In this neat little book, the veteran linguist David Crystal (DC) looks at a linguistic phenomenon of current popular culture: text messages sent via mobile phones. He provides lots of fascinating data, discusses it in a lively well-informed way and gently disposes of the various anxious and/or pompous predictions of linguistic decay that this mode of communication has prompted. The accompanying irreverent cartoons by Ed McLachlan, starting with a parodic drawing of the famous Rodin sculpture with a mobile phone in one hand, labelled ‘The Texter’, contribute greatly to the light pacey tone of the book.

There is texting and there is txtng. The former is what is generally done by aging and infrequent users of the text facility on mobile phones, employing pretty much wholly standard written forms. Naturally, DC is more interested in the latter, since it is this that makes for novel communicative symbols, including vowel-free words (e.g. ‘txtng’), letter-number combinations (e.g. ‘gr8’ for ‘great’), acronyms (e.g. ‘TTUL’ for ‘talk to you later’) and emoticons or ‘smileys’ (representing various positive and negative, including sarcastic, feelings). In discussing the distinctive features of txtng, DC brings to bear his considerable knowledge of the history of writing systems and shows that
virtually all of its characteristics (logograms, initialisms, pictograms, abbreviations, nonstandard spellings) have been around for centuries. Of course, the specific instances of each of these within the txtng medium are new, and the creative, playful side of txtng makes for further novelty (e.g. building on IMO ‘in my opinion’, we find: IMHO ‘in my humble opinion’, IMHBCO ‘in my humble but correct opinion’, IMNSHO ‘in my not so humble opinion’, and so on (p.53).

DC looks at the ‘who, what and why’ of texting. The answer to the ‘who’ question is ‘just about anyone and everyone, but predominantly teenagers’. No surprise there. The answers to the ‘what?’ and ‘why?’ are less obvious and more interesting. As well as informative uses such as practical (time-and-place) arrangements and company alerts, on the one hand, and personal relationship uses such as flirtation, gossip and phatic communion, on the other, texting (and txtng) is used for seeking help for depression (e.g. messages to the Samaritans), ending relationships, soliciting support for a collective action or campaign (e.g. during the American presidential election), providing encouragement to those trying to give up smoking or some other addiction (p.118), and much else.

A primary purpose of the abbreviatory characteristics of Textese is, of course, to save the sender’s time and effort, but, like any other code, it becomes an empowering badge of identity, distinguishing those in the know from those not (in particular, teenagers from their parents and teachers). DC emphasises another function, however, one which often entails a lot of extra effort, and that is what he calls the ‘ludic dimension’ of txtng. As he points out, people have always played all sorts of language games (p.71) just for
the sake of it, because it’s fun, because it’s a challenge, because it provides its own satisfaction, and Textese provides a whole new set of creative play possibilities. He illustrates various literary genres attempted in the text message medium, including poems, songs, limericks, prayers, anthems, tales, and even novels (p.80), and describes how this has led to a move beyond the confines of the mobile-phone to hard copy and, thus, the emergence of Textese as a genuinely new variety of language.

One of the most appealing features of the book is its multilingual perspective: in an appendix, DC lists and glosses (some of) the abbreviatedtxtng forms used in eleven very different languages, including Chinese, Czech, Portuguese, Swedish and Welsh, and throughout the book he cites observations and facts concerning txtng across a range of cultures. Although there are specific practical keypad issues raised by non-Roman writing systems with logographic or other complex symbols (e.g. Chinese characters, or the 345 written symbols of Ethiopian), the txtng conventions, such as acronyms, other kinds of symbol omissions, pictograms, and use of numerals, and the user habits across languages and cultures are remarkably similar.

The tone of this book is good-humoured, open-minded, non-judgemental, genial and witty. Occasionally, political correctness leads to overstating the creative achievements of Textese users. For instance, most of the winning entries in a competition for the best poem written within the constraints of the 160-character mobile-phone screen were written in full English rather than Textese, (i.e. they were cases of texting rather than txtng). So they do not serve particularly well DC’s intended purpose of countering the various dismayed criticisms of Textese as ‘bleak, bald, sad shorthand’. Overall, though,
he provides plenty of evidence weighing against the alarmist prophecies that txtng is
destroying literacy and will lead eventually to the decline of the language as a whole.
Ultimately, DC makes no grand academic or theoretical claims for Textese and doesn’t
believe it will have much, if any, effect (good or bad) on the language as a whole. So
the final message seems to be: t+&sc.

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