

Teaching unit 28: Digital Interactions and ‘Text-speak’

Background

This unit explores the uses and motivations of non-standard spellings in digital interactions on the mobile messaging application, WhatsApp. Students are encouraged to think about how spelling conventions of digital interactions have changed over time and what technological advancements may have brought these changes about. Exploring a series of WhatsApp conversations collected from a group of young adults residing in London, students will have the opportunity to identify non-standard spellings in the messages. Based on their observations, they can develop hypotheses about why specific spellings occur at different moments through the course of the conversations. The exercise will encourage them to think about how non-standard spellings may fulfil specific communicative functions.

Digital Communication and Spelling

In the early days of mobile communication, people were reliant on pay-as-you-go contracts. Communicating via text could be costly. With each SMS text costing 10p per 160 characters, savvy users developed innovative ways to communicate the same message in one single text. Hence, in the 1990’s and early 2000’s, you could expect to receive a text filled with abbreviations and so-called ‘text-speak’, as in the examples below:

- R u ok?
- Dat wuld b gr8 hun
- g2g nw, gd tlking 2 u

Perhaps, however, these spellings aren’t that innovative. Indeed many of these spellings were also found in older forms of communication, such as in the age of the telegraph. Like texts, these messages were restricted to a certain number of characters and were more costly depending on the size of the message. So, as with texts, users developed innovative ways to reduce the number of characters that their message contained, thus saving their hard-earned pennies!

In the contemporary era of digital culture and with the emergence of mobile data-plans, people were no longer restricted to the SMS. We now have a plethora of apps, platforms, and devices to send much longer messages filled with multimedia content. As the cost of sending messages has decreased substantially, the spellings that once characterised SMS appear to be largely redundant now. Indeed, research has shown that people rarely use features that were once considered typical of texting. The nail in the coffin seems to be predictive text. Most users appear to make use of these intelligent systems. So, if you were to use a variant spelling (.e.g, <gr8> for <great>) you would have to actively and consciously decide to spell the word in this way.

Nowadays, non-standard spellings are often used strategically to mimic qualities of spoken language such as pronunciation, intonation, or emphasis. For instance, the spelling <fink> for *think* is often used to represent colloquial pronunciation, and words are often put in capital letters with additional exclamation marks to symbolise emphasis or shouting, for example, <I KNOW!!!!!!>. Non-standard spellings might also be used to put on a different ‘voice’ or identity – much like we do in spoken communication. This could be useful to diffuse a tense moment or communicate a level of informality that standard spellings can’t do.

The Data

Below are a series of conversations taken from the mobile messaging application WhatsApp. For each of the following extracts, try to identify the variant spellings and orthographic features. This might include spellings such as <yeeees>, <u ok>, <YES>, and <brb>, as well as non-standard uses of punctuation, such as <?????> and <);>¹.

One thing to look for is whether the same user uses different spellings in different messages. For instance, if they use <great> in one part of the conversation but then <gr8> in another part, why might this be? Look for clues in the content of the conversation.


You can also think about the influence of the medium on the communication. Whatsapp is a mobile messaging service. Why do you think we see multiple messages in a row sent by the same user? How do people manage the limitations of communication via WhatsApp? What are those limitations? Think about if these influence non-standard spellings or innovative forms of written communication.

Once you’ve identified the non-standard spellings, try to formulate an explanation of why those features are being used at that particular time. To help you, part of the context has been provided. Try to think about whether you think the non-standard spelling is a genuine error, or whether it’s been used strategically for some purpose. Remember, there’s no right or wrong answer. Your analysis is an interpretation of the patterns based on the data alone.

¹When discussing spelling, linguists will often use < > to distinguish the spelling from the word. You may want to use this notation system in your work, e.g., <gr8> for *great*

Extract 1

Context: Lisa has just been asked by her friend who happens to be an air-stewardess whether she would like to go to Barbados for New Year's Eve free of charge. The rest of the group had planned on going to a bar in Broadgate Circus. The extract starts when Lisa announces that she's been asked if she'd like to go to Barbados.

1. Lisa lol guys I've just been asked if I want to go to Barbados for 5 nights over New Year FOR FREE
 2. Abi wtf
 3. Abi ??
 4. Ellie What?!
 5. Ellie Why don't you go
 6. Abi Well obviously answer is yes
 7. Lisa My friend is an air hostess hahah
 8. Ellie I'll go if you don't
 9. Stef Whaaaaat
 10. Stef Yeah me three
 11. Abi Can we all go hahaha
 12. Stef 
 13. Lisa Nooo I already made plans with y'all!
 14. Lisa Can I split myself in half
 15. Abi Lol
 16. Abi Are you STUPID
 17. Abi Lisa
 18. Ellie hahahaha
 19. Abi It's Barbados
 20. Ellie Wow
 21. Ellie Spelling
 22. Lisa Hahahaha spelling
 23. Stef We are going to Broadgate circus
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Extract 2

Context: In the previous messages, Abi had announced that they are at a pub 'The George' and that the others should meet her and her friends. Mark replies in this excerpt by arranging to meet them.

1. Mark Ok! I'll meet yaaa
 2. Abi Yeah George
 3. Abi I'm walking up the road
 4. Stef We're in the garden bbz
 5. Abi Cooooool
 6. Abi C u in a min
 7. Mark You guys still there?
 8. Abi Yeeeeeee
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Extract 3

Context: Rachel has just got herself a new job that she wasn't particularly interested in and it's her first day. Abi asks how her day is going. Rachel replies but she seems a little disheartened. Abi attempts to lighten the mood before Rachel states that she's 'not complaining'.

1. Abi How was the first morning?
 2. Rachel Nothing to do really just familiarising myself with the back end of the website
 3. Abi Haha at least it's a job bbz!!
 4. Rachel Not complaining
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