

Text messages and emojis: Do they enrich our language or denigrate it?

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A new book co-authored by a University of South Australia academic gives an insight into how text messaging—celebrating its 30th birthday this year—has been driven by technology and young people.

Every day, nearly 20 billion text messages are sent worldwide, with more than 3000 [emojis](#) to choose from. Short message services (aka SMS) are the single most used feature on a smartphone, but have they denigrated or improved our [language](#)?

In the book [Exploring Language in Global Contexts](#), UniSA linguist Dr. Antonella Strambi and Flinders University lecturer Dr. Olga Sanchez Castro devote a chapter to addressing the impact of technology on language, citing more efficient communication and the role that young people have played in driving this change.

It's almost 30 years since the first [text message](#) was sent by 22-year-old UK software programmer Neil Papworth on 3 December 1992, wishing his colleague "Merry Christmas."

From an original limit of 160 characters, messages are now media rich (including emojis, photos, videos and GIFs), can be sent via various channels, and have morphed from private social exchanges to useful [communication tools](#) for governments and businesses.

"Where once they were purely social channels, SMS is now also used to send 'push notifications' such as reminders of payment dates, weather alerts, appointments and critical health messages," Dr. Strambi says.

"Text messaging has changed the way we communicate and while deep concerns have been expressed about how detrimental textspeak is to literacy and grammar, there is no real evidence to suggest that is the case.

"Despite the concerns often expressed by language purists, nearly three decades of electronic communication have demonstrated that speakers learn to switch confidently and accurately between formal and informal language. It has even been suggested that text messaging may in fact

enrich literacy, rather than hinder it."

Dr. Strambi says young people have always been innovators when it comes to new words and expressions in our language, combining words learned from their parents with new phrases to create frequently used idioms.

"Ironically, once new expressions enter everyday language and become common, they lose their novelty and appeal for young people who then create new words and phrases to differentiate their identity and social group. The same trend can be seen with social media channels such as Facebook, created in 2004 by university students. Once their parents started using it, young people moved on."

The only constant about language is that it changes, Dr. Strambi says.

"There is evidence to show that language is becoming more informal and more efficient—both influenced by technology—and text messaging has led that transformation. It is an asset, not an issue."

Provided by University of South Australia

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