



Text Messaging: Literate or Oral Discourse?

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Text messaging is a form of writing, but it may be more like speech than writing. The author compiles a corpus of text messages from his own conversations and examines features atypical of other writing. Discourse markers and tone markers are found in the form of emoticons and punctuation (both standard and nonstandard). Turn-taking and tone are identified as present in text messaging. The author concludes that text messaging is primarily oral rather than literate—spoken rather than written.

Introduction

There is a definite distinction between literate and oral discourse. They are identified by the media as writing and speaking, respectively. Barbara Johnstone shows that characteristics of oral discourse include mnemonic devices (such as rhythm and rhyme) as well as a tendency to aggregate knowledge about the world immediately around us. By contrast, literate discourse requires no memorization and typically deals more with the theoretical and the esoteric (Johnstone 2008).

Included in this discussion is the question of ‘plannedness’—the extent to which a given discourse is planned in advance. Because of oral discourse’s demand for real-time communication, little planning is permitted as compared to the amount of planning allowed in literate discourse. This leads literacy to simpler grammatical structures and more references to the immediate (demonstratives, present tense, etc.). Orality, on the other hand, tends toward denser grammatical structures and more references to the general (Johnstone 2008).

Of course, any discourse will exhibit characteristics of both orality and literacy, but one will typically trump the other. Of all forms of communication available to us today, one of particular interest in this context is text messaging (TM). Its convenience and privacy are immediately appealing. It has, however, drawn much criticism, especially in reference to teenagers’ and young adults’ usage. With the emergence of emoticons and abbreviations galore, TM has taken on peculiar characteristics. But are these characteristic primarily of oral or literate discourse?

Side A: Literate

There is a strong and clear argument to be made that TM is modeled chiefly on literate discourse. First and foremost, it is in written form or is at least visual and nonverbal. Robert Beasley performed a study on college students in 2009 in which he found many TM symbols rooted in this feature: thirty of the fifty-three most common symbols were

abbreviations or other representations not based on sound or anything spoken, and five relied on the names of letters and not their sound in use (Beasley 2009).

TM also lends itself to literacy in that the audience is absent. Thus the need for such paralinguistic activity as intonation or gesture disappears. One longitudinal study of twenty-one smartphone users shows that emoticons were used in only four percent of all 158,098 text messages recorded, suggesting that the bare text is sufficient (Tossell, et al. 2012).

Walter Ong has done much work with respect to orality and literacy, especially with an emphasis on technology's influence. He concluded that the orality of radio and television broadcasts was irrevocably primarily literate because they required planned, recorded transcripts before natural speech could occur. He essentially summarized the argument for ascribing literacy to TM, even before TM had been invented: "Orality cannot cope with electronic media Because we live in a media-conscious world, we are able to make the contrast between oral speech and writing" (Ong 1980).

Side B: Oral

On the other hand, TM exhibits many characteristics of oral discourse. To begin such a discussion, it seems appropriate to quote Ong again:

We are so literate in ideology that we think writing comes naturally. We have to remind ourselves from time to time that writing is completely and irremedially artificial, and that what you find in a dictionary are not real words but coded marks for voicing real words, exteriorally or in imagination (Ong 1980).

This must be the point of departure for any investigation of the written word. Any feature of literacy is possible only because orality is possible. Such knowledge militates against an interpretation of TM as literary solely because it is written.

As stated previously, Beasley discovered many TM terms that were born of literacy and not orality—from their form, not their sound; however, there are many phonetically derived abbreviations, such as 8 in *l8r* or 4 for *for*, especially among younger users. Soffer claims that these playful misspellings are akin to the overuse of certain punctuation marks and the higher frequency of totally capitalized words—all in an effort to express oneself as a speaker, and a dynamic one at that (Soffer 2010).

Despite the fact that the audience is absent in TM, nonverbal cues are still of tremendous impact. One study found that the same set of text is perceived much differently based on the presence of positive, negative, and no emoticons. Thus, appropriate expression of emotion, attitude, and attention are heavily shaped by this nonverbal cue in TM (Lo 2008). Furthermore, Soffer points out that “in a synchronic forum, the reaction time is crucial—any delay in response can be disruptive . . . indicating a technical lag or a problem of attitude of the sender” (Soffer 2010). It is possible for asynchrony in TM communication, but synchronic conversation is often expected. Surely the reader has experienced such a disruption.

Also noteworthy is the level of planning typical of TM. It is universally recognized that TM is seldom free of typos or grammatical errors. These features are of orality and not literacy. In these ways, TM can be seen to embody an oral model despite its deceptive form.

Methodology

In order to test which one of the aforementioned approaches was more appropriate for TM, I created a small corpus of 12,548 words from my own TM conversations. I transcribed 816 messages to and from one contact and twenty to thirty messages from nine other contacts; unfortunately, all the data was lost except for those from the first source. The transcription is as faithful as is possible: improper spelling

and/or grammar was included in order to have a more accurate sample. Unfortunately, in my fervor to transcribe, I neglected to keep capitalization as it originally was. Since this led to many capitalized acronyms when they were in fact lower-case, acronyms were not included in my consideration of nonstandard capitalization.

Having transcribed the text messages, I searched in a word processor for the following features: punctuation marks (periods, ellipses, exclamation points), emoticons, nonstandard orthography (capitalization, spelling), and nonstandard yet common speech words (*hahaha*, *um*). In these, I looked for bases of literacy (grammaticality, presence of planning) or orality (intonation, gesture, lack of planning). In many instances, repetition was employed (such as a period versus an ellipsis); I accounted for and reported appropriately the number of such instances accurately. A chart containing interesting or noteworthy features is included in the analysis.

Analysis

With regard to emoticons, my data had far more than that of Tossell et al., with about twenty percent of messages containing at least one. There was not much variety; besides a smile and a wink, there were only two other emoticons, which were used three times total. Beyond that, though, was an extremely interesting pattern: every emoticon was placed at the end of a clause, and most were followed by a capitalized letter. This suggests that the emoticon doubles as a period/exclamation point and as a paralinguistic feature such as tone or facial expression.

Oral discourse is unique in its preponderance of discourse markers and repair mechanisms. These are neither accidental nor unnoticed in text messaging, as they may seem in spoken discourse, for a handful of them surfaced repeatedly in my data. The most common were *hey*, *well*, *haha*, *mmm*, and *um*. In every instance, *hey* introduced a new topic. The rest expressed the conversant's reaction to a previous

statement or event. *Mmm* and *um* were closely related, but the former indicated more uncertainty while the latter indicated more resistance. There were few such discourse markers to end a message or clause (for example, ending a turn with, *so ...*). The only other type of marker I could identify was when a clause ended with the words *you know?* This would make great sense in speech, giving the other person an opportunity to ask clarification questions or take over; but all three instances of this marker occurred within a text message, with more text on either side. The questions were never replied to.

My data suggests that some nonstandard grammar and orthography is the norm in TM. Over sixty percent of commas were used to stand where a period was grammatically necessary, but where neither a pause nor an intonation change would likely have occurred, as in the following example: “We’re debating on *The Hobbit* at 7:15, you in?” There was, however, not a single abbreviation unique to TM, such as *LOL* or *TTYL*. Interestingly, there were two texts that read, in full, “??” and “...?” and another which read “!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”. Because there is no actual sound associated with ! or ?, one can confidently conclude that these were literacy-based utterances, hijacking the essence of a question without other words or sounds. However, the vast majority of messages were grammatically well-formed, at least at the clause level.

Data	#	Notes	Data	#	Notes
:)	123	Punctuate	.	658	After only about half of texts
;))	26	2 don't punctuate	,	501	1/3 in place of periods
:(2	Punctuate	...	20	3 before, 1 mid, 16 after clauses
o_o	1	Punctuates	:	41	14 after only 1 or 2 words
Well	22	2 mid-text	;	10	-
Haha	19	0 mid-text	!	263	-

Data	#	Notes	Data	#	Notes
Hey	19	2 mid-text	!!	19	-
OK	10	3 mid-text	!!!	17	-
Mmm	5	1 mid-text	!!!!	4	-
Um	2	0 mid-text			

Table 1: Noteworthy punctuation marks and discourse markers

Besides such distinct and visible features as punctuation marks, the theme of the messages is worth consideration. There were two messages of great length, but the vast majority were shorter than the 160-character limit. The messages communicated in TM tend to be simple and immediate, perhaps in part because of this strict limit on message length. Many were setting up a time to talk; many were wishing good morning, good night, good luck, etc.; many were simple approvals of the previous message; many were a statement followed by a question on the same topic; but few were standing alone, and only three wrestled with anything remotely theoretical beyond what is visible or audible.

Conclusions

As anticipated, this data does not indicate that TM is completely oral or literate in form, but rather that it is a mixture with orality as the primary component. It seems clear, then, that the data suggests a dominance of orality over literacy.

The unique creation of the emoticon in TM is of great importance in the data. The form of the emoticon itself can be construed as literate, since there is no sound associated with either symbol. Nonetheless, as we read words and not letters, we see a face and not symbols. The fact that facial expressions are represented, or at least referenced, in TM suggests that such meaning is expected—that orality is cham-

pioned therein. One can easily imagine smiles or winks punctuating spoken utterances.

That discourse markers are found in TM at all immediately points to orality over literacy. True, horizontal intertextuality may connect one text to another, but to connect one speaker so fully to another is not part of literacy (Johnstone 2008). TM feels so much like oral discourse that these markers have been included. There is, however, a lack of closing utterances such as *goodbye* or *talk to you later*. Perhaps this is simply the nature of my communication with my source.

Literacy promotes standardized grammar, including punctuation marks. It can be difficult, though, to transcribe natural, real-time speech with our orthography. This data suggests that TM does not demand such rigid rightness as does literacy, as comma splices and sentence fragments are common. These would suggest a more oral model for TM as well.

Of course, these conclusions are of limited reliability given the narrow number of participants; however, text messaging can be highly personal and private, so securing permission from more informants for analysis and sharing conversations may have proven difficult. Also limiting would be the short time frame: the messages considered in this paper date back about five months, but the other data (now lost) only went back about a week. Perhaps my own and others' patterns would have changed in that time, either in general or in conformity with the other person in the conversation.

Nonetheless, this data suggests quite clearly that TM is far more oral than literate in its discourse structure. Future studies must surely include far more participants and perhaps a longer time frame (although TM usage change over time is unclear). With the advent of smartphones, transcription is as simple as emailing the conversation to another address for compilation and study, allowing more data than was available for me to study. This would undoubtedly show more fully how TM is modeled after orality before literacy.

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