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# "wuz good wit u bro": Patterns of Digital African American Language Use in Two Modes of Communication

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Available online 12 April 2018

## Abstract

Extending previous research (Cunningham, 2014), which investigated social network site (SNS) comments composed in digital African American Language (DAAL), this research analyzes text messages composed among three, male DAAL interlocutors. This study draws from grounded theory, content analysis, digital language (DL) research, and linguistics scholarship on African American Language (AAL) in order to examine the patterns and frequencies of AAL and DL features found among 380 text messages. Comparing the text message results to Cunningham (2014)'s SNS findings, this study suggests significant ways that DAAL follows predictable, identifiable, and similar linguistic and paralinguistic patterns.
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*Keywords:* language use; digital language; African American Language; text messages; grounded theory; literacy

## 1. Introduction

Writing in the digital age with a range of "composing technologies and platforms" available has made writing itself a ubiquitous and somewhat invisible practice (Moore et al., 2016, p. 2). People are writing more but tend not to acknowledge their digital composing (e.g., text messaging, blogging, social media posting, etc.) as real writing. As Pamela Takayoshi (2015) writes, "Writing that is digitally mediated and distributed plays a prominent and ever-present role in almost every scene of literate practice across 21st-century American culture" (p. 21). In digital environments, non-academic literacies are afforded a space to exist more visibly in written form. The importance of examining digital text itself affords writing studies scholars the opportunity to understand descriptively how writing, literacy, and language are being employed for authentic communicative purposes in these non-academic spaces.

Considering available digital composing possibilities, Kress (2003) argues that writing is changing grammatically and syntactically and, building on that idea, Takayoshi (2015) argues that writing researchers ought "to study individual acts of writing without losing sight of the important contexts which intersect with those individual acts of composing" (p. 11). With that in mind, this study examines a specific act of composing (i.e., Digital African American Language), situating it within a digital context (i.e., text messaging) and investigating the ways it intersects with composing possibilities within that context. In order to better understand the composition and function of Digital African American

Language (DAAL), this study compares current instances of DAAL text messages to previous scholarship and instances of DAAL features found on a social media site (Cunningham, 2014), ultimately demonstrating patterns between the corpora which yield implications relevant to literacy studies and composition pedagogy.

### 1.1. Text Messages

David Crystal (2001) defines *computer-mediated communication* (CMC) as any written message that is sent using the Internet, which would include everything from email to text messages. Today, text messages are understood as a type of CMC or digital communication, given that smart phones are small, mobile computers. Clare Wood, Nenagh Kemp, Sam Waldron, and Lucy Hart (2014) define text messaging as "technologically-mediated discourse" that "is similar, if not identical, to other popular forms of computer-mediated discourse such as instant messaging, and the language forms observed on social networking sites (e.g.'wallposts' in Facebook) and microblogging sites such as Twitter" (p. 282). They refer to text message abbreviations as "textisms," describing them as "unconventional orthographic representations, which have intact phonological representations" (p. 282). David Crystal (2001, 2008) first referred to this phenomenon as Netspeak and later as digital language (DL). Using acronyms, shortened words, or letters for words are examples of digital language; however, digital language is not new phenomena (Baron, 2008) and is now prominently observed among text messages, what Michelle A. Drouin (2011) calls "textese." Textese is defined as "an abbreviated vocabulary that includes initialisms (e.g. *lol* for laughing out loud), letter/number homophones (e.g. *gr8* for great), contractions or shortenings (e.g. *cuz* for because), emoticons (symbols rep-resenting emotions (e.g.: (for sad), and the deletion of unnecessary words, vowels, punctuation, and capitalization" (Drouin, 2011, p. 67).

The use of text messages has increased within the last ten years, as has textese. According to a Pew Research Center (2010) study, 72% of adult cell phone users sent and received text messages, which was an increase from 65% in 2009, suggesting that the number has continued to increase in the last seven years. This same study reported that teens sent an average of 50 text messages a day, with adults sending an average of 10 text messages a day ("Pew Research Center," 2010). Reinforcing the popularity of or preference for text messaging, Dominic E. Madell and Steven J. Muncer (2007) found that adolescents prefer text messaging to talking on the phone and Moore et al. (2016) surveyed 1366 students from seven colleges and universities, finding that cell phones were reported as used most often (97.6%) and most valued (85.8%) among digital compositing options (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, E-mail, etc.) (p. 6). Similarly, Dorothy Skierkowski and Rebecca M. Wood (2012) surveyed 43 psychology students (ages 18–23) and found that text messaging was their most frequent and preferred type of communication (p. 751). The prevalence of text messaging is clear, but with the popularity of text messaging comes criticism of textese in relation to literacy.

### 1.2. Impact of Text Messaging on Literacy

Popular media tend to purport and perpetuate an assumed negative impact that text messaging has on literacy and language. Often cited is Crispin Thurlow's (2006) study, which found that the majority of media reports portrayed textese negatively. Scholars, however, have found that the correlation between textese use and literacy might be more nuanced.

J.E.L. Coe and Jane Oakhill (2011) examined possible correlations between the text messaging practices and reading abilities of 10- and 11-year-olds, finding that, although poor readers used their phones for more minutes per day, good readers used more textisms when communicating via text messages. Their research suggests, as Wood et al. (2014) articulate, "that better readers may be able to use multiple registers more easily and possibly have better metalinguistic skills" (p. 282). James Paul Gee and Elisabeth R. Hayes (2011) reiterate this idea, writing, "Acquiring new ways with words, something people do all the time, can increase rather than decrease people's language skills. They just have a bigger repertoire" (p. 132). Additionally, Wood et al. (2014) found that, with children, textese seemed not to correlate with a decline in grammatical knowledge, but that an association might exist among adults' use of textese and knowledge of grammatical violations. They argued, however, that the association was isolated "in the context of a range of other language variables which had no relationship to grammatical violations when texting" and, in that way, they argued "that the case for the negative impact of texting on language skills may have been overstated" (Wood et al., 2014, p. 289).

Further examining the complex relationship between textese and literacy, Drouin (2011) studied 152 students who were enrolled in an introductory psychology class at a midsize Mid-western university and found that text messaging