haiku tradition; but then, haikus have had a head-start of several hundred years.

There is something about the genre which has no parallel elsewhere. This is nothing to do with the use of texting abbreviations. It is more to do with the way the short lines have an individual force. Reading a text poem, wrote Peter Sansom, who co-judged a Guardian competition in 2002, is "an urgent business ... with a text poem you stay focused as it were in the now of each arriving line." The impact is evident even in one-liners, whose effect relies on the kind of succinctness we find in a maxim or proverb. UA Fanthorpe, Sansom's fellow judge, admired "Basildon: imagine a carpark." And they both liked "They phone you up, your mum and dad."

Several competitions have focussed on reworking famous lines, titles, or quotations:

txt me ishmael

zen & T @ f m2 cycl mn10nc

The brevity of the SMS genre disallows complex formal patterning - of, say, the kind we might find in a sonnet. It isn't so easy to include more than a couple of images, such as similes, simply because there isn't the space. Writers have nonetheless tried to extend the potential of the medium. The SMS novel, for example, operates on a screen-by-screen basis. Each screen is a "chapter" describing an event in the story. Here is an interactive example from 2005, from an Indian website called "Cloakroom":

Chptr 6: While Surching 4 Her Father, Rita Bumps In2 A Chaiwalla & Tea Spills On Her Blouse. She Goes Inside Da Washroom, & Da Train Halts @ A Station.

In Japan, an author known as Yoshi has had a huge success with his text-messaging novel Deep Love. Readers sent feedback as the story unfolded, and some of their ideas were incorporated into it. He went on to make a film of the novel.

A mobile literature channel began in China in 2004. The "m-novel", as it is called, started with a love story, "Distance", by writer and broadcaster Xuan Huang. A young couple get to know each other because of a wrongly sent SMS message. The whole story is 1008 Chinese characters, told in 15 chapters, with one chapter sent each day.

Plainly, there are severe limits to the expressive power of the medium, when it is restricted to a screen in this way. So it is not surprising that, very early on, writers dispensed with the 160-character constraint, and engaged in SMS creative writing of any length using hard copy. Immediately there was a problem. By taking the writing away from the mobile phone screen, how could the distinctiveness of the genre be maintained? So the stylistic character of SMS writing changed, and texting abbreviations, previously optional, became obligatory.

Several SMS poets, such as Norman Silver, go well beyond text-messaging conventions, introducing variations in line-shape, type-size, font, and colour that are reminiscent of the concrete poetry creations of the 1960s. They illustrate the way the genre is being shaped by the more powerful applications available on computers.

In 2007 Finnish writer Hannu Luntiala published The Last Messages, in which the whole 332-page narrative consists of SMS messages. It tells the story of an IT-executive who resigns his job and travels the world, using text messages to keep in touch with everyone. And the growing independence of the genre from its mobile-phone origins is well illustrated by the French novelist Phil Marso, who published a book in 2004 written entirely in French SMS shorthand, Pas Sage a Taba vo SMS - a piece of word-play intended to discourage young people from smoking. The next year he produced L, an SMS retelling of French poetic classics.

An extraordinary number of doom-laden prophecies have been made about the supposed linguistic evils unleashed by texting. Sadly, its creative potential has been virtually ignored. But five years of research has at last begun to dispel the myths. The most important finding is that texting does not erode children's ability to read and write. On the contrary, literacy improves. The latest studies (from a team at Coventry University) have found strong positive links between the use of text language and the skills underlying success in standard English in pre-teenage children. The more abbreviations in their messages, the higher they scored on tests of reading and vocabulary. The children who were better at spelling and writing used the most textisms. And the younger they received their first phone, the higher their scores.

Children could not be good at texting if they had not already developed considerable literacy awareness. Before you can write and play with abbreviated forms, you need to have a sense of how the sounds of your language relate to the letters. You need to know that there are such things as alternative spellings. If you are aware that your texting behaviour is different, you must have already intuited that there is such a thing as a standard. If you are using such abbreviations as lol and brb ("be right back"), you must have developed a sensitivity to the communicative needs of your textees.

Some people dislike texting. Some are bemused by it. But it is merely the latest manifestation of the human ability to be linguistically creative and to adapt language to suit the demands of diverse settings. There is no disaster pending. We will not see a new generation of adults growing up unable to write proper English. The language as a whole will not decline. In texting what we are seeing, in a small way, is language in evolution.