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Texting Kills Off Words, But Language Survives

BY KATE KNIBBS
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Text-speak and spellcheck are killing off unconventional words and encouraging shorter communication, but the flexible language still manages to survive.

Researchers from the Institutions Markets Technologies' Lucca Institute for Advanced Studies in Italy performed a comprehensive study on technology's impact on words, looking at various languages since the advent of text messaging and digital word processing. They determined the use of spellcheckers discouraged unusual words, contributing to a decline in culturally accepted vocabulary words.

The research team also found technological strides inspired simple, easy-to-understand language choices. Speakers jettisoned longer, ornate phrases for abbreviations and acronyms, and words often "died," or fell out of use, more quickly.

The spellcheck function could threaten eccentric turns of phrase, it appears, but overall, the technological revolution also provides linguistic benefits.

Teenagers adopt obsolete words and dialects to cultivate exclusive slang for text messages and tweets, which helps fading languages stay current. Meanwhile, linguists recognize much-maligned text speak like "LOL" and "msg" actually reflects imaginative language use, showcasing creativity and not laziness.

The researchers discovered new words, like e-mail, are widely used in comparison to new words from past generations. When we coin new phrases today, they come into the general lexicon more quickly than they did in the past. This means people are better at picking up on novel expressions and language is likely to continue evolving at an increased speed.

"Words don't actually die -- they only disappear in a statistical

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sense," said Alexandra Petersen, researcher at the Lucca Institute. "Unlike animal species, which undergo irreversible extinction, words can come in and out of use. Thus, any reader that goes back and likes a word or phrase that is out of style, can conceivably resurrect its use. After all, our society is notably prone to fads which wax and wane."

Petersen emphasizes the fluidity of language, underlining how technology might bring certain words to light and discourage use of others, but changing patterns and trends could further affect word use. Following Petersen's line of thought, old-fashioned phrases could come back into fashion after a time, propelled by the same technology that initially hindered the word use.

Spellcheck's tendency to encourage a limited roster of words could be troublesome, but the other effects of the digital revolution are good news for words. Text-speak promotes creativity and allows people looking to communicate in an obscure language or dialect an easier time connecting with like-minded people, and expedites adopting new words. Communication is trending towards shorter words and sentences, but that does not mean our language capabilities are shrinking as well.

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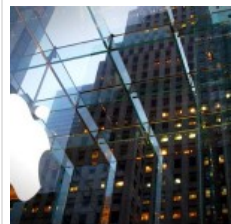
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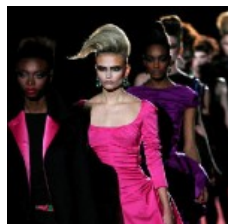
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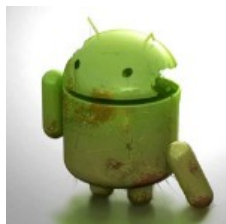
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