

THE *FADING AGE OF LITERATURE*:

Technology and Its Effects on Language

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The English language has been a flexible, amorphous, ever-changing creature throughout its history. Its ability to grow, develop, and adjust to new circumstances is one of its greatest strengths and has enabled it to overcome astronomical obstacles. But that very trait may have placed the very core of what the English language is at risk today. New technologies that have come out in the last twenty years have vastly changed how people use their time and how they communicate. From texting to typing, Facebook to Twitter, this is a new world with many new possibilities. But what has been sacrificed in the process? Reading and writing skills in standard English have suffered dramatically, and they continue to drop more every year. And it is a direct result of these new technologies integrating themselves into the everyday lives of this nation's citizens. Technology has pushed people to lose the desire to read and has dramatically altered the way in which people write, causing the English language to fade to a faint ghost of its former glory.

THE DECLINING INTEREST IN READING

How many times is the saying, “Oh, I’ll wait for the movie to come out,” casually said in reference to the prospect of reading a book? In this age of computers, movies, video games, and texting, the nation's interest in reading, and attention span required for such an

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activity, has significantly dropped. In an article recently published in the *Scroll*, it is pointed out that “One-third of high school graduates never read another book for the rest of their lives” (Farnes). It is also said that “...typical Americans read four books last year and one in four adults read no books at all” (Farnes). These statistics point to the very concerning fact that the average person does not read anymore, and they are losing the desire to do so.

In a survey conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts in 2002, out of the 17,000 Americans of all ages, ethnicities, and backgrounds polled, only 46.7% of adults (37.6% men and 55.1% of women) are reading literature (Bradshaw). Out of the typical college ages of 18-24, only 42.8% read literature, a 28% drop over the twenty years between 1982-2002 (Bradshaw). There was an overall “decline of 10 percentage points in literary readers from 1982 to 2002, representing a loss of 20 million potential readers. The rate of decline is increasing and, according to the survey, has nearly tripled in the last decade” (Gifford). This means that each decade, less and less people are reading literature, and this trend is only going to increase over time.

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So what is the reason behind this? The report of the NEA's survey said it the clearest: “Literature now competes with an enormous array of electronic media. While no single activity is responsible for the decline of reading, the cumulative presence and availability of these alternatives have increasingly drawn Americans away from reading” (Bradshaw). In summary, technological distractions are the reason behind this drop in book reading. In a survey conducted for this article of 32 people between the ages of 21 and 58, 87% reported that they enjoyed reading, though 67% said they only spent between 0-1 hours reading for fun daily (DeLand). On

average, each person has about 2.5 hours of free time each day, and they spend 3.5 hours using technology every day, 90% using Facebook, 57% texting, 17% instant messaging, and 67% using other forms of technology (DeLand). So, although 32 people hardly represent all Americans, this does give a pretty good idea of how people are using their time: for technology.

READING ABILITY BECOMES INABILITY

Most are familiar with the fact that, generally, local newspapers are written at an 8th grade level of education while national newspapers are at an 11th grade level. Why is this? Because many people are unable to easily read at a higher level. Think of the most popular novels from the last decade. That list includes such books as *Harry Potter*, *Maximum Ride*, and *Twilight*, all of which have in common their status as books written for youth. As a result, more and more authors are leaning toward writing youth and young adult fiction, making such authors like Clive Cussler, Terry Brooks, and Tom Clancy a thing of the past, phased out by these newer, young adult writers. But more concerning is the fact that, because people are not reading as they once did, their ability to read is suffering.

The National Center for Education Statistics performed a national assessment on education progress and discovered that “reading ability is positively correlated with the extent to which students read recreationally” (“Reading and Writing Habits of Students”). Not a new concept, but definitely one that has been forgotten in this age of technology. They also reported that 9, 13, and 17-year-old students who read for fun at least once a week had a higher average reading proficiency than those who never or hardly

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ever read for fun (“Reading and Writing Habits of Students). So, those students who spent their time reading rather than involving themselves in other activities were better at reading. As was pointed out in the *Scroll*, “Reading offers benefits not found in more passive media. It gives the brain a much better workout than does watching television...Reading allows the mind to pause, reflect, think more actively, use intellect and emotion together and develop a longer attention span” (Farnes). If people want to develop a greater ability to read, then, and gain the longer attention span necessary for such an intensive activity, they need to use their time reading and thinking rather than passively watching movies, television, and video games.

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THE COMMUNICATION SHIFT: STANDARD WRITING TAKES A BACKSEAT

Reading is not the only activity to suffer under the reign of technology. The English language has been beset on all sides, including the written word. As most are well aware, “technology is the most popular form of communication nowadays” (Richardson), that communication typically performed through forms such as texting, instant messaging, and Facebook. These technologies are wonderful inventions that allow worldwide communication and instant responses, but that is also their downfall. As Brenna Richardson stated so bluntly, “We expect quick responses. This immediate response time often causes people to forget simple grammatical rules.” Annalee Newitz put it a different way, saying the rise of Internet English is at hand, a simple language learned from message boards and technical manuals. It is full of slang and technical terminology and is “free of the more cumbersome aspects of English

grammar” (Newitz). Capitalization, spelling, and punctuation have also suffered drastically (Martinez).

What makes this incorrect writing frustrating to people is the fact that “the frequency of minor errors...could be eliminated by a quick once-over glance at the material in question before it's sent or posted” (Wynn). There is no question about it, the English language is changing once again. Changing into a completely different form full of shorthand, acronyms, and a bizarre mishmash of fragments and run-on sentences. Even the more educated are involved in this butchering of the language. Brenna Richardson admitted, “I am studying to be a journalist and even I cannot speak correctly.” This is a rampant concern among educators everywhere who have to red-pen this kind of writing in the formal compositions of their students every day (Huang).

Any discussion on written communication cannot now be complete without making specific mention of texting. Lily Huang defines texting as “a national habit,” and she cannot be more right. A great percentage of Americans today own their own personal cell phone, and out of those who do, almost all have texting ability and utilize this technology to a great extent daily. In 2008 alone, 2.3 trillion text messages were sent just in the United States (Huang). This is, indeed, a national habit. And what is its effect on the language? “Textese,” Huang says, is “a nascent dialect of English that subverts letters and numbers to produce ultra-concise words and sentiments, [and it] is horrifying language loyalists and pedagogues.” With this dropping of consonants, vowels, and punctuation, along with the lack of distinction between letters and numbers, there is the very real fear that soon people will forget how they are really supposed to communicate, and the generations to come will become illiterate in a

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This illiteracy will surface when the literature of the past and present becomes beyond comprehension. As was theorized by Annalee Newitz, “By the time English truly is a dominant language on the planet, it will no longer be English. Instead, say a group of linguists interviewed in *New Scientist* (March 29, 2008), the language will fragment into many mutually unintelligible dialects.” In a sense, this depicts a future devolution of English, for when the English language was first forming in England, they too had problems with multiple dialects being spoken throughout the country that were unintelligible to one another (Bragg). Huang sees this same idea of devolution in the language of texting, discussing “the distinctive elements of texting language—pictograms; initialisms, or acronyms; contractions, and others” and how there are “similar examples in linguistic practice from the ancient Egyptians.” Though Huang points to this as a positive improvement in the English language, this shows a disturbing backwards flow from sophistication to prehistoricism when men used to communicate through pictograms drawn on cave walls. The prolific use of texting is taking the written word and slinging it in a backwards arc that may not be correctable.

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IMPLICATIONS OF CHAT-SPEAK:

WHY IS THIS A BAD THING?

Now, the crux of the problem: why does it matter? Language is constantly evolving and changing, so how is this new, technology-influenced language any different? Ryza Martinez believes these new forms of communication have opened up language to creativity, letting people “explore the power of the written language in a creative

way” and giving them “prospects to build up new stylistic rules.” She believes the only reason why people recoil at grammar errors is because of the way they have been taught growing up, and they must develop an open mind toward these changes in language (Martinez). Earl Wynn shares this feeling, commenting on how “We’re so used to everything written professionally being typed, and everything typed being professionally written, so our minds have become accustomed to this notion, and errors throw the average reader for a loop.”

Although these are interesting, and thought-provoking, points, there is a very simple reason why the English language is the way it is: conformity for the sake of clarity.

Back when English was still struggling to become its own language, because there were so many dialects, spelling variations, and differences in the order words were used, it was necessary for scholars to come together and decide which words should be kept, how to spell them, and how the language should sound (Bragg). The reason? So people could understand one another clearly. By getting “creative” with these time-tested rules, chaos hovers on the near horizon that could drive America back to that same point the English once were: fragmented and dissentious with an inability to clearly communicate with one another.

But what is the harm in using this already formed chat-speak since it does exist in the modern world and is apparently here to stay? In an experiment performed in Britain in 2007, children who texted got better scores on reading and vocabulary tests (Huang). The more abbreviations they generally used in their texting, the better their spelling and vocabulary (Huang). Huang believes that “Before you can write abbreviated forms effectively and play with them, you need to have a sense of how the sounds of your language relate to the letters,”

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and this may very well be true. However, as was pointed out by Brenna Richardson, “If we become lazy in the way we write and the way we talk, how are our children going to speak? Children learn from example.”

This is a proven fact. If coming generations hear an acronym like “TTYL” in the context of meaning “talk to you later,” they are going to speak using those same acronyms and have no idea of the actual meaning of the letters. They will grow up without those words in their vocabulary, and they will mature into adults not knowing the proper way to capitalize, use punctuation, spell words, form sentences, or any of the other essentials behind writing. Hundreds of generations worth of literature and knowledge will be lost purely because no one will be able to read them anymore due to a drastic shift in the language. Really, “It does not take that much longer to type out a grammatically correct text message” (Richardson), and so there is no excuse for people to continue utilizing sloppy, lazy writing techniques just because they are writing on a cell phone or computer instead of turning in a formal English paper. For the sake of the next generation, if not the fingers of avid texters, proper writing needs to be restored in all aspects of written communication.

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The technology itself that is available may be harming the writing skills of the American population. The invention of “spell-check,” for example. Earl S. Wynn feels this tool “allow[s] us to actually understand how to spell words, and makes us really question how much these modern conveniences of thought and communication have contributed to the apparent degradation of grammar and spelling in type,” but the trends in the writing of Americans proves this to be very much false. Because spell-check fixes spelling mistakes for users, unless they actively take the time to study the differences

between their spelling and the correct spelling, they do not learn how to spell these words. Spell-check feeds the decay of writing by continually fixing spelling and grammar mistakes without the person having to think about it. So, to the contrary, it looks as though modern technologies of this kind have and do contribute very much to the degradation of grammar and spelling.

There is also the fact that the typed written language used to be the world of English language professionals (Wynn). This is no longer true, as is evident by the increasing number of blogs, personal websites, and chatrooms that pepper the Internet today, complete with their “creative” version of English (Wynn). As the Internet becomes even more prevalent in the home, this problem will only get worse as these grammatically-challenged sources come to vastly outnumber the more scholarly knowledge and information available out there. Wynn himself sums up the paradox of technology and language best when he poses the question, “Will computers and the internet be the grammar and spelling’s saving grace, or will they ultimately prove to be the shadowy specters caught holding the axe when the written word falls before the relentless drumbeat of human progress?” It is Americans’ choice to make, and they have to make it soon before it is too late to salvage what remains of their language.

CONCLUSION:

DAWN OF A NEW AGE OR FALL OF THE OLD?

The English language is in dire straits and it needs a splash of reviving attention in order to climb back on top. Though new technologies offer many new and exciting opportunities, people need to remember to use these things in moderation and utilize their time

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What kind of example should be set for future generations?

instead for reading literature and writing correctly. Reading is an important skill for the future, and it also enables mankind to learn and develop, challenging the brain and pushing creativity in order to think in new ways. And it is crucial that these ways are changed and proper written English is once again used in tandem with technology so that the children of these times do not grow up knowing only the language of chat. It is not that these technologies are inherently bad things. On the contrary, they have opened up communication on a worldwide basis, adding to the sharing of knowledge and socializing between nations. The thing to keep in mind is “how we use the technology at our disposal, and the example we set for future generations” (Wynn). What kind of example should be set for future generations? That of responsibility, and that of literacy. If people are responsible with these resources they have and strive to clean up their reading and writing habits, the bleak future of a world full of illiteracy and “LOL's” can be avoided.

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