

## Texting is making English a foreign language

Michael Deacon believes that literature is likely to become as abbreviated as teenagers' attention spans.



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Baroness Greenfield, the neuroscientist, is worried that sending text messages may cause young people to have shorter attention spans. If she's right, of course, none of those young people will be aware of this, because she expressed her views in a newspaper article of several hundred words, some of them long, all of them spelt correctly, and none of them using digits as substitutes for whole syllables. All terribly old-fashioned and out-of-d8. So they won't have read it.

In all probability, then, she's preaching only to the converted. None the less, I'm right behind her. Admittedly, I'm not in the least qualified to comment on whether text messaging can cause mental disorders, or whether predictive text – the ability of your phone to guess what you're going to say – will stunt your powers of self-expression, and make you less thoughtful and more error-prone. But I do know one thing. Reading text speak, or txt spk, makes my eyes water as if hit by a jet of lemon juice. And even if using text speak doesn't reduce your attention span, it suggests that you've already got a pretty damn short one.

What is the excuse for it? I know that keeping messages below a certain character count can make them cheaper, but anyone who has ever received a text from a teenage relative will know that, if brevity was their aim, they wouldn't insist on ending every sentence with a row of at least six exclamation marks.

Being the neurotic, prematurely aged pedant that I am, I always type out every word in full when I'm texting, as if I were going to submit the thing to a publisher rather than merely use it to let my girlfriend know I've caught the 18.46 from Victoria station. Unlike the teenagers relying on their predictive text (and substituting "book" for "cool" or "Smirnoff" for "poisoned", because the keys are the same), I even reread it to check for spelling and grammar errors.

Now, this may well make me a certifiable lunatic – indeed, Baroness Greenfield is welcome to use me as a subject for her next study of neurological disorders. But I still think what I do is better than inflicting such assaults on the English language as "ROFL" (Rolling On Floor Laughing) or "BBFN" (Bye Bye For Now) or "DMFYLOCIAIM" (Delete Me From Your List Of Contacts, I'm An Illiterate Moron).

And it's not as if all these jaunty acronyms are universally understood. A lot of people over the age of 30 seem to think that "LOL" stands for Lots Of Love, rather than Laughing Out Loud. Which creates all kinds of potential for inadvertent offence. ("Don't B upset, babe – UR new hairdo looks gr8. LOL.") Mobile phone companies are only too delighted to indulge their customers' laziness. My own phone goes one better than predictive text and offers a selection of text message templates, so that I don't even have to bother typing out "I'm in a meeting" or "See you at...". There's even a template that says "Happy birthday". I wonder how little you'd have to think of a friend not just to send a text instead of a card, but to refuse to go to the effort of typing it.

Still, language is in a constant state of evolution. Perhaps text speak will seem perfectly normal in 50 years' time. Perhaps there'll be a 21st-century edition of Shakespeare's collected works featuring "2B/not 2B", and the *Oxford English Dictionary* will define "2thless" and "1derment". Perhaps misery memoirs will be written not in prose, but as a series of increasingly downcast emoticons.

But let's look on the bright side. If everyone in the world keeps texting, we'll all become as mentally stunted as each other, and so nobody will even notice that there's been a narrowing of the human attention span. Or, as it will surely become known, a10shn spn.