Use of Textese in Text Messages: “we dont clip r gs”

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Text messaging has increased 450% over two years in the U.S. (Reardon, 2008). It consists of written language that is transmitted through cell phones and has become a dominant medium through which people, mostly young adults and adolescents, interact and communicate (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell & Purnell, 2010; Ling, 2010). This seemingly sudden increase and widespread use of text messaging has brought about the attention of both the media and literacy theorists. This is due to the fact that with the increase in the use of text messaging there has also been linguistic developments, similar to written communication online, which has been termed textese.

The purpose of the present study was to enrich the foundation of knowledge of text messaging behavior, upon which further research can be directed. This was accomplished by collecting actual text messages to determine how frequently young adults use textisms (text abbreviations) in their text messages in relation to standard English, as well as to categorize the types of textisms in the messages so that we could compare that data to a limited number of texting studies conducted elsewhere.

Participants were 196 introductory psychology students (more than 40 majors represented) who completed a range of literacy assessments and an online survey which asked questions related to personal demographics, text messaging behavior, and then asked the participant to transcribe the last five actual text messages that they sent. Every word in the text messages collected were then coded, adopting a textism classification list developed recently in Australia (DeJonge & Kemp, 2010), to conduct an analysis of the density of textese (total number of textisms/total number of words), and category density (total textisms in a category/total number of textisms) within text messages for individual participants as well as the overall sample.

Overall sample statistics revealed that textese accounted for 20% of the total words used in text messages. With regard to textisms themselves, the most used textism classification was missing capitalization (.37 of total textisms), trailed by accent stylization (.13 of total), single letter/number homophone (.09 of total), and omitted apostrophe (.08 of total). The rarest textisms used were, g-clipping (.02 of total), and combined letter/number homophone (.01 of total).

In conclusion, textese was used relatively frequently within text messages, accounting for about one in every five words being textese, which reveals an increase when compared to previous studies (e.g., Ling & Baron, 2007). Also, in regards to category classification, this study supported the categorization methods of previously conducted research in both Britain and Australia. These findings assist in the development of a systematic basis, where text messaging can be quantified, and provides a resource for further empirical study to assess the phenomenon of textese upon language, behavior, culture and literacy.