

Punctuation in text messages helps replace cues found in face-to-face conversations

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Emoticons, irregular spellings and exclamation points in text messages aren't sloppy or a sign that written language is going down the tubes—these "textisms" help convey meaning and intent in the absence

of spoken conversation, according to newly published research from Binghamton University, State University of New York.

"In contrast with face-to-face conversation, texters can't rely on extra-linguistic cues such as tone of voice and pauses, or non-linguistic cues such as facial expressions and hand gestures," said Binghamton University Professor of Psychology Celia Klin. "In a spoken conversation, the cues aren't simply add-ons to our words; they convey critical information. A facial expression or a rise in the pitch of our voices can entirely change the meaning of our words."

"It's been suggested that one way that texters add meaning to their words is by using "textisms"— things like emoticons, irregular spellings (sooooo) and irregular use of punctuation (!!!)."

A 2016 study led by Klin found that text messages that end with a period are seen as less sincere than text messages that do not end with a period. Klin pursued this subject further, conducting experiments to see if people reading texts understand textisms, asking how people's understanding of a single-word text (e.g., yeah, nope, maybe) as a response to an invitation is influenced by the inclusion, or absence, of a period.

"In formal writing, such as what you'd find in a novel or an essay, the period is almost always used grammatically to indicate that a sentence is complete. With texts, we found that the period can also be used rhetorically to add meaning," said Klin. "Specifically, when one texter asked a question (e.g., I got a new dog. Wanna come over?), and it was answered with a single word (e.g., yeah), readers understood the response somewhat differently depending if it ended with a period (yeah.) or did not end with a period (yeah). This was true if the response was positive (yeah, yup), negative (nope, nah) or more ambiguous (maybe, alright). We concluded that although periods no doubt can serve

a grammatical function in texts just as they can with more formal writing—for example, when a period is at the end of a sentence—periods can also serve as textisms, changing the meaning of the text."

Klin said that this research is motivated by an interest in taking advantage of a unique moment in time when scientists can observe language evolving in real time.

"What we are seeing with electronic communication is that, as with any unmet language need, new language constructions are emerging to fill the gap between what people want to express and what they are able to express with the tools they have available to them," said Klin. "The findings indicate that our understanding of written language varies across contexts. We read text messages in a slightly different way than we read a novel or an essay. Further, all the elements of our texts—the punctuation we choose, the way that words are spelled, a smiley face—can change the meaning. The hope, of course, is that the meaning that is understood is the one we intended. Certainly, it's not uncommon for those of us in the lab to take an extra second or two before we send texts. We wonder: How might this be interpreted? 'Hmmm, period or no period? That sounds a little harsh; maybe I should soften it with a "lol" or a winky-face-tongue-out emoji.'"

With trillions of text messages sent each year, we can expect the evolution of textisms, and of the language of texting more generally, to continue at a rapid rate, wrote the researchers. Texters are likely to continue to rely on current textisms, as well to as create new textisms, to take the place of the extra-linguistic and nonverbal cues available in spoken conversations. The rate of change for "talk-writing" is likely to continue to outpace the changes in other forms of English.

"The results of the current experiments reinforce the claim that the

divergence from formal written English that is found in digital communication is neither arbitrary nor sloppy," said Klin. "It wasn't too long ago that people began using email, instant messaging and text messaging on a regular basis. Because these forms of communication provide limited ways to communicate nuanced [meaning](#), especially compared to face-to-face conversations, people have found other tools."

Klin believes that this subject could be studied further.

"An important extension would be to have a situation that more closely mimics actual texting, but in the lab where we can observe how different cues, such as punctuation, abbreviations and emojis, contribute to texters' understanding," she said. "We might also examine some of the factors that should influence texters' understanding, such as the social relationship between the two texters or the topic of the text exchange, as their level of formality should influence the role of things like punctuation."

The study, "Punctuation in [text](#) messages may convey abruptness. Period," was published in *Computers in Human Behavior*.

More information: Kenneth J. Houghton et al, Punctuation in text messages may convey abruptness. Period, *Computers in Human Behavior* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chb.2017.10.044](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.10.044)

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