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## Textism: Is Spelling Over?



By Marty Kaplan

*f u cn rd ths, u cn bcm a sec & gt a gd jb w hi pa.*

You can tell that's not a text message. When secretaries were getting good jobs for high pay, no one was texting.

Those School of Speedwriting ads were everywhere in New York in the 1950s and '60s, and in New Jersey where I grew up. I didn't want to become a secretary, but at age 12, I did wonder if learning lightning dictation could give me an extra edge in college, which everyone I knew had cautioned me would be really, really hard.

I never took the home study course, but the texts and tweets and emails I send today are full of *plz* and *thx* and *u* and *w* and *&*, and that's true as well for most of the messages I get. I write *coupla* and *wanna* and *lmk*. i'm also — the horror — a lower case kind of guy. Many people rail against this as a degradation of language and a vandalizing of culture. I'm not one of them. I think it's efficient, occasionally ingenious, unpretentious and fun.

But I have my limits. Articles, resumes, professional work — standard English only, please. In domains like that, I'm a hawk on spelling, grammar and punctuation. If you don't know the difference between *your* and *you're*, *its* and *it's*, *affect* and *effect*, I'm rigidly intolerant. I let myself get away with murdering the English language in an email, but for a job applicant I treat it like a capital crime.

The prescriptive case for standard English has always made sense to me. Good grammar, proper punctuation and correct spelling improve communication. Not only do they clarify the sending and receiving of messages, they clarify the thinking that goes into those messages. Plus there's a cultural argument: Language is constitutive of identity, and if the rules of language erode, the identity erodes.

Yet recently I've found myself wondering whether my orthodoxy will one day seem foolish in retrospect. "Spelling! What were they thinking?"

I'm not making a political argument here. It's not about whether Ebonics is legitimate or not. In fact, I'm sympathetic to the idea that subcultures create their identities through the use of nonstandard — not substandard — English. I readily acknowledge that the rules of standard English are values-laden and can be deployed as instruments of social sorting. I agree with Oxford English professor Simon Horobin, author of the book *Does Spelling Matter?*, who told an interviewer that “judging character or worth by how meticulous a speller a person [is] ‘is a way to say I’m better than you.... It’s a form of licensed prejudice.’” No, my beef with spelling isn’t that it protects the ruling class. It’s that it’s so irrelevant.

I mean, really: *Occurred* has two c’s and two r’s. Is getting that wrong really a slippery slope to barbarism? The truth is that I always know what someone means by *your welcome*, and a misspelling never flummoxes me. I may squirm inwardly when I hear “between you and I,” but I never misunderstand it. It’s ridiculous that people now say “literally” when they mean “figuratively,” but it’s never so ridiculous that I fail to comprehend them. Dan Quayle was spit-roasted for spelling *potatoe* with that e at the end; it was seen as evidence that he was just a dumb blonde. But not a single person laughing at him would ever mistake a potato for a turnip, which arguably should be what’s at stake here.

It’s one thing for Professor Horobin, or me, to cut misspellers some slack. In my case, the grammar that Mrs. Bustard drilled into my head served me well on standardized tests, in college and in my career, so it’s easy for me to go wobbly on rules now. But what about today’s texting toddlers who grow up thinking that *lo/* is a word? Are we raising a generation of illiterates whose fuzzy spelling is the precursor of fuzzy thinking?

It’s not as though we can stop them, no more than King Canute could stop the tide. The coming universal penetration of smart phones, the Wild West vibe of the Internet, the bias of social media for brevity, instantaneity and comedy: these vectors are inexorably torquing how we communicate. But are they also dumbing us down?

A study sponsored by the British Academy for the Humanities and Social Sciences has a heartening answer. “Textism,” as the report calls the kind of discourse that 8-to-12 year-olds and I use, is actually driving the development of reading skill in children. “If we are seeing a decline in literacy standards among children,” says its author, Dr. Clare Wood of Coventry University, “it is in spite of text messaging, not because of it.”

I can easily imagine a future where voice-to-text, or thought-to-text, is the main method of writing. I can imagine apps able to transform any text to fit any place on the language spectrum, from Henry James and Henry Higgins at one end, to *2 kewl 4 skewl* and *rotflmfao* at the other. I can even imagine that the brain regions we cultivate in order to read and write literature will not be made vestigial by outsourcing to software our mastery of the Queen’s English.

The one thing I can’t imagine is a future where u cn bcm a sec & gt a gd jb w hi pa.

*This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. My JJ columns won the 2013 Best Columnist award from the LA Press Club. You can read more of them here, and email me there if you’d like.*

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