# 5.2 How Hashtags, Texts, and Tweets Are Influencing Digital Language

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JOHN DANKOSKY: This is Science Friday. I’m John Dankosky. Texting has made communicating a lot easier. No more memorizing phone numbers, instant response time, but there are a few pitfalls that can come with it.

JORDAN PEELE: I’ve been trying to reach out to you all day. Are we on for tonight? [PHONE BEEPS] Oh, shoot, Keegan’s been texting me. Sorry, dude, missed your texts. I assumed we’d meet at the bar, whatever I don’t care. [PHONE BEEPS]

KEEGAN-MICHAEL KEY: Sorry, dude, missed your texts I assumed we’d meet at the bar. Whatever, I don’t care. Whatever, I don’t care? Do you even want to hang out?

JORDAN PEELE: Do you even want to hang out? Oh, that’s considerate. Like I said, whatever.

KEEGAN-MICHAEL KEY: Like I said, whatever? This is– [PHONE SLAMS]

JOHN DANKOSKY: That’s Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele from the show Key and Peele. Without the face-to-face interaction, texting and digital conversations can be open to some interpretation. So how do we convey tones like sarcasm online? Are hashtags and emoji becoming a new type of syntax and punctuation?

My next guest is here to talk about the creative ways we’re communicating online and in the digital space. Gretchen McCulloch is an internet linguist and she writes the blog All Things Linguistic and she’s based out of Montreal. Welcome to the show.

GRETCHEN MCCULLOCH: Hi, thank you.

JOHN DANKOSKY: And if you’ve got a question about how we develop tone and language in the digital space or how you use it, maybe confoundingly at times, you can give us a call. Our number is 844-724-8255. That’s 844-SCITALK, you can always tweet @scifri. We were talking in the introduction about sarcasm being lost in translation. Why is sarcasm, Gretchen, so hard to convey digitally?

GRETCHEN MCCULLOCH: I think sarcasm is difficult because it’s got so many layers to it. There are so many different ways to be sarcastic. You can be kind of dry sarcastic, over-the-top sarcastic. There’s been a lot of efforts in the past to introduce a particular sarcastic punctuation mark and none of them have come through. Because I think the nature of sarcasm is that it leaves open this possibility for misinterpretation, because otherwise you’d be communicating overtly.

JOHN DANKOSKY: Now we’ve taken a long time in human existence to try to actually figure out how to be sarcastic to one another face-to-face, and we’re making this up so quickly in the digital space. Are there some pitfalls here of adapting some of these new things so quickly, we can really miscommunicate?

GRETCHEN MCCULLOCH: I think there are some pitfalls, and particularly, making sure to gauge who your audience. If you’re communicating with someone in a different generation as you, maybe you want to give them a little bit more room for ambiguity or benefit of the doubt, and not assume they’re mad at you right away. They might just be an inept.

JOHN DANKOSKY: We always do this on the radio, right? We’re talking to someone and we put up air quotes and we realize that nobody can see us. How do you do that online, your favorite version of online air quotes?

GRETCHEN MCCULLOCH: Well, I mean, there are quotation marks of course that you can put online, but I really like the very important capitalization, if you will, where you capitalize each word. Sometimes you put a period in between them. And it adds the sense of distance and the sense of exaggerated formality that’s not actually there. I think that’s really fun.

JOHN DANKOSKY: Let’s talk about hashtags. They were used as a type of index on Twitter at first, but it’s taken on this whole different meaning. Is the hashtag a new type of punctuation, do you think?

GRETCHEN MCCULLOCH: I don’t think so much– I mean, the punctuation mark has been around, but what we’re using it for is different. I think we’re using hashtags to communicate a second channel or a second layer of information that provides context. So you can see this with the indexing type of hashtag.

So if you say, wow, Beyoncé’s amazing, and you hashtag Super Bowl, that means something different than if you say, wow, Beyoncé’s amazing and you hashtag lemonade. Because in one case you’re referring to her new album, another case you’re referring to a particular performance. And in another case maybe you’re not using a hashtag all you, and you think this is a generic statement that’s true all the time.

And I think that people have taken this obvious organizational function of hashtags and the way they add context to what particular event you’re talking about, or what particular item you’re talking about, and extended that to using hashtags to provide context more generally.

So a hashtag like, #sorrynotsorry, no one’s going and searching through the hashtags of #sorrynotsorry the way they go search through the hashtags of #superbowl. But at the same time, it provides a certain type of context for why you’re saying something in particular, or what else is going through your mind at the same time as you’re saying the main statement that you’re saying outside the hashtag.

JOHN DANKOSKY: Mm. If you have questions for us, 844-724-8255, as we talk about some of the changes in digital language with Gretchen McCulloch. Digital tone, as we’ve been saying, is so hard to get across at times. We’ve always been told we’re not supposed to write in all caps because it’s yelling. Are there some other things that maybe we should avoid that maybe convey something we don’t mean to convey?

GRETCHEN MCCULLOCH: Well, I mean, sometimes you might want to write in all caps because sometimes you do want to yell. It’s just you need to be cautious of what you’re actually conveying, and that you’re conveying what you intended to do in the first place. I think one other example is using internet slang, so things like a letter 2 for to go, or the letter 4, or just U by itself. For a lot of younger people, those convey a certain type of tone of voice, a certain type of informality, a certain type of relaxed communication. And they’re not default.

Whereas people in older generations just use those in any kind of text. And they aren’t aware that they have a particular tone attached to them. So I think that’s one area where you see a kind of generation gap, and where you want to be cautious about who you’re communicating with. There’s a comic by XKCD that says we’ve arrived at a weird stage where if you write it’s too late with the letter 2 to do this, you’re more likely to be a Senator than a teenager these days. And I think that’s really true.

JOHN DANKOSKY: Have you ever received a one word text reply and period and were confused about what that might mean? It seems that a period is not just a period when it comes to texting. I want to bring on another guest who has tested this very scenario. Celia Klin is a psychologist at the Binghamton University in, Binghamton, New York. Welcome to Science Friday, Celia.

CELIA KLIN: Thank you, it’s great to be here.

JOHN DANKOSKY: So can you talk about this, about using a period at the end of a single word text?

CELIA KLIN: Yeah, we did a really simple study a couple years ago taking a look at the role of periods in text messages. And our thought really was a fairly simple question to start with. We just wanted to see if the way that people read and interpreted text messages might be in some ways different from the way they read and interpreted more standard formal language, like stories or essays, things like that.

So we gave our subjects, who were undergraduates of Binghamton University, a couple of texts to read. So it might say something like, hey, do you want to hang out tonight? And the other person would respond, yup, or sure. And for half the subjects in the experiment, the single word response– yup, sure, OK– was followed by a period. And for the other half of the subjects there was no period.

And we just asked the subjects to rate how much that person wanted to hang out, or wanted to go to the movies. And we found– and now we found this consistently across quite a number of studies– that if there’s a period following that one word response, our subjects, and we assume texters more generally, interpret that as being less positive or less sincere.

JOHN DANKOSKY: Less positive and less sincere. Why would that be? What is it about putting a period at the end of something that makes it seem off putting?

CELIA KLIN: Yeah, certainly we asked ourselves that quite a lot. First of all I want to say, I don’t think we would have had the same results if the period were at the end of a sentence. So period has a specific meaning at the end of the sentence, and that means the sentence is over. But these are very informal and chatty kinds of texts. So I think that period in some ways was– it was over punctuated. There was something that felt stuffy or too formal about the period.

So people went ahead and assumed that that period was in there for some reason. You didn’t need to tell people you’re at the end of the word. You could tell by looking at it. So I think the assumption was that that period carried meaning. And it carried some sort of abruptness. And that made it seem less positive or less sincere.

JOHN DANKOSKY: Well, there’s something that people convey in language sometimes, which is when they really want to put the end to a conversation, they’ll say, and that’s what I mean to say period. And that might be what you’re talking about there, that the period at the end is this conversation’s over.

CELIA KLIN: Absolutely, I think that’s a great way of looking at it. I think it did have that kind of feel to it of I don’t want to go to the movies. Or, yes, I do want to go to the movies– period, we’re done. And that conveys something for sure.

JOHN DANKOSKY: Gretchen, I’d love your thoughts on this. What do you think about this study?

CELIA KLIN: I think it’s a great study. And it’s a great way to put numbers and a large sample of people behind what’s been an intuition for a lot of people for a long time. I’m just thinking of poetry actually, which is another thing that uses line breaks for a particular meaning. And you can have a line that ends without a period or without any punctuation in poetry. And then you can have a line that ends with a period and that means something different, because we have these two options available to us. So maybe this double use of the period has been around for longer than we think it has.

GRETCHEN MCCULLOCH: Hm, that’s interesting. I hadn’t thought about poetry. I like that.

OHN DANKOSKY: I want to go to some phone calls. Let’s go to Adam, who’s calling from Cincinnati, Ohio. Hi, Adam, you’re on Science Friday.

ADAM: Hello, there.

JOHN DANKOSKY: Hi, what’s on your mind?

ADAM: All right, actually some very interesting stuff you’ve got going on there. I’m a middle school English teacher here in Cincinnati. I actually a lot of times will encourage my students to use full sentences, proper punctuation, and all of that in their text messages, just as a way to practice their formal writing, knowing that they of course don’t always write formally. But it’s a way to get them to use that punctuation more commonly.

JOHN DANKOSKY: And are they taking you up on the suggestion, Adam?

ADAM: You know, I have no clue.

JOHN DANKOSKY: They’re not texting you too often, are they?

ADAM: No, I do tend to keep my number private.

JOHN DANKOSKY: Adam, thanks so much for the phone call. Gretchen and Celia, it’s so interesting. I knew that we’d get a call from a middle school English teacher at some point. It only takes so much time. I mean, there’s always this question– I’ll ask you first, Gretchen, about whether or not this new way of writing digitally is wrecking the language, if the middle school English teachers are going to have a hard time teaching formal English writing because of the way people text and the way people tweet?

GRETCHEN MCCULLOCH: You know, I think that that’s been a big worry for a lot of people. But there have been studies that show that kids that use more textisms and that text more often are actually better at formal standard English as well, because they just have more chances to express themselves in writing. And I think part of that is because, even if you’re not sending a formal text message, sometimes you’re sending a very important text message. If you’re flirting with someone over text message, or breaking up with someone over text message, it’s very important you convey the right tone of voice.

And so you’re used to putting thought into what you’re saying. And that’s something that we want to encourage people to write in. I’ve heard of an interesting assignment that maybe your caller can give the middle school students, which is to take a passage from classic literature and translate it into a text message conversation, and then take a text message conversation and translate it into formal writing. And this idea that we can write in multiple styles and registers and that you can transfer between the two and that you could have control over multiple varieties is, I think, a really interesting idea for kids.

JOHN DANKOSKY: Celia, you do have a thought about this, about how the digital language that we’ve adopted is changing formal language?

CELIA KLIN: Yeah, people brought that up a lot when the study came out. People were really angry about what they thought we were suggesting, which was funny because we weren’t suggesting anything. We were just looking at what people understood. I don’t see this as being dangerous to formal written language.

We’re used to having spoken language be in many different registers. We can chat with our friends. We can give a formal lecture. We don’t expect those to be the same. And we have faith that people know the difference, they know when to use one kind of spoken language and when to use the other. I think we’re less used to informal written language. That’s something new to us. But I believe fully that people know, or they can learn, the difference between formal written language and informal written language.

If anything, I think the extent to which people are so tuned in to very subtle differences in texts, for example, a period versus not a period, to me says sort of the opposite of that we should be concerned. I think it shows that people are linguistically very sensitive and linguistically clever. We create what we need to express what we want to express.

JOHN DANKOSKY: But is there a worry though, Celia, that without a universal type of language, one that’s being created constantly, we really can’t communicate across generations, across different parts of the country, or different parts of the world, because we’re adopting so many different styles it’s hard for us to really communicate amongst each other?

CELIA KLIN: I think that may be a concern in general about language and communication across the world and across generations. I don’t think it’s about writing. I think that there is still formal written language. I think we are very tuned in to context, who we’re speaking to, if it’s formal, if it’s informal. So I see this as just one more kind of conversation, one more kind of communication. To me, this does not signal the end of life as we know it.

JOHN DANKOSKY: I’m John Dankosky, and this is Science Friday from PRI, Public Radio International. And we’re talking about some of the changing digital language that we all face. So let’s hear from a high schooler. Fiona’s calling from Minneapolis. Hi, Fiona.

FIONA: Hi, I was listening when you guys were talking about the difference between a period at the end of a one word comment or response and no punctuation at all. And I’ve found that, in my experience, at first a one word response a couple years ago seemed pretty friendly and enthusiastic, but now people tend to take that as unenthusiastic, or upset, or a negative response, and tend to compensate by using emoticons and exclamation marks fairly frequently. So I was just wondering if that’s something that tends– is that a tendency that’s common, or?

JOHN DANKOSKY: Huh. Well, let me ask you that. And Fiona, thank you so much for your phone call. And I wanted to ask a little bit about emojis anyway. Gretchen, so what do you say to Fiona?

GRETCHEN MCCULLOCH: Well, I think there’s something fairly common when it comes to being polite, is that polite thing is something that takes more effort on the part of the speaker to do. So saying close the window is less polite than would you mind possibly if I were to maybe close the window, just because you’ve added more stuff there. And so you’ve gone to a little bit more effort to be more polite about it. And so I think that in general adding emoji or adding extra punctuation, especially if it’s not a period, can make you sound more polite, or can make it feel like you’ve gone to a little bit of extra effort on behalf of the speaker, and also potentially a little more interesting because you can play around with the emoji a bit.

JOHN DANKOSKY: That’s one of my questions though about emoji. There’s so many options and you almost feel if you use them in a text context, or online anywhere, that if you are trying too hard, if you’re going through all the possible emojis you could use, you could frankly spend all day trying to do it. But you’re also maybe making too much of an effort to just convey something simple. Are there downfalls with the way we use emoji right now?

GRETCHEN MCCULLOCH: Well, you do find that the most popular emoji are the face and hand emoji. And a lot of people have a small set that they pick from. So they go into their most recent emoji and they just pick from one of those, rather than going through the whole list of a couple hundred every time they want to do one. So I think that the way we’re solving that problem is by picking from a very restricted set.

But I think part of the reason why the face and hand emoji are so popular is because we lack facial expressions, and tone of voice, and gestures and stuff when it comes to digital writing. And you wouldn’t want to have a conversation with a paper bag over your head and in a monotone, so why would you want to do that in a text?

JOHN DANKOSKY: I want to go to one more quick phone call here. Cameron is calling from Plano, Texas. Hi, Cameron, go ahead.

CAMERON: Hi, yeah, I just had something to add about the sarcasm. You started a conversation about sarcasm. In a forum like Reddit, or any other forum where you have a bunch of strangers, to get a sarcasm of course is a very difficult thing to convey.

So what we’ve come up with is after our statement, if it’s a sarcastic one, you do a backslash lower case s. And that’s meant to convey that the previous statement was done in a sarcastic way. And I think it’s important to note that when you’re texting, you’re usually texting with people that are amongst your group of friends. So you’re reading in each other’s voices, you can kind of infer what the tone is without much punctuation. But when you’re getting into the bigger forums full of strangers you need more tools at your disposal.

JOHN DANKOSKY: And I think that that’s a big– and Cameron, thank you for that. We’ll have to leave it there. And there’s so many different ways to communicate across this entire country, amongst your friends, and among strangers.

I want to thank Gretchen McCulloch, an internet linguist who writes the blog All Things Linguistic based out of Montreal. Thank you so much. Celia Klin is a psychologist at the Binghamton University in Binghamton New York.

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