Text Language: A Boon or Doom for English as a Language

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Abstract

When sending text messages on their mobile phone to friends, children often use a special type of register, which is called textese. This register allows the omission of words and the use of textisms: instances of non-standard written language such as 4ever (forever). It is possible that children's grammar system is affected by textese as well, as grammar rules are often transgressed in this register. Therefore, the main aim of this study was to investigate whether the use of textese influences children's grammar performance, and whether this effect is specific to grammar or language in general. Additionally, studies have not yet investigated the influence of textese on children's cognitive abilities. Consequently, the secondary aim of this study was to find out whether textese affects children's executive functions. In addition, text messages were elicited and the number of omissions and textisms in children's messages were calculated. Regression analyses showed that omissions were a significant predictor of children's grammar performance after various other variables were controlled for: the more words children omitted in their text messages, the better their performance on the grammar task.

KEYWORDS: Textese, Language, LSRW skills, SMS/ Short language/ Literacy

INTRODUCTION

With children's increasing use of mobile phones, concerns have been raised about its influence on their literacy skills. One well-known feature of children's text messages is that they do not always adhere to conventional written language rules and use a register that is called textese. In this register, children make use of phonetic replacements, such as ur instead of your and acronyms, such as lol and drop words. This has led to the assumption that characteristics of textese may leak into children's general writing, ultimately resulting in language deterioration. However, this is in sharp contrast to findings from several studies showing that children who used textese frequently did not perform poorly on spelling and tasks measuring literacy abilities. More recently, this research has been expanded to the effect of textese on children's grammar abilities in written language. Outcomes of some studies suggest a negative influence of textese on grammar. Nevertheless, variability in coding of textese between studies and use of written tasks, which do not strictly represent grammar, may have masked the effect of textese on children's grammar abilities. Therefore, the main aim of the present study is to ascertain whether use of textese influences children's grammar performance in spoken language.

Yet another understudied area is the connection between use of textese and children's cognitive development. Previous studies have shown that young people who often switch between different media types and non-media (e.g. watching television while doing homework), have lower executive functions. As many young children

nowadays own a (smart) phone they may also be prone to this effect. On the other hand, children who are proficient in textese, might have similar advantages as bilingual children have, as they might be considered a special type of bilinguals—in a different modality—having to switch between formal written language and textese. This is so because various studies have shown superior performance on executive function tasks by bilingual children over monolingual children. Thus, the second aim of this study is to determine whether proficient texters have better-developed executive functions than non-proficient texters, similar to proficient bilingual children.

Textese and literacy

In the last decade, a number of studies have been conducted focusing on children's text message writing and use of textese. Textese is a form of abbreviated written—or actually typed—language, that is characterized by the omission of words and the use of textisms, such as abbreviations, letter/number homophones, emoticons, etc… Those identified textism categories range from 4 to 11. In public opinion, use of textese by children and young adults has been linked to poor reading and writing skills and even language deterioration, as illustrated by a corpus study by Thurlow, who investigated opinions on texting and textese in newspapers. Some studies have indeed found negative associations between frequency of use of textese and measures of spelling and other tasks measuring abilities related to literacy such as verbal and nonverbal reasoning. However, in the majority of studies, children's use of textese and their spelling and literacy abilities were found to be positively related: accuracy of reading textese and speed of reading and writing textese were positively associated with children's spelling, reading and non-word reading scores; and number of (certain types of) textisms and textism density—the ratio of textisms used per word—were positively associated with spelling skills; orthographic processing ability; phonological and phoneme processing, awareness and retrieval abilities; verbal reasoning scores reading skills; and writing skills.

Nearly all studies on the effects of textese focused on children's literacy development and hardly any attention has been paid to the effects of textese on children's language development. Specifically grammatical development is interesting in this respect because, as mentioned by Kemp and colleagues, grammar rules of conventional written language are often transgressed in textese. As a result, this lack of grammatical conventions might leak into registers other than textese. To the best of our knowledge, only four studies have investigated effects of use of textese on children's use of grammar. These studies have focused on the use of grammar in written language and have shown mixed results. Cingel and Sundar obtained a negative association between the number of text messages children sent and received and the number of textisms used and children's grammar abilities. However, these findings are hard to interpret, as the authors did not calculate the textism ratio—which is a relative measure that takes text length into account—but used raw scores. In addition, textisms at the word level (spelling), rather than at the sentence level, were responsible for this effect.

Other studies looking into children's grammar abilities did take into account children's message length when analyzing effects of use of textisms. Kemp et al., Wood et al., and Wood et al. all studied the relationship between children's texting behavior based on natural messages sent over a 2-day period and their performance on a grammar assessment. Kemp et al. found that primary school children's (8-10-year old) performance on a grammatical spelling choice task was related to the proportion of

grammatical violations they made in their text messages: children who did not perform well on the spelling task made more grammatical violations than children who obtained a better spelling test score. These observations have to do with missing and unconventional punctuation, missing capitalisation, word and grammatical errors (missing words, lack of verbal agreement, verb and preposition merged; and grammatical homonyms). No textisms at the word level were included in this measure. Wood et al., on the other hand, did not find any significant correlations between children's grammar scores and grammatical violations in their textese. In a longitudinal follow-up study, Wood et al. repeated the procedure used by Wood et al. over a one-year period and again asked children to transcribe their natural messages and assessed their grammar skills on various tasks. For the primary school children, grammatical violations in their text messages did not predict development of their grammatical skills over the year.

In sum, previous studies do not convincingly indicate that use of textese by children negatively affects their conventional writing and spelling abilities. If any association does exist between textism use and literacy, it appears to be positive. Researchers suggest different reasons for this positive association. One of the reasons is that writing text messages is fun and encourages children to play with language without having to worry about spelling conventions. This, in turn, might positively affect children's attitudes towards other activities associated with literacy . Another important potential advantage of texting is that it increases children's exposure to text , which in turn is related to better reading skills ; but see . Furthermore, as many textisms are phonologically based (such as '2night' instead of 'tonight), use of textese is often linked to phonological or phonetic awareness , which is associated with reading attainment . Finally, use of textese could have a more general effect. Previous studies have shown that children know that textisms are not appropriate in, for example, school work. Hence, they are aware of the different registers they can employ. According to Craig, this strengthens children's meta linguistic awareness.

Regarding the effect of children's use of textese on their grammar abilities the findings are less clear. Two out of the four studies investigating this question found a negative association, whereas two other studies did not obtain any significant correlations. Importantly, the focus of all four studies was on tasks assessing children's grammar knowledge in written language. Two of the four studies also included a receptive vocabulary task which we will turn to in the discussion section. Written language is considered more formal than spoken language—at least at school and in test situations—which may make children more aware of the necessity to apply conventional (orthographic) grammar rules. In addition, written language, rather than spoken language, allows children time to reread their message, think about its structure consciously and correct it if necessary. As a result, effects of textese on children's grammar might not be reflected in these type of tasks. Given that textese has properties of both written as well as spoken language and spoken language is less bound by formal grammar rules than written language, it is likely that effects of textese on children's grammar might rather be reflected in tasks assessing children's grammatical competence in spoken language. Furthermore, from a linguistic perspective, grammar should be teased apart from orthographic rules, as the latter is not assumed to be part of the core grammatical competence, i.e. the rules that underlie word and sentence formation (morphology and syntax). However, previous studies have used a rather broad definition of grammar when

identifying violations in textese and when assessing children's grammatical competence, which is based on more general written conventions, including omission of capitals and interpunction, for example. As a result, the outcomes of these studies provide limited insight into the effects of textese on children's grammar proficiency. Therefore, the main aim of the present study is to investigate the effect of textese on children's language abilities, and specifically their grammar skills.

CONCLUSION

As we saw, language evolved through various stages of development. Language was developed or used primarily for the exchange of ideas which is called the process of 'Communication.' Later, owing to factors like civilization, language left out the basic function to be secondary and took a much more superior form. Language became an ornament of literature in the hands of eminent literary figures like Shakespeare, Keats, Wordsworth and all. Languages beautified literature. Most of the literary works were evaluated based on the usage of language in it. Thus language became more expressive literary tool rather than a communication tool. Changes in language did not stop with this. The language that we use today was not the same in an earlier era. Many of the Great languages that were used traditionally have already become dead and alien. Sanskrit, Latin etc are examples for such dead languages. Language today, even after so many centuries and generations after it took birth, is still subject to change. Due to political and economic reasons like colonization and slavery new types of languages were formed by the mixing of two or more languages into one. These gradually arouse in man the thirst for a common language for the world. The invention of the artificially invented language called Esperanto during the late 1870s and early 1880s was not a great success then. English now has come up somewhat to such a level, though it was not intentional. Still the grammar, sentence structure etc are found to be a factor that prevents the users of English as their second or third language to expertise in it. To take for example, let us consider the situation in India. Hindi is considered as our official and national language whereas English is our second language only. But due to the international acceptance and usage of English, it is true that today English is often being used more than our official language. Still, not the entire country is well efficient in English.

The new communication tool of 'Texting' is in fact a true challenge for English. While English is a language with order and structure, 'Texting' has no such concepts. It is an anti-grammar format which gives abundant freedom to its users to handle language according to their wish and will. Words are shortened and the syntactic structure is deconstructed. There is no more rigid usage of punctuations. In fact punctuations are at times totally avoided and sometimes over used. Though 'Texting' is considered to be an easy and quick means to use language and convey ideas, the fact that it has deconstructed the rules and ideals of English vocabulary and grammar has led to the awakening of great controversies and debates. At present the ongoing debates and arguments are, whether 'Texting' is a threat to English language or not, whether 'Texting' would destroy the essence and soul of the entire language or not. It is highly the time for someone to conduct studies on this topic and produce an effective conclusion. It is not yet clear about why they look at 'Texting' with so much enmity. 'Texting' after all is simply a change that is inevitable. May be after another 50 years, 'Texting' would stand in the present condition of English, facing the call for change. This is because language is not fixed and static. Language from the very time of its origin had to undergo various changes and will

have to undergo change in the coming future also. May be at least till the whole world starts speaking a single language as we find in the Old Testament of the Holy Bible. According to the Biblical story, before the fall of the Fort Babel, man used to speak a single language. But gradually pride started to grow in him and his greed made him desire to be Godlike. As the English proverb goes, "Pride goes before a fall", man was punished for his pride and greed. God scattered his language and they were no longer able to communicate or understand one another. This led to the fall of the great Fort of Babel which was built as an icon of civilization.

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