

# SHOULD U RLY BE TXTNG UR S/O

ANYA BERLOVA

*University of Colorado Boulder*

This paper examines the impact of phone-based communication and the language of texting on romantic relationships in the United States. Texting has become an integral aspect of romantic relationships for many young adults (Luo 2014), but expert opinion is divided on the subject. Certain studies have shown that texting may lead to “disconnect” and mixed signals, further amplified by the lack of “standardization in [emoji] deployment.” Conversely, others have found that the similarity of mobile communication between partners may lead to “higher understanding” and greater relationship satisfaction, and emoji usage can be effective in cross-cultural engagement and as a signal of conversational and relational exclusivity. Through an analysis of research in media and relationships, the paper argues that the ambiguity presented by texting and phone-based communication can be dangerous, but can also contribute to powerful in-group and pro-social activity. If misused, the effect on romantic relationships can be adverse, so it is crucial that both partners are aware of the possible pitfalls to be able to navigate them with care.

*Keywords:* text messaging, new media, technologically mediated communication, cell phone, emoji

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the current technological world, the phone has emerged as a popular tool of communication. According to Luo (2014:145), “[American] cell owners between the ages of 18 and 24 exchange an average of 109.5 messages on a normal day.” Hence, it is logical to assume that texting has become an integral aspect of romantic relationships for many young adults in the United States. However, as discussed by McManus (2018), the texting language is viewed as a lesser form of English. Furthermore, many linguists and sociologists view texting as a harmful communication tool, with negative effects on both the conversation and the relationship between the parties involved. This paper will aim to answer the question of how the language of texting affects romantic relationships in the United States, and whether it is truly problematic as a language in regard to clarity, understanding, and positive development of the relationship. The first section of the paper details the impact of over-reliance on the texting medium, as well as the positive role texting can serve in relationship formation. The second section of the paper highlights the stylistic features of texting, including emojis and acronyms such as ‘lol’, and their effect on relationship

dynamics. The analysis contributes to literature in linguistics on the social effect of mobile communication within the US.

## 2. THE ROLE OF TEXTING IN ESTABLISHING OR DESTABILIZING RELATIONSHIPS

The utilization of texting provides affordances as well as hindrances for romantic relationships. A study by Schade et al. (2013) of 276 young adults in the United States examines the lower relationship quality brought about by texting for both men and women, in regard to both texting that is used to work through conflicts or apologize, or texting that is simply too frequent. All of the study participants were either in serious relationships, engaged, or married. Study results revealed that texting is a narrow form of expression, so neither side can fully express nor understand the breadth of the emotions of the other person. Schade et al. propose that texting may be a safer form of communication, but may serve as a replacement for in-person conversations, leading to disconnect (Schade et al. 2013). Furthermore, as noted by McSweeney (2019), the texting component forces people to consider a “new layer of compatibility” when assessing their romantic partner. Accurately doing so may be difficult and hinder a relationship’s successful development. McSweeney (2019) explains that a large amount of information is exchanged over text, but this can open the door to misinterpretation because “people have different language skills, dialects, and even expectations.” Hence, developing trust and intimacy may not be easily achieved through the texting platform.

The intimacy issue and the dangers of a reliance on the texting medium can further be seen in a study conducted by Gershon (2011) regarding media switching and relationships. Gershon collected 72 interviews with undergraduates at Indiana University, and an issue around media switching had surfaced: more specifically, the lack of transition between texting to in-person conversations. According to one of the interviewees, Trill, her relationship fell apart when she was not able to communicate with her romantic interest, Todd, in person. The two would text, but when they found each other face to face, “all they did was make out” and never actually talked. Trill noted that it was easier for her to text, and at first it seemed to be effective, but eventually, Todd became less and less engaged and eventually found someone else (Gershon 2011:395). This supports the findings by Schade et al. (2013) regarding the emergence of disconnect in a relationship when texting replaces talking in person.

Gershon (2011) further points out that texting may be specifically problematic for young adults, who may feel “trapped and frustrated in texting-only relationships.” For instance, another interviewee, Rebecca, found herself greatly irritated and upset with her breakup after her boyfriend ended things via text messaging. Rebecca wanted “clarity” about his intentions and felt that a text exchange could not fully reflect them. Confusion around actions and intentions was also present in the case of another student, Halle, whose boyfriend continued to text her after breaking up with her over text. It was clear that for them, a breakup text message meant different things; for Halle’s now ‘ex’-boyfriend, texting “did not mean the definitive end of the relationship,” contrary to how it was for Halle. In the case of Trill, Rebecca, and Halle, the use of texting as the primary form of communication led to the termination of relationships without the opportunity for reconciliation, which may have been possible if in-person conversation was utilized (Gershon 2011). Additionally, LeFevbre (2017) brings up texting as a route towards the avoidance of confrontation and the usage of GHOSTING. Ghosting refers to “unilaterally ceasing communications (temporarily or permanently) in an effort to withdraw access to individual (s) prompting relationship dissolution (suddenly or gradually) commonly enacted via one or multiple technological medium (s)” (220). As LeFevbre (2017) describes, a breakup is achieved more easily through the abrupt disengagement of one partner from an online conversation (such as that over text), but is “negatively endorse[d]” by the recipient of the ghosting. Although it is possible that the ghosting initiator does so to “save the non-initiators’ feelings”, the act is viewed as ambiguous and lacking compassion, and a passive approach to a difficult conversation (LeFevbre 2017:227).

Luna (2018) provides an alternative viewpoint into this situation: she concludes that texting can be a tool to bring people closer together, not break their connection. Luna (2018) cites Trub and Barbot (2020) on the motivation behind texting of 982 adults between the ages of 18 to 29. The study revealed that often, people express thoughts over text that they were too shy or anxious to do in person. As stated by Trub and Barbot (2020), “texting may be used in the service of alleviating fear, anxiety or discomfort related to being in social situations, enabling more confidence and ease in expressing oneself.” A study by Reid and Reid (2007) offers further support for the usage of texting to build connection. For study participants who carried a greater sense of anxiety, texting was preferred over methods of communication such as voice calls. To them, sending texts felt more comfortable, leading to “expressive and intimate contact” (Reid & Reid, 2007:433). Interestingly, study participants who felt lonely rather than socially anxious preferred

voice calls and viewed texting as a less intimate communication method. Perhaps, the asynchronous nature of texting grants a sense of safety, but it may also lead to problems in the way the relationship is viewed. Dibble (2017) finds that the edited and perfected nature of a text can lead to “high idealization” of the person on the other side of the screen, causing the communication to seem less tangible (75). The research Dibble (2017) describes is related to potential infidelity by partners, and their perception of a side-relationship that takes place online as a “fantasy” rather than reality. Even so, it can be posited that a parallel could be drawn to romantic relationships and how they are perceived if the use of texting is heavily utilized. It is possible that the presence of a phone as the moderator between two romantically involved parties can create a schism between real life and the “online” life and distort one’s view of their partner and relationship. More specifically, a relationship may be implicitly viewed in a less serious and more casual way, which opens the door for more ambiguity. Furthermore, the aspect of idealization stems from one’s ability to filter a text and portray themselves in the best light, and if this is not displayed in real life, it can create uncomfortable unpredictability. According to Murray (1996:1156), one may wish to idealize their partner due to a “desire for security” and wish to “feel safe and secure in one’s commitment.” If there is a lack of consistency in the way a partner is over text versus offline, this can sabotage the feeling of security since the actuality of who the partner is will not be clear (Murray 1996).

### 3. STYLISTIC FEATURES OF TEXTING

The texting medium encompasses unique stylistic and technical means of expression. According to an interview held by Turello (2017), emojis are a significant communication tool in the language of texting. The interviewees, which included Wendy Hall, a Computer Science Professor at the University of Southampton, Alexandre Loktionov, an expert in hieroglyphic texts, and Jessica Lingel, a social media expert and assistant professor at the University of Pennsylvania, come to a consensus that emojis are an efficient means of communicating and can add significant meaning to written words and phrases; however, there is an issue with “standardization in sign deployment” (Turello 2017). Both Loktionov and Lingel express concerns about the possibility of misinterpretation due to a lack of concrete “dictionary definitions” for each emoji. If texting is viewed as a separate and individual form of language, then, as with English, “standardization” may not be the accurate approach since various people may have different ways of expressing themselves over text and “texting dialects” may emerge. However, there is a higher danger of

misinterpretation during texting communication since the communicating parties do not see each other in real life, so nonverbal cues or tone of voice cannot be observed and interpreted.

Even so, as noted by Loktionov, the lack of “concreteness” with the use of emojis in texting, in part, has contributed to their growing popularity. According to him, the flexibility of emojis may often add to their usage value due to their ability to convey various emotions and thoughts (Turello 2017). Furthermore, in the cases where language is a definite barrier, emojis may present an effective method of expressing basic ideas and feelings, especially between people of different language groups. Still, Loktionov once again points out that this flexibility across various languages makes misinterpretation likely and presents a challenge in clear communication. Furthermore, according to Lingel and Hall, in modern days, since emoji usage is associated most with conveying feelings, they have become “feminized” in American society (Turello 2017). This has often led men to reject the use of emojis as a form of linguistic expression, which hinder emojis in becoming a more widely accepted form of language. Hence, if a male and a female in a heterosexual relationship are communicating, the female may find herself relying so much more on emojis that it may seem she is speaking a different form of texting dialect. This may serve as a barrier in communication between the two.

Crystal (2008) provides support for these potential negative aspects by discussing the fact that texting language utilizes a lot of unique features that may lead to confusion and frustration if both parties do not have the same understanding of their meaning. For example, texting uses a lot of omitted letters, which involves the removal of middle or end letters from the word. So, the word ‘message’ may be written as ‘msg’, and the word ‘texting’ may be written as ‘txtin’. Furthermore, texting utilizes initialisms, which reduces words to their initial letters, resulting in terms such as ‘jk’ to represent ‘just kidding’ (Crystal 2008:42). Another feature that is common is the presence of logograms, which translates to “the use of single letters, numerals, and typographic symbols to represent words, parts of words, or even noise associated with actions” (Crystal 2008:37). Hence, the word ‘for’ may be replaced with the number ‘4’, in a word such as ‘4ever’. The use of newly developed omissions, initialisms, or logograms may not be known by the texting recipient, which may cause dissatisfaction in the communication and, as a result, in the relationship overall.

McCulloch (2019) further agrees that communication difficulties and misinterpretations may result if there is not an open conversation about the “means” in which one is expressing one’s thoughts. McCulloch (2019) discusses that texters of different generations may differently

interpret simple features of a message. For example, periods at the end of sentences could be viewed by some as an indication of passive aggression, while others would not give them any meaning beyond adherence to rules of punctuation. McCulloch (2019) believes that there is no “one right way” to use language online and various uses are not wrong, but parties need to be open about their texting style. In fact, similarity in texting style between parties may contribute to greater relationship satisfaction. A study of young adults in romantic relationships by Ohadi (2018) shows that a larger similarity between two partners in the use of text messaging, as well as the frequency of “initiating and saying hello via text messaging,” leads to a more satisfying relationship. Greater similarity may correspond to higher understanding between two partners in regard to their texting behaviors, which confirms the importance of texting clarity in relationships.

A perspective I, myself, have developed is the fact that the features used over texting may be a form of slang; hence, a way to signify ‘in-group status’ (Mattiello 2008). Thus, it may be perfectly fine that certain logograms or initialisms, for example, would not be understood by everyone who looks at the message. In fact, a couple may develop certain initialisms or omissions themselves that only they understand between each other in order to discuss certain topics efficiently or prevent others from understanding the meaning of their conversation (especially in the cases if these topics would be considered ‘taboo’). In this scenario, the two people in the relationship would form their own in-group, with the texting slang they use signaling their belonging in the relationship and their togetherness. Thus, their ability to express their thoughts may not necessarily decrease, as they may have developed certain linguistic replacements for complex ideas that they now share and use among themselves. For instance, Gershon (2011) provides an example between two roommates, who developed a certain texting style to indicate different emotions. To convey a friendly tone, they would text each other ‘hey’ with two y’s, and if only one ‘y’ was used, this signaled negative feelings. The roommates found this an effective means of making their emotions known without needing to say it more explicitly (Gershon 2011:399). The usage of texting slang as such may be problematic in the case of the two partners belonging to different in-groups from which they draw their slang. If this is the case, it would be more difficult for them to reach an understanding and would hinder their closeness and connectedness.

Even so, it is important to note that many features of texting can be viewed as informal, so may make the interaction seem more casual and less meaningful. Hence, thoughts that could be

expressed in a deeper or more meaningful way in person would be reduced to a quick and concise format. Luo (2014) conducted an online study of 395 participants who described and discussed their texting behavior. The study shows that when partners start relying on texting as their primary form of communication, it may further weaken their attachment and lead to a significant decrease in relationship satisfaction. Texting may “reduce the feelings of love, closeness, and connection”, and may amplify miscommunication and misunderstanding (McManus 2018). According to McManus, acronyms such as ‘lol’ can be used as a signal of passive-aggressiveness or lack of seriousness of the statement to which it corresponds. Although this may lighten the mood in certain situations, it may also take away from the power and importance of a text, once again diminishing its meaningfulness. However, it is possible that deep conversation is not necessarily expected to occur over text, since, as McManus notes, the language of text emerged to fulfill the need of expressing sufficient-enough emotion using as few letters as possible, with emojis serving as virtual replacements for non-verbal dialogue and tone of voice.

McCulloch (2019) agrees that in certain circumstances, emojis can help contextualize the meaning of a text, such as in the cases that sarcasm is intended. McCulloch refers to emojis as “gestures” rather than a form of language, and points out that they are “expressive tools for informal writing” that may serve as an efficient tool to convey attention and irony when doing so with one’s voice is impossible. By using emojis, one can be clear when one is utilizing a playful spirit and “offer deliberate cues to the feelings, emotions, and intentions” behind the text. McCulloch (2019) notes this can be particularly useful in the situation when double meaning is intended. Gershon (2011) also discusses that the texting platform can be used to one’s advantage when expressing thoughts or emotions one would have difficulty with face to face. This may include conversations involving anger or jealousy, in which case some people use texting to limit and conceal their emotional intensity. This was also confirmed in a study by Pettigrew (2009), who found that individuals can use texting to hide their feelings as well as discuss subjects they would find uncomfortable in-person. Or, as indicated by students in Gershon’s study, texting can be used as a convenient flirting tool, as a phone potentially alleviates anxieties and grants higher levels of comfort.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In summary, texting as a language form needs to be navigated carefully; there has definitely been evidence of its negative effects on romantic relationships in the United States, but it also has potential to be used as a tool to build connection and efficiently convey information. Although Schade et al. (2013) provide research to support the idea that texting can lead to misinterpretation, lack of effective communication, and disconnect, there is alternative evidence that shows it is not necessarily so. In the interview by Turello (2017), both Loktionov and Lingel agree that emojis are useful in substituting for real-life emotions so can be good conversational cues. Although there is no one “emoji dictionary” and emoji usage is open to interpretation, it can be a good method of conveying thoughts and emotions in situations where language may be a barrier. On the other hand, it is important that emoji users are aware of emojis being “feminized” in our society (Turello 2017) and support males in using them in order to prevent major communicational differences between males and females in heterosexual relationships. Furthermore, as discussed by Crystal (2008), although in certain cases, the usage of texting initialisms, omissions, and logograms may act as another source of confusion and misinterpretation, in my opinion, it is a form of slang that can be used to signify in-group status (Mattiello 2008) between the communicating parties and build on their connection. Furthermore, although McManus (2018) notes that the informal structure of texts can reduce their meaningfulness, it is important to note that texting is not necessarily the tool that is widely used for extremely meaningful communication; its value lies in their ability to quickly and efficiently convey a thought or emotion. Overall, it does not seem that there is a concrete answer to whether the effects of texting on romantic relationships in the US are positive or negative. More research in this field from the perspective of socio-linguistics may be useful in coming to this conclusion, particularly with consideration of dialectal or cross-cultural differences. As of right now, I believe that the language of texting may benefit romantic relationships if used with care, but may hinder them if neither side is aware of the negative effects they can have and approaches texting carelessly.

#### REFERENCES

- Crystal, D. (2008). *Txtng: The Gr8 Db8*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gershon, I. (2011). Breaking Up Is Hard To Do: Media Switching and Media Ideologies. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*.

- Luna, K. (2018, August 9). It's Complicated: Our Relationship with Texting. *American Psychological Association*. Retrieved from <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2018/08/relationship-texting>
- LeFebvre, L. (2017). Phantom lovers: Ghosting as a relationship dissolution strategy in the technological age. In N.M. Punyanunt-Carter & J.S. Wrench (Eds). *The Impact of Social Media in Modern Romantic Relationships*. London: Lexington Books.
- Luo, S. (2014, April). Effects of texting on satisfaction in romantic relationships: the role of attachment. *Elsevier*.
- Mattiello, E. (2008). An Introduction to English Slang: A Description of its Morphology, Semantics and Sociology. *Polimetrica, International Scientific Publisher*.
- McCulloch, G. (2019, July). Is the internet killing language? LOL, no. *Vox*. Retrieved from <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/7/22/20702335/internet-language-text-emojis-gifs-bad-for-english>
- McManus, N. (2018, February). Listen Up: The Linguistics of Texting. *Wellesley Centers for Women*. Retrieved from <https://www.wcwonline.org/Women-s-Review-of-Books-Sept/Oct-2018/listen-up-the-linguistics-of-texting>
- McSweeney, M. (2019, September). Revealing your emoticon side: how digital technology has changed the way we talk to each other. *CBC Radio*. Retrieved from <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/spark/revealing-your-emoticon-side-how-digital-technology-has-changed-the-way-we-talk-to-each-other-1.5272103>
- Murray, S. (1996). The Self-Fulfilling Nature of Positive Illusions in Romantic Relationships: Love Is Not Blind, but Prescient. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.
- Ohadi, J. (2017, September). I just text to say I love you: Partner similarity in texting and relationship satisfaction. *Elsevier*.
- Pettigrew, J. (2009, August). Text Messaging and Connectedness Within Close Interpersonal Relationships. *Marriage and Family Review*.
- Punyanunt-Carter, N., & Wrench, J. (2017). *The Impact of Social Media in Modern Romantic Relationships*. London: Lexington Books.
- Reid, D. & Reid, F. (2007, June). Text or Talk? Social Anxiety, Loneliness, and Divergent Preferences for Cell Phone Use. *CyberPsychology and Behavior* 10(3).

- Schade, L., et al. (2013, October). Using Technology to connect in Romantic Relationships: Effects on Attachment, Relationship Satisfaction, and Stability in Emerging Adults. *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy*.
- Trub, L. & Barbot, B. (2020) Texting – Great escape or path to self-expression?: Development and validation of the Messing Motivations Questionnaire. *Measurement and Evaluation in Counseling and Development* 53(2).
- Turello, D. (2017, June 15). Emoji, Texting and Social Media: How Do They Impact Language? *Library of Congress*. Retrieved from <https://blogs.loc.gov/kluge/2017/06/emoji-texting-and-social-media-how-do-they-impact-language/>