

Student researches how texting culture has evolved

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Back in the good old days, the most complex message one could expect to receive via texting was 160 characters long and ended with LOL, maybe ROFL on a particularly crazy day. But according to research from a recently completed student project, texting is becoming less simplistic and more like other forms of communication.

Jessie Hale spent last year studying texting behavior and the changes that have come to the cellular world, courtesy of a \$1,500 ORCA grant she received last fall.

“I thought it would be interesting to see how text messaging affects different elements of discourse,” she said. “People used to use texting to inform people or to ask a quick question, but now it’s become a way of

having entire conversations.”

Hale worked with Wendy Baker, assistant professor in the department of linguistics and English language, to collect nearly 1,500 texts from friends, co-workers and random participants as part of the project. The pair analyzed these texts by looking at what texters were willing to say and how they said it. They also conducted a survey that asked what people did and didn't like about texting, how often they used texting and what they deemed appropriate for the medium.

This information helped the pair correlate texting behavior with variables such as age and gender.

“People are bolder while texting than they would be in person, and it doesn't matter if they are male or female,” Baker said. “What matters is age: the younger you are, the more daring you are. This daringness seems to peak at 25 and decrease from there.”

Gender might not affect what a person is willing to do via texting, but it has a profound impact on how that person asks a question or requests a favor.

“We all do different things during conversations to make potentially threatening acts, like complaining or declining offers, less threatening,” Hale said. “We thought it would be interesting to see how those politeness factors affect text messaging.”

According to Hale's research, men like to impersonalize questions (Do you know if this has been done?) and lighten up situations with jokes. And women are more apt to apologize (Sorry to ask, but are you available to help?) and provide a list of reasons for their actions.

These elements of politeness were noticeably absent from texting several

years ago simply because text messages were limited to 160 characters. But the death of the hard-and-fast character limit also signaled the end of using texts solely for party invites and emoticons.

However, texting is also drifting further away from other forms of communication because of its impersonal, impermanent nature.

“[Texting](#) is very transient,” Hale said. “Texts will eventually disappear if they are not saved, so we feel safer giving out information that might seem sensitive if spoken.”

Provided by Brigham Young University

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