Txting: The Gr8 Db8

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Description

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David Crystal’sTxting: The Gr8 Db8

Review by Jeffrey Barlow


One of the truly controversial impacts of the Internet and other electronic communication methods has been that upon writing. Some see, for example, the rapid spread of texting as disastrous. David Crystal’s Txting: The Gr8 Db8, should make us all feel better, providing that we can decipher the title, of course. One of its many benefits is that it teaches the reader to understand texts.

Crystal is both a noted academic linguist, and a witty writer who pays particular attention to the effects of digital communication upon the English language. We have earlier reviewed others of his works. [1] Here he discusses texting in his usual highly informative and entertaining style.

At first glance Txting: The Gr8 Db8 might be thought of as an elegant trifle. It is published in a small format, bound with heavy gold embossing and black covers and endpapers, and, of course, issued by the Oxford University Press. Both the topic and the relative brevity of the book suggests perhaps a quick witty romp through the latest linguistic crimes of the thumb tribes, those individuals--usually young individuals--seen tapping away at cell phones at every moment, whether convenient or inconvenient.

Crystal, however, is one of the principle analysts and historians of English, and consequently has a very broad perspective. Crystal argues that texting is not only nothing all that new, but in general a very positive development which promises, if anything, to enhance the language.
Why then, does it arouse so much resistance if not outright resentment in many? One possibility, speaking as a teacher, is certainly that it can often be a terrible distraction, both for the texter and for the unfortunate bystanders. In general, however, I agree with Crystal that the source of our doubts is simply ignorance. Texting is not, as anybody who has tried it for the first time is aware, all that easy.

The very difficulty of manipulating the physical device, usually a cell phone but increasingly also an internet-enabled tool such as a Blackberry, puts a premium upon simplicity and speed. Capitalization is probably the first element to go, quickly followed by commas, apostrophes, the possessive case, unnecessary vowels, and soon entire words.

To Crystal, texting is a sort of demotic language, a dialect of the language from which it is derived. And texting is seemingly universal. Crystal's own grasp of at least the linguistic descriptions of many languages, from Welsh to Italian via Japanese, Chinese, Czech, Russian, etc., allows him to make many observations about commonalities as well as distinctive differences between texters world-wide.

And while short, the work is by no means simple. In order to read it in any depth, we also need to be able to read texts. By the end of the book, we have taken, if not necessarily passed with honors, short courses in Texting 101, 102, and 103. At the beginning of the book we are introduced to rules, such as usually dropping repeated letters, then beginning to abbrev, ltr drpng vwls, nex punctuation (xcpt whn clrt sez otherwise, thn voila! we r reding txt).

Texting also often has, like so much digital communication, a ludic or playful element. We have had texted poetry contests, entire novels, interactive multi-author works, and many other forms of texted prose. Crystal draws on examples of many such works to make his points, and in doing so introduces several interesting new genres to us.
One poet, Norman Silver, has published two collections of text-poetry. Here, shamelessly cribbed from "The virtuallinguist" [2] are two of his poems, also reproduced by Silver.

"txt commndmnts"

1 u shall luv ur mobil fone with all ur hart
2 u & ur fone shall neva b apart
3 u shall nt lust aftr ur neibrs fone nor thiev
4 u shall b prepard @ all times 2 tXt & 2 recv
5 u shall use LOL & othr acronyms in conversatns
6 u shall b zappy with ur ast*r*sks & exc!matns!!
7 u shall abbrevi8 & rite words like theyr sed
8 u shall nt speak 2 sum1 face2face if u cn msg em insted
9 u shall nt shout with capitls XEPT IN DIRE EMERGNCY+
10 u shall nt consult a ninglish dictnry

"langwij"

langwij
is hi-ly infectious
children
the world ova
catch it
from parence
by word of mouth
the yung
r specially vulnerable
so care
shud b taken how langwij
is spread
symptoms include acute
goo-goo
& the equally serious ga-ga
if NE child is infected with langwij
give em
3 Tspoons of txt
b4 bedtime
&_ a tablet of verse
after every meal [3]

Neither are the short forms or conventions of texting new ones. As Crystal says, "Texting may be using a new technology, but its linguistic processes are centuries old." [4] A surprising number of common abbreviations are well-established ones, and many can be found in classical English literature and poetry.

Crystal also studies the origins and the spread of texting, and its impact. The largest concern has so far been, aside from some worries about malformed or otherwise injured thumbs, that it will begin to replace Standard English. Crystal has collected hundreds if not thousands of examples of texting in many languages, and assures us that even the very young have an appropriate sense of when it is all right to use text, and when more formality is required.

In addition, Crystal argues, because one must learn whatever the standard version of one's language in order to write at all, those who text well almost invariably also have an excellent command of their language. Those who write more text seemingly also both write more, and better, Standard English.

Crystal not only as this book makes evident, walks the walk, but he also txts the txt. His blog, a delight for all those interested in the many usages of English and other languages, can be found online. [5] The work also contains a very useful glossary of computer-mediated communication as well as lists of texting conventions found in eleven different languages.

With the holiday season fast approaching, this work would make a wonderful family gift, if you can get the kids to put down their dam fone long enough to read it!
Endnotes


[4] p. 27