

## Unit 6 JOHN McWHORTER

## Txtng Is Killing Language. JK!!!

## Part 1

What texting is, despite the fact that it involves the **brute mechanics**<sup>1</sup> of something that we call writing, is **fingered speech**.<sup>2</sup> That's what texting is. Now we can write the way we talk. And it's a very interesting thing, but nevertheless, easy to think that still it represents some sort of decline. We see this general bagginess of the structure, the lack of concern with rules and the way that we're used to **learning on the blackboard**,<sup>3</sup> and so we think that something has **gone wrong**.<sup>4</sup> It's a very natural sense.

But **the fact of the matter is that**<sup>5</sup> what is going on is a kind of emergent complexity. That's what we're seeing in this fingered speech. And in order to understand it, what we want to see is the way, in this new kind of language, there is new structure coming up.

And so, for example, there is in texting a convention, which is LOL. Now LOL, we generally think of as meaning "laughing out loud." And of course, theoretically, it does, and if you look at older texts, then people used it to actually indicate laughing out loud. But if you text now, or if you are someone who is aware of the **substrate**<sup>6</sup> of texting the way it's become, you'll

notice that LOL does not mean laughing out loud anymore. It's evolved into something that is much subtler.

This is an actual text that was done by a **non-male person of about 20 years old**<sup>7</sup> not too long ago. "I love the font you're using, btw." Julie: "lol thanks gmail is being slow right now." Now if you think about it, that's not funny. No one's laughing. And yet, there it is, so you assume there's been some kind of **hiccup**.<sup>8</sup> Then Susan says "lol, I know," again more guffawing than we're used to when you're talking about these inconveniences. So Julie says, "I just sent you an email." Susan: "lol, I see it." Very funny people, if that's what LOL means. This Julie says, "So what's up?" Susan: "lol, I have to write a 10 page paper."

She's not amused. Let's think about it. LOL is being used in a very particular way. It's a marker of empathy. It's a marker of accommodation. We linguists call things like that pragmatic particles. Any spoken language that's used by real people has them. If you happen to speak Japanese, think about that little word *ne* that you use at the end of a lot of sentences. If you listen to the way **black youth**<sup>9</sup> today speak, think about the use of the word *yo*. Whole dissertations could be written about it, and probably are being written about it. A pragmatic

<sup>1</sup> By using the expression "brute mechanics," McWhorter is emphasizing that texting is a physical task (that resembles writing).

<sup>2</sup> The term "fingered speech" is a clear description of what texting is: speaking by writing with your fingers. He explains this in the sentence that follows when he says that with texting, "we can write the way we talk."

<sup>3</sup> McWhorter uses "learning on the blackboard" as a figurative way to refer to formal education.

<sup>4</sup> When something "goes wrong," a problem is experienced.

<sup>5</sup> The expression "the fact of the matter is that" is a synonym for "in fact."

<sup>6</sup> A "substrate" is a layer, often of something that is growing, and in this case McWhorter uses the term to infer that the language of texting is evolving.

<sup>7</sup> Note that instead of saying "a teenage girl," McWhorter uses the more entertaining expression of "a non-male person of about 20 years old."

<sup>8</sup> The word "hiccup" is used as a euphemism for a small mistake.

<sup>9</sup> When he says "black youth today," McWhorter is mostly referring to black youth in the U.S.

particle, that's what LOL has gradually become. It's a way of using the language between actual people. . . .

## Part 2

Another example is *slash*. Now, we can use slash in the way that we're used to, along the lines of, "We're going to have a party-slash-networking session." That's kind of like what we're at. *Slash* is used in a very different way in texting among young people today. It's used to change the **scene**.<sup>10</sup> So for example, this Sally person says, "So I need to find people to **chill**<sup>11</sup> with" and Jake says, "Haha"—you could write a dissertation about "Haha" too, but we don't have time for that—"Haha so you're going by yourself? Why?" Sally: "For this summer program at NYU." Jake: "Haha. Slash I'm watching this video with suns players trying to shoot with one eye."

The slash is interesting. I don't really even know what Jake is talking about after that, but you notice that he's changing the topic. Now that seems kind of mundane, but think about how in real life, if we're having a conversation and we want

to change the topic, there are ways of doing it gracefully. You don't just **zip**<sup>12</sup> right into it. You'll pat your thighs and look wistfully off into the distance, or you'll say something like, "Hmm, makes you think"—when it really didn't, but what you're really—what you're really trying to do is change the topic. You can't do that while you're texting, and so ways are developing of doing it within this medium. All spoken languages have what a linguist calls a new information marker—or two, or three. Texting has developed one from this *slash*. . . .

And so, the way I'm thinking of texting these days is that what we're seeing is a whole new way of writing that young people are developing, which they're using alongside their ordinary writing skills, and that means that they're able to do two things. Increasing evidence is that being bilingual is cognitively beneficial. That's also true of being bidialectal. That's certainly true of being bidialectal in terms of your writing. And so texting actually is evidence of **a balancing act**<sup>13</sup> that young people are using today, not consciously, of course, but it's an expansion of their linguistic repertoire . . .

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<sup>10</sup> A synonym for "scene" in this sentence is "topic."

<sup>11</sup> Sally is using the slang word "chill" to mean "hang out" or "spend time with."

<sup>12</sup> The verb "zip" here is used to describe being overly direct in an action.

<sup>13</sup> The expression "a balancing act" refers to a situation when two different things must be done simultaneously.