The joy of txt

Bung Abk! Ist die jüngere Generation vor lauter SMS-Schreiben dabei, ihr Sprachgefühl zu verlieren? Der Sprachwissenschaftler David Crystal hat diese Vorwürfe untersucht. MIKE PILEWSKI führte ein exklusives Interview mit ihm.

David Crystal: studying how language changes

“People like to believe that text messaging will destroy language”

The book’s 240 pages also include a glossary of text-message abbreviations in 11 languages. Crystal’s central theme, though, is how and why people are writing text messages and what effect this might be having on language. Spotlight asked him what he’s discovered.

What is the “great debate” about texting?

“Debate” is probably the wrong word for it, because a debate is usually two sides arguing about a particular point where there’s some basis in fact. Here we have a situation where the debate is based entirely on an urban myth that started soon after texting arrived.

Now, texting is less than ten years old. Suddenly this phenomenon arrived, and it generated an extraordinary reaction — a moral panic, almost — about the nature of this beast. In Britain, a media piece appeared around 2003, describing an essay supposedly written by a schoolchild entirely in abbreviations of the text-messaging kind. She passed it to her teacher, who couldn’t understand a word of it.

The report then said that this shows how modern children are incapable of using standard English, how it’s a breakdown in the educational system, how children will grow up not knowing how to spell, how they will fail their examinations. They will become adults who will not know how to use the language, and eventually the English language and other languages will go down the drain, and it’ll be an absolute disaster. Well, nobody ever questioned that essay, which turned out to be a complete hoax. Nobody ever found that essay or found the teacher or anything.

How do you do this?

First of all, text messaging is not full of abbreviations. Ninety per cent of the words are in perfectly standard English, standard German, standard whatever. That’s because, when you’re sending messages, you want to understand each other, and abbreviations will only take you so far in that direction.

Second, the abbreviations that are used are not novel. They’re not invented by the children. Most of the abbreviations that are used in text messaging, like “c u l8r” (for “see you later”), have been around for hundreds of years, and there’s nothing new about them at all. People have always abbreviated in English and in German. You can find abbreviations going back centuries, right to the beginnings of English in Anglo-Saxon times.

Third, most of the text messages in the world are not written by children, but by adults and by institutions.