

Rachel: Hello everyone and welcome to our podcast: Instant Messaging and its effects on reading and writing. In this podcast, we will be talking about the history of instant messaging, how it has changed literacies and cultures, and lastly, its implications on education. My name is Rachel. I live in Vancouver BC and I am an academic advisor at Simon Fraser University. Working with university students really gives me that extra motivation or confusion, if you will, sometimes, as through daily conversations with students, I get to see what are the cool ways to communicate now!

Jasmine: And my name is Jasmine. I live in Montreal Quebec and work at McGill University as a Learning Technology Consultant/Instructional Designer. I work closely with instructors at the university with implementing education technologies that support teaching and learning. So today we're going to be talking about the evolution of instant messaging communication and how this evolution has impacted language, literacy and education, because we know that it has had great impacts. Even within our lifetimes, as students, we've both experienced these changes, first hand. I remember when I started using instant messaging. I was maybe 12 or 13 when "chat rooms" became a thing. I remember specifically "teenchat2000.com", this online chat platform that you could join and chat with people from around the world. I remember it being so new and so exciting. Then came actual softwares and applications. I don't know if you remember MSN Messenger, but this was widely used in middle school. Do you remember the first time you used instant messaging platforms, Rachel?

Rachel: Definitely! Let's not forget about the iconic ICQ notification too. The excitement of hearing the sound of messages coming in. [omg, the like UH OH! sound] Now think back, social media has always been so addictive even from the start! When I first moved to Canada from Taiwan back in 2000, MSN Messenger was "the thing" everyone had. Without it, I don't think I would've been able to stay in touch with some of my closest friends in Taiwan. I still remember how much time I spent on coming up with something cool on the status bar, hoping the boy I had a crush on would notice it. This probably was the early version of Twitter if you came to think of it! Oh the good old days! Jasmine, it always fascinates me when I think about how communication has progressed in the past decades. Can you remember the era of pre-instant messaging?

Jasmine: Actually, I do remember talking on the phone A LOT. It's funny because now I hate talking on the phone, but in elementary school and early highschool, I'd come home and in the evenings just talk to my friends on the phone... for HOURS. and It's kind of funny to think back and remember my friends phoning me every night, or vice versa. What on earth did we have to talk about?

Rachel: I know! I remembered those late night phone calls and the frustration my parents had when the phone line was constantly busy!

Jasmine: I also remember coming home from summer camp and calling friends I had made. I had all of their phone numbers and addresses written in an address book. We'd also send each other letters for months. It's so nostalgic to think back to that time. I still have many of those old letters.

Rachel: The anticipation of checking mailbox and everything!

Jasmine: It was a really special time and I am happy that we were kind of on the cusp of that transition from pre-internet communication to the world wide web generation. Some things, though, are now really hard to imagine. How did we manage?! After the chat platforms came phones and texting. I only really had my first cellphone where I could text in my first years of university. It cost 10 cents a text, by the way. But in college (here in quebec we go to college before university), we used to go out without cellphones. It's like we made a plan and stuck to it and met our friends while out. I have a hard time

imagining how that even worked.... I think people were more committed to plans back then. Or the expectations were just different? It's hard to imagine going out and just finding people!

Rachel: I share the sentiment. I'm not sure if it's just that people are now more flakey or people were the same and it was just before then, they didn't have the way to cancel plans the last minute

Jasmine: All that to say, so much has changed since the dawn of instant messaging and I think it's important, before we get in to how it has impacted language and literacy and "changed the spaces of reading and writing", what those changes looked like over the last century.

Rachel: The ways we communicate have come a long way! Before talking about the evolution of instant messaging or IM, it would be helpful for us to quickly go back to how we even arrived at the beginning of message exchange. From snail mail to fax, the use of pagers probably is one of the earliest forms of digital messaging. As cell phones become widely available, text messaging turns into a popular way for people to communicate. According to a 2007 article on The New York Times, the first text message was sent out 28 years ago, in 1992, which when you think about it, wasn't that long ago! For those who are curious, "Merry Christmas" was the message that was sent!

Jasmine: It's only been 28 years? That's amazing to think something now considered so old school isn't even that ancient!

Pei: A few years after that first text message, around 1996 was when we started to see the introduction of instant messaging, or some early forms of it. There were some debates over whether ICQ or the AIM by AOL was the earliest prototype of the instant messaging apps we use now. Both provided users real time experience in interacting with others. Speaking of which, Jasmine, did you know ICQ stands for "I seek you"?

Jasmine: I didn't know that actually!

Pei: I have to be quite honest that it never occurred to me until now. I guess this is a quick example of how culture and language play a role in the instant messaging trend! Anyways, back to the topic, after AOL, other instant messaging programs soon joined the game, including Yahoo Messenger, MSN Messenger, to WhatsApp. The instant messaging programs add a lot more functions so it is no longer a pure text communication tool. We have more ways, including text, emojis, and of course gifs to express ourselves ; file sharing has become very easy to do over these platforms as well. Most, if not all, instant messaging programs also have options for users to use video or phone call to communicate too.

Jasmine: And now, we have this ubiquitous communication channel between us and everyone else. You can contact someone by texting them and have them respond within seconds. And as you said, Rachel, we can share more than just words over these instant communication channels. Some people will send each other memes all day long and actually exchange very few words. So I think it's safe to say that these platforms have changed the way we communicate. I think it's also safe to say that they've changed our language to some degree.

Rachel: The language I use now is definitely so different. There was a time I would be hesitant to use emojis in my conversation but now I use it all the time!

Jasmine: Languages tend to naturally evolve over time but there appears to be a fear that these digital language platforms, like instant messaging is "killing" language. The linguistic strangeness to online lingo has become sensationalized over the last decade or two. I will admit, it can be hard to keep up with the

ever changing terms and acronyms. I even find myself struggling to understand certain online language these days. I sometimes have to google what things mean! Thank you Reddit for always being there for me. David Crystal, a British linguist and academic has outlined the many ways in which text language differs from conventional written language. Aside from emojis, one of the most common trends in online lingo is that words tend to be shortened. *By the way* turns into btw... on my way is now OMW... and then the most commonly used one, which is a mix of an abbreviation and emotional expression, the classic: LOL. There are abbreviations, really can be shortened to rly. Initialisms (capitalizations), shortening of words, more contractions (don't vs do not), single letter/number homophones like "c u l8er" and the list goes on. And as I said before, the changes evolve quickly. It's like a language trend. The entire purpose of these changes are to make the communication easier, more efficient and to communicate emotion, tone and attitudes.

The reality, and the research, actually says that while the informal language of instant messaging looks different from formal writing, it's not (yet) created any drastic changes to the English language itself. I read an article in TIME magazine called "Is Texting Killing the English Language" from 2013 says that instant messaging and texting are more akin to spoken language than written and additionally, is making that type of communication more complex. According to Lauren Collister, a sociolinguist at the University of Pittsburg "these emoticons and symbols are not destroying language, but actually they show a kind of creative repurposing and are a part of this new era of technology. Aside from ignoring all these rules and regulations the texter is always aware of the fact that he or she must also be understood and that the text message must be "understood able". More recently, Park & Baron (2018) asked university students in Australia to compare writing they did through smartphones and writing they did on laptops or through pen and paper, and students said that writing on smartphones, through IMs or texting, was more like talking in a conversation. This type of text tends to be shorter and is meant to be read once. So comparing the text coming from IMs to what students would consider "writing" is like comparing two different types of communication. And from a student's perspective, I think I can relate to that. I don't feel like the writing I use to communicate in a text message is the same as when I sit down and write a paper for a class or write a formal email. The question is, is there a distinct line drawn separating the two are they or will they merge... which is where I think people worry about having problems.

Rachel: This reminds me that when I go on Reddit, sometimes people would say "On mobile, sorry for the formatting". So almost like when we're using mobile technology or whatnot, our communication tends to be quite different. I think for some students, there is confusion over what is considered as professional writing. I've heard from professors about the types of email they get from students but again, these types of complaints aren't exactly new or only exist in this generation

Jasmine: Absolutely! That reminds me of something, when people write emails I noticed, when you send emails from your phone, there is usually a tag that goes at the bottom of the email that says "Sent from iPhone" or "Sent from Android" and I am wondering if that has any representation of this is sent from a smartphone and there might be typos or a bit of different languages to it. I don't know if it is true but you just reminded me of that and it's kind of an interesting way to think about it.

Rachel: That's a really good point!

Jasmine: In the vein of IMs and texting creating more complex forms of spoken communication, let's revisit our favourite slang or abbreviation: LOL. While it stands for Laughing out Loud in the literal sense, it's actually evolved in meaning. Most people use it in more sophisticated ways and less to indicate that they find something funny. Speaking from experience, if I find something really funny, I will write out hahaha or will express myself with a laughing crying emoji, which, by the way (or btw) is apparently a

very millennial thing and not the cool thing to do anymore... So we can see how quickly things evolve... using haha's and emoji's are already uncool. But back to LOL, it's now more often used as a way to express empathy, be more playful and ease tension in a texting conversation. It's amazing how it can completely change the tone of a message. It has evolved from having a literal meaning to portraying a certain attitude. So it makes the message more personable, less formal and more like a face to face interaction. I find this to be fascinating because it shows that these little tweaks we've made to our texting language are actually creating more meaning within the realm of text communication. It's no longer just text, it has attitude and a tone, which is how we want to sound when talking to our friends, isn't it?

We also touched on something similar in the podcast *The Allusionist* with Helen Zaltzman and Gretchen McCulloch how we use punctuation in instant messaging to convey tone and attitudes. It's kind of this set of unwritten rules or an etiquette that we've become accustomed to. The interesting thing to this etiquette, is that they are not necessarily understood and adopted by everyone. They can vary by generation, by culture, by where you were born...etc. My personal texting etiquette will change depending on who I am talking to. For example, when I talk to my mom, she loves to use ...'s. She uses them after almost every sentence. Typically, if I were to use the same etiquette with one of my friends, ending a sentence with ... they would think I'm mad at them or I'm unhappy with something. But for my mom, it's just a texting style she picked up somewhere and it doesn't mean the same thing to her as it would to many of my peers.

Rachel, you must have this type of experience. How do you feel texting etiquette is different here than in Taiwan for example?

Rachel: I think it's funny to think of it but I mostly text in English that I don't really know whether there are particular texting etiquette in Taiwan. I'm there there are some as some of my friends wonder why I always text in long sentences!

Jasmine: I want to talk a little bit more about what the experts say about how IMs and texting have been changing language. Naomi Baron, who is a linguist, professor and researcher has done extensive research on computer mediated communication and how instant messaging and text messaging have changed language. Her findings show that there have been changes to language but they tend to be minor shifts in vocabulary and sentence mechanics. There are some incorporation of acronyms into every day language. For example hearing young people say BRB or LOL as shortcuts, but we have to remember that the infusion of acronyms is common in linguistic evolutions. We say acronyms like RSVP and ASAP without much thought. This type of change is considered minor.

Another change, Baron notes concerns spelling and punctuation, but says still, the changes are minor. For example, using an apostrophe seems to be the greatest mistake students make. One assumption I've had when it comes to texting and writing digitally in general, is that we are likely losing our ability to spell. Everything has spell check these days, and I know that I am a very avid user of spell check myself. Most of the time, it corrects words without you even knowing... so I've always thought that this must have negative effects on everyone's spelling skills. According to a study by Javed and Mahmood in 2016, texting and instant messaging has actually improved students' spelling. Why? Because they're writing more and while it might seem mindless, they are actually exposed to the corrections made by spellcheck and the smart keyboards. David Crystal argues a few good points - texting cannot cause bad spelling because people must know how to spell before they text. Additionally, he notes, texting improves people's literacy because it provides people with the opportunity to engage in the language through reading and writing. Another interesting thought is that it may develop young children's spelling and

pronunciation skills. When they use abbreviations, they must think about the language phonetically. So when children or students are playing with creative representations of language, they have to use and practice their understanding of the letter and sound. For example, a student typing later as l8er, they are making the link between sounds of letters and their combinations and how they are written.

The worries and critics sounds similar to those that we saw in week 4 in analyzing the change from scrolls to codex or books. People tend to panic when things change! And while, yes, there are minor shifts, but there would have been shifts regardless. Things change. Language is always shifting and evolving with globalization, cultures mixing, technology...etc. Another interesting perspective, brought up by Naomi Baron is that it is not so much that texting is changing the language, but rather it is our attitudes about language that is changing it. So, as I just said, with increases in multiculturalism where we are now being exposed to different dialects and people whose english is their second language, there is actually a greater tolerance to what we may have previously obsessed as being incorrect. So for example, Baron brings up the age old corrections of *may* and *can* - "*May I come in?*" versus "*Can I come in?*" and says that many students (graduate level) tend to take on a more *laissez-faire* attitude in that it doesn't really matter which one you use and they fail to see why anyone should care. So actually, it appears that the correlation is between instant messaging and texting and changes to language when the causation may actually be shifts in attitudes to be more inclusive. This shift may be admirable but it has had linguistic consequences.

So to circle back, the research actually shows that people, most commonly analyzed are young people, even with all of these changes to communicating through instant messaging text, are aware of the line between informal communication and formal communicate. Students tend to understand what language is appropriate for what context. (Lenhart, Smith, & Macgill, 2008). Thus debating the concern that texting is ruining the english language are not actually based on fact.

Rachel: That's very interesting to hear that students are better at spelling because now they write more. I would have thought that people are losing that sophistication of writing with the whole instant messaging cultural phenomenon! This is just another example of how instant messaging has changed the way we communicate and think in our daily lives. It is only fair now we shift our attention to how IM has impacted education. Given how readily available this communication channel is, it would be intriguing to see how instant messaging has any implications on education.

In fact, there is no surprise that some social media channels are now used in teaching and learning. For instance, in some courses, instead of submitting individual assignments, students are asked to create a blog and showcase their writing in their blog. What about IM? I know how much I rely on WhatsApp and Slack to organize group projects. Jasmine can also speak to that as we first knew each other from a group project almost two years ago. Without our Slack working group, it would be hard to sustain the relationship as we don't necessarily take the same courses in the program.

Jasmine: I am actually so grateful for our Slack working group. Especially in a fully online program! it's been very difficult to meet people but we've stayed in touch since the one course Summer 2019. I bring this up often with instructors who are interested in creating spaces for their students to connect, given the remote context we've been in for over a year. Having an informal space, allowing students to ask quick questions and get a quick response gives an online or remote course that element of interaction that may be lacking from not being face to face.

Rachel: Tang and Hew, took a deep dive and analyzed 39 empirical work done on how IM is used in education and they published their result in 2017. They concluded IM should be incorporated into

teaching and learning more because of its temporal affordance, its nature for social engagement, and how user friendly it is. I just want to quickly elaborate on what it means by temporal affordance and it refers to how seamless it is to access, record, and retrieve information anytime.

IM is placed to test during covid as schools around the world moved to remote learning. Peer to peer interaction and peer to instructor interaction are essential in learning but even in those in-person lectures, they can be hard to achieve. Many people were afraid that social engagement would be non-existent once courses moved online.

Nevertheless, with Zoom and Blackboard Ultra and many other video conference platforms, they also embedded instant messaging features. This provides students an opportunity to interact with one another. When I talk to students during advising appointments, they often mention how they use Discord to form a course study group. Of course it still doesn't compare to the face to face interaction but it is something for the time being.

De Bakker et al in a paper in 2007, brought up a valid point of how instant messaging has the potential to impact education in a meaningful way. For listeners out there who are familiar with different learning theories, you probably have heard social constructivism, which is under Vygotsky's social learning theory. Within social constructivism, scaffolding and competence based learning are two unique characteristics. De Bakker et al found the bottom-up approach used in scaffolding can be mimicked by the use of instant messaging too.

Another reason instant messaging could be advantageous in education is its versatility. Instant messaging isn't just limited to text communication but it is also available in audio and video format. We all know how students learn differently and there is no "right way" of presenting course content. For myself, I need to write things down or at least visualize them so I can learn. That is why as much as podcasts are becoming a mainstream channel for people to learn, I haven't felt motivated to get on board with it. Meta-cognition, that is thinking about thinking, is often talked about when educators discuss universal design for learning and instant messaging.

Now we have discussed all the positivity IM can bring, let's talk about the dark side. The first concern I have is how do we differentiate between private and school or work life. A friend of mine is an elementary school teacher in Taiwan and she has a group chat on her phone with all the parents in her class. The goal is so it's easier for teachers and parents to communicate any student issue. However, my friend would constantly get messages from parents that sometimes even at midnight messages are still coming in. On the other hand, as So mentioned in his 2016 paper, students also feel life is interrupted when course tasks are sent during non-class hours. Also because of how convenient IM is, users have less tolerance in responding time. Would the quality of education suffer because of that?

Hazaea and Alzubi pointed out two main challenges they find in their 2016 paper and they are the use of informal language and the amount of irrelevant and/or inappropriate information that could float around on IM. Jasmine earlier talked about the slangs and shortening people use and it is a concern when instructors want to collaborate IM into a formal method for assignments. It is also easier to take a less serious attitude when one interacts with others on IM, whether it is an official communication channel used for the course or not.

Jasmine: you know, I've caught myself using informal language in our Teams group chat I have with my Learning Technology team. Not that it's a big deal, but I have noticed how easy it is to use

abbreviations... or write rly instead of typing out the whole word for really. It's sometimes hard to separate the two when it's on an instant messaging platform

Rachel: Lastly, the fear of violating academic integrity has become a growing issue for educators. The advantage of temporal affordance becomes a double edged sword that students can easily retrieve information shared by others shared on IM and make it theirs. There have been cases that students used the IM feature to discuss and exchange answers during remote exams.

According to Statista, as of January 2021, there are 2 billion users using WhatsApp per month. That is WhatsApp alone so imagine how much more activities must be happening on instant messaging! For me, I can't even imagine a day without using instant messaging in some capacity. As someone who works with university students closely, it is intriguing to observe the language students use in their IM now and the generational differences. Instant messaging provides more options in how we communicate with others. A common criticism people have for virtual communication is the tone can be misinterpreted easily without non-verbal cues. However, with the use of emojis and memes, it provides more context to facilitate the conversation.

Instant messaging also changes how teaching and learning can be performed. Instead of the traditional top-down approach, IM highlights the practicality of peer interaction. In some ways, we can even say IM gives the boost that social constructivism needs.

Our lives have changed in so many ways since covid but this provides an opportunity for educators to see how learning can be done differently. I have to lol when people still think IM is only used for leisure and isn't serious enough to be used in education.