

OK. I'll admit it. May George Orwell, Samuel Johnson, and other guardians of the English language forgive me!

As with most transgressions, it started innocuously enough. As I was rushing out the door early one morning, I made my first forgivable commission. I had prepared my nineteen-year-old, home-for-the-summer son a sandwich and wanted to cue him in to look for it before he bothered to find an alternative meal. Hastily, I taped a note to his bedroom door, knowing that, with the vampire hours he kept, he would not see it until about noon. Fine—that would be soon enough, so I scribbled: "Sndwch 4 u."

It had been so easy; I felt a bit excited and surprisingly little shame. Moreover, I had no doubt even my Swarthmore-educated son would understand this cryptic message, written in the coded language rampant among his generation.

Indeed, among our students and others, this technology "new speak"—license-plate jargon, text messaging (TM), Blackberry lingo, Instant Messenger (IM) or email talk, also known as Short Message Service (SMS) language, or txtspk—is becoming ever more ubiquitous; disturbingly, we see its reflection spreading, even into the "formal" papers they submit to us.

SMS, or txtspk, appears to be a speedier, more efficient way to communicate than ig-Pay atin-Lay, the frivolous and rather silly coded language of my youth. Txtspk, as its very name demonstrates, leaves out vowels; it also substitutes letters and numbers for sounds and words, or it may even use emoticons—which consist of smiley faces, like this :-)—and other representations of emotions created by combining various keyboard options, usually punctuation. While this shorthand can save time, the resulting cryptic message can be nearly undecipherable, at least for the uninitiated: "i 4got lnc. c u @ hm l8r."

It would take me longer to render my message into this jargon than it would to keyboard all the missing characters: I forgot lunch. See you at home later. But our students seem undaunted by composing in txtspk, doing it quickly and efficiently.

Alas, b4 this nu language, wuz not communication EZ-er?

Txtspk is also characterized by consistent use of lower case (Ah, so that is why my students think "i" is acceptable for "I.") as well as acronyms like LOL (laughing out loud). Of course, when used by young people, txtspk also becomes sprinkled with slang and colloquialisms. Perhaps those explain why "wuz" may be substituted for "was" even though there is no particular efficiency in doing so.

The main problem with txtspk is its inappropriate presence in students' assignments. At one time or another, I have seen all of the following in formal

papers: u for you, b4 for before, r for are, nu for new. Txtspk appears to be the current threat to our students' fluency in standard English.

Of course, generations of students have demonstrated various degrees of difficulty with standard English, often producing writing that falls short in the estimation of their faculty readers. Some faculty, not just English teachers, are offended and disturbed by sentences that end in prepositions. Others may be irked by misused punctuation (the *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* focus), or cringe at common word confusion errors (their, there, and they're, or advise and advice). Recently, our students – a generation that seems to be reading less – seem to have elevated word confusion to a new and sometimes unexpectedly humorous level. Hence, my students, when enumerating current controversies, have been known to include “youth in Asia” alongside capital punishment or abortion. My initial wonder at what seemed great cultural inclusiveness and sensitivity was tempered by amusement when I realized what they really meant was “euthanasia.” A bit sadly, I realized what was indistinguishable to their ears would have been obvious to their eyes if only they read more. A lack of reading and its accompanying slide in word recognition probably accounts for these same students' growing fascination with “cereal killers.” Either that, or it is time to worry about my *Raisin Bran*.

Computers do little to help students catch such word confusion errors. Indeed, the advent of txtspk/Blackberry lingo is only the latest impact of the electronic world on student writing, following as it has on the heels of the spell checker and the curious errors that the latter has either produced or failed to remedy. For example, just this semester, a student of mine wrote “cretin suction” in his paper. Yes, cretin suction. It made me pause too, trying to unravel what he had meant. Eventually, I realized that the student had meant “certain situations.” This revelation made it easier to solve the mystery. The student had typed “certin” for “certain.” The first substitute word suggested by his spell checker was “cretin.” Because he was not paying close attention, did not use a dictionary, and/or could not recognize the correct spelling of “certain,” which was listed as the second option, he clicked on the first. An alternative theory is that he thought the authority of the spell checker's first suggestion should go unquestioned.

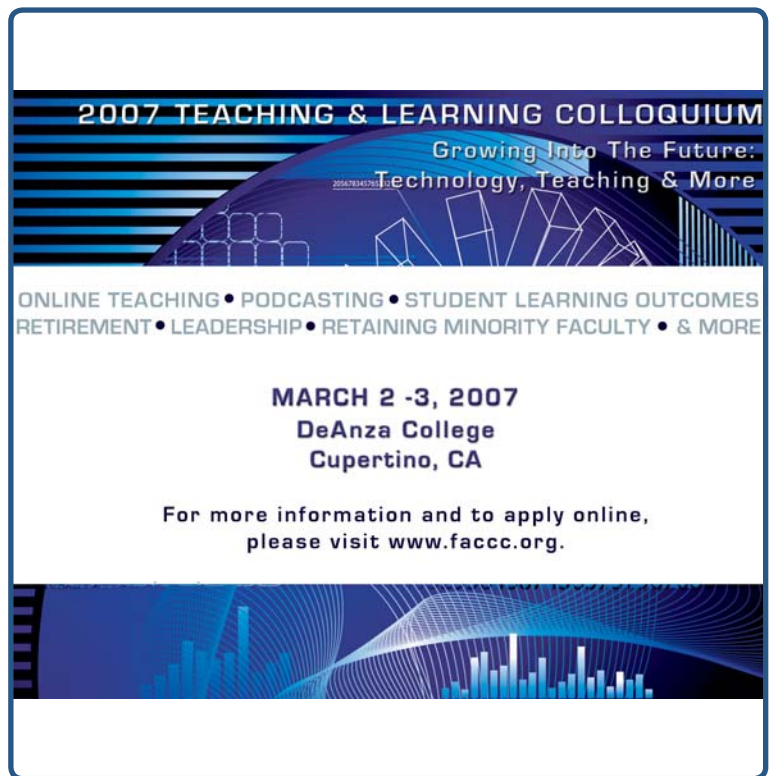
A spell checker can be dangerous in inexperienced hands. Perhaps it should come with a warning label: Caution! This spell checker's accuracy depends on the skill and judgment of its user.

It is a little harder, however, to determine how the student got “suctions” for situations. He probably typed “suations” or something to that effect. If he did, spell checker would have presented him with four choices: “sudations,” “stations,” “suasions,” and “cautions” to wade through. Oops, I meant “through which to wade.”

If not for the spell checker, the sudden epidemic use, or misuse, of the word “posses” would not be spreading so rapidly. Ah, if only students could just remove “posses” from their spell checker's word bank. Just imagine the saving in red ink, alone, if the plural of “posse” (And just how often will our students be using the word posses anyway?) were removed from the spell checker's options. Then, when students typed “posses” for “possess,” Microsoft Word would simply auto-correct, and we would be posses-free.

Perhaps txt lingo and other changes 2 r language brought by advances in technology +s, rather than –s from communication and cultural xpreshun. Thez could b vud as colorful dialects and celebr8ed as alternative forms of xpreshun w/valu of their own.

Az lng az studnts can swich bck n 4th btwn this dilect n stndrd english, thn mayB therz no prob at al. I meen, perhaps this iznt az thretning az it seemz. Its not like r languig iz bng takn ovr by 0 1 00 1111000100001111000011110001000011110000111100001111000100. ■



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