

**editor's angle** by sue khodarahmi

## The end of language? LOL

While some lament the impact of text messaging, it's just the latest step in the evolution of language

It's not like you can write your novel one cell phone screen at a time, you say. Um, actually, you can.

Everyone knows that language evolves. If it didn't, we wouldn't have the words for all the newfangled technologies and innovative concepts in our lives. Indeed, we wouldn't have much in the way of words at all.

At the IABC International Conference in June, a group of us were chatting about language, specifically how one person's childhood knowledge of Russian hadn't developed along with the language itself. That is, because she didn't speak Russian much outside the home as a child, she never learned many of the words that came into the vernacular over the years. Conversing in Russian with a friend, she learned that she was using outdated words.

In our fast-paced and globally connected world, new words and meanings arrive quicker than ever. Merriam-Webster recently announced the addition of more than 100 new entries to its Collegiate Dictionary, from *air quotes* to *Webinar* (see "They're Official Words Now," opposite). In a recent e-mail exchange, some fellow copy editors and I discussed whether a company's preference

### about the author

CW managing editor Sue Khodarahmi prefers typing on a proper QWERTY keyboard to a tiny cell phone.



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to use *best-fit* as a verb, à la *fine-tune*, was appropriate in a marketing context. One editor noted that Shakespeare made up more than 2,000 words that we still use today. (We didn't exactly come to a consensus as to whether *best-fit* qualified as a compound verb, but acquiesced to the company's preference.)

But "doomsday grammarians," notes Carolyn Y. Johnson of *The Boston Globe*, are worried about more than how quickly words and meanings are entering the language. They're concerned that people, especially young people, are inappropriately using technological shorthand in place of "real" language, abbreviating

words, abandoning capitalization and tossing basic punctuation aside. They cite a survey by the Pew Internet and American Life Project that found that half of teenagers failed to follow standard capitalization and punctuation in their schoolwork, and a quarter were not beyond including emoticons like the smiley face. :-)

But another study, published in *American Speech*, of teenagers' use of instant messaging, put a more positive spin on the trend: IM, say researchers Sali A. Tagliamonte and Derek Denis of the University of Toronto, "reflects the same structured heterogeneity (variation) and the same dynamic, ongoing

processes of linguistic change that are currently under way in contemporary varieties of English. At the same time, IM is a unique new hybrid register, exhibiting a fusion of the full range of variants from the speech community—formal, informal and highly vernacular.”

In the workplace, employers report that many of their younger, Generation Y workers are comfortable using the informal text shorthand instead of more formal communications. While their older bosses may not like it, it may have some benefits. One recent study, conducted jointly by researchers at Ohio State University and the University of California, Irvine, revealed that people who used instant messaging on the job felt they had fewer interruptions than those who did not. Study co-author R. Kelly Garrett, assistant professor of communication at Ohio State, noted that instant messaging is often used as a substitute for more disruptive forms of communication, such as the telephone, e-mail or face-to-face conversations. “We find that employees are quite strategic in their use of instant messaging,” Garrett said. “They are using it to check in with their colleagues to find out if they’re busy before interrupting them in a more intrusive way.”

Garrett added, “It is not the case that people are engaging in

extensive conversations or trying to resolve complex problems over this very limited medium. Instead, people are using the technology to solicit answers to quick questions from colleagues and coordinate their conversations at more convenient times.”

So texting has its limits, you say. It’s not like you can write your novel one cell phone screen at a time. Um, actually, you can. A 21-year-old Japanese woman named Rin composed her novel *If You* on her cell phone whenever she had a free moment, and then uploaded the entries to a web site for aspiring authors. *If You* was so popular among the site’s readers that it was turned into a 142-page *real book* and sold 400,000 copies, making it the fifth-best-selling novel in Japan in 2007. And Rin is just one person who’s managed to turn the tiny screen into big success.

So is text the end of language as we know it? Probably not. After all, many words have been shortened to a simpler or more conversational spelling or pronunciation over time. *Good-bye*, according to Merriam-Webster’s, evolved from *God be with you*. Maybe in 100 yrs we’ll LOL about all the fuss this txt msging caused. •

### they’re official words now

These are some of the new words that lexicographer Merriam-Webster recently added to its Collegiate Dictionary.

**air quotes:** a gesture made by raising and flexing the index and middle fingers of both hands, used to call attention to a spoken word or expression

**dirty bomb:** a bomb designed to release radioactive material

**dwarf planet:** a celestial body that orbits the sun and has a spherical shape, but is too small to disturb other objects from its orbit

**edamame:** immature green soybeans, usually in the pod

**infinity pool:** an outdoor swimming pool having an edge over which water flows into a trough, but seems to flow to the horizon

**jukebox musical:** a musical that features popular songs from the past

**malware:** software designed to interfere with a computer’s normal functioning

**mental health day:** a day that an employee takes off from work to relieve stress or renew vitality

**netroots:** grassroots political activists who communicate via the Internet, especially by blogs

**pescoarian:** a vegetarian whose diet includes fish

**pretexting:** presenting oneself as someone else to obtain private information

**prosecco:** a dry Italian sparkling wine

**racino:** a racetrack at which slot machines are available for gamblers

**webinar:** a live online educational presentation during which participating viewers can submit questions and comments

### pocket-size crime fighters

Police around the U.S. are encouraging people to report crimes or tips via text message, according to The Associated Press. More than 100 communities accept anonymous tips via text. Police say that one advantage over, say, calling a crime hotline is that tipsters can communicate in real time with the authorities—even report a crime in progress, almost silently.