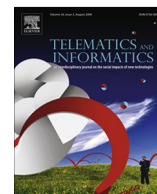




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Texting versus talking: An exploration in telecommunication language

Thomas Holtgraves*, Korey Paul

Department of Psychological Science, Ball State University, United States

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ABSTRACT

Prior research on text messaging has focused on its elliptical nature (e.g., acronyms, etc.). In contrast, the purpose of this research was to conduct an investigation of the type of words that tend to occur in text messages. Participants ($N = 224$) retrieved their most recent text messages which were then analyzed with the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) program (Pennebaker et al., 2007a,b) and compared with parallel analyses of randomly selected telephone conversations ($N = 214$). The results indicated numerous linguistic differences between text messages and telephone conversations. The former were linguistically simpler, more personal and more affective than the latter. Overall, the results further our understanding of the linguistic dimensions of this relatively new form of communication.

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1. Introduction

Text messaging (texting for short) has become a ubiquitous means of electronic communication. According to a large scale survey conducted in the United States by the Pew Research Center' Internet and American Life Project, 75% of 12–17-year-olds own cell phones, 72% of all adolescents (88% of cell phone users) use text messaging regularly, and 54% contact friends daily via text messaging (Lenhart et al., 2010). Moreover, texting is a form of electronic communication with important implications for our understanding of communication processes. Despite the ubiquity and importance of texting, there have been relatively few empirical studies of this phenomenon, nor have there been any systematic comparisons of texting with other means of verbal communication. We first provide a brief review of prior research on text messaging followed by a description of the issues investigated in this research.

Text messaging is similar to email and instant messaging in that it represents a merging of written and oral communication modes. However, the highly interactive nature of texting sets it apart from those modes; it is essentially a written form of communication that takes place interactively in real-time. Moreover, cell phone users (unlike computer users) tend to carry their devices with them at all times thereby allowing them to text anytime, anywhere. In a focus group study, Horstmannshof and Power (2005) uncovered two general themes regarding texting. One theme was an unspoken rule about the immediacy of response needed to stay connected to the individual. A second theme was pressure to stay "in the loop" by carrying their devices at all times. A survey conducted by Reid and Reid (2007) demonstrated a similar tendency for those who reported preferring texting to talking; that is, they tended to form close-knit "text circles" staying in perpetual contact with their group of friends (see also Lenhart et al., 2010).

In terms of the language used when texting, one of the most notable and obvious features is its elliptical nature, that is, the frequent use of abbreviations, acronyms, emoticons, misspellings, and omission of vowels, subject pronouns, and punctuation (Crystal, 2008; Hard af Segerstad, 2005). Thurlow and Brown (2003) conducted a texting study in Great Britain in which participants were asked to produce messages from their phones. Messages in this study averaged 65 characters

* Corresponding author. Address: Department of Psychological Science, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306, United States.
E-mail address: 00t0holtgrav@bsu.edu (T. Holtgraves).

and 14 words (although variability was quite large). Abbreviations accounted for 18.75% of message content. However, a large majority of these users (82%) reported that they use abbreviations when they text. In a more recent texting study, Ling and Baron (2007) reported even briefer messages (averaging 7.7 words and 35 characters per message) and relatively infrequent use of emoticons (.001%) and acronyms (.005%).

Thurlow and Brown (2003) developed a preliminary coding scheme as a means of describing the content of text messages. They made an important distinction between informational and relational messages, the former referring to messages designed to provide information (e.g., directions) and the latter designed to create, develop, or maintain a relationship. They found a clear preponderance (approximately 2/3) of messages in the latter category. However, the relational aspects of texting can sometimes have an informational component. For example, Gritner and Eldridge (2003) found that navigating a future social event by means of updating information between users is a popular use for text messages. Text messaging serves as a social catalyst that fills in the time between initial plans and the execution of a social event; the text message acts as an RSVP to confirm whether an event is to take place or not.

Some researchers have examined personality and gender differences in texting. McKenna et al. (2002) found that those with high levels of social anxiety and shyness felt more comfortable connecting with others through computer mediated communication. Perhaps the anticipation of rejection that is associated with social anxiety is easier to deal with from a distance. Socially anxious mobile phone users appear to be relatively predisposed to take advantage of the social affordances of texting (Reid and Reid, 2010). More recent research has demonstrated that the language used to text reflects the texter's personality in much the same way that other forms of language use reflect one's personality (Holtgraves, 2011). In this study, for example, extraversion was related to the use of more personal pronouns ($r = .14$), especially first person singular pronouns ($r = .19$), and negatively related to the use of impersonal pronouns ($r = -.18$). Neuroticism was positively correlated with negative emotion words ($r = .15$). Agreeableness was negatively correlated with swearing ($r = -.18$), and negative emotion words ($r = -.25$).

In terms of gender differences, Horstmanshof and Power (2005) found males to be more reluctant than females to follow the social "rules" of responding immediately to text messages from significant others. Some of the males in this study described carrying their devices as being on a social leash that confines them to the immediate response rule. In the large-scale study conducted by Ling et al. (2010), females were more likely to text than were males, and were more likely to use emoticons than were males, a finding also reported by Holtgraves (2011).

2. The present research

Prior research on texting has tended to focus on its elliptical nature (i.e., use of abbreviations, acronyms, etc.). In contrast, no one has yet undertaken systematic, empirical analyses of the lexical aspects of texting. To pursue this, we used the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count program (LIWC; Pennebaker et al., 2007b) to generate category (e.g., verbs, personal pronouns, impersonal pronouns, etc.) counts for a set of text messages. This program counts the occurrences of words within its dictionary, as well as categories (e.g., verbs, emotion words, etc.) that constitute a subset of those words.

Currently, the LIWC program analyzes text documents for 70 categories and includes a base dictionary of almost 4500 words and word stems. The 70 categories fall into one of three groups: linguistic processes, psychological processes, and current concerns. The LIWC has been shown to have good internal consistency and temporal reliability (Pennebaker et al., 2007a) and constitutes a valid method for measuring personal expression of emotion (Pennebaker and King, 1999; Mehl and Pennebaker, 2003; Mehl et al., 2001), personality traits such as the Big 5 (Pennebaker and King, 1999) and self-esteem (Bosson et al., 2000), as well as linguistic markers of age (Pennebaker and Stone, 2003), gender (Mehl and Pennebaker, 2003), and deception (Bond and Lee, 2005; Newman et al. (2003).

We complemented our linguistic description of text messages by comparing it with an analysis of telephone conversations. To do this, a corpus of publically available telephone conversations was analyzed simultaneously with the LIWC. A fundamental problem, of course, is that it is not possible to control for all possible differences between the text and telephone data sets (participant differences, topic differences, etc.). We assumed that if there were no significant differences in the current concern categories, then the two data sets were equivalent enough to allow for the examination of linguistic and psychological differences. Although these comparative analyses are largely exploratory, based on prior research (Reid and Reid, 2007; Thurlow and Brown, 2003) we did expect text messages to be more affective (contain a higher percentage of affective words) than telephone conversations, and for telephone conversations to be more complex (e.g., contain a higher percentage of function words) than text messages.

Finally, for each text sent, texting participants indicated where, when, and with whom they texted. We conducted exploratory analyses of these responses in order to provide an initial picture of this aspect of texting.

3. Method

3.1. Texting participants

Participants were 224 students (104 males; 120 females) enrolled in introductory psychology classes at Ball State University who participated for partial course credit. The age of the participants ranged between 18 and 41 ($M = 19.08$; $SD = 1.12$),

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