



# ORAL TRADITION

## Festschrift for John Miles Foley

**This article is one of a series of short essays, collectively titled “Further Explorations,” published as part of a special issue of *Oral Tradition* in honor of John Miles Foley’s 65<sup>th</sup> birthday and 2011 retirement. The surprise Festschrift, guest-edited by Lori and Scott Garner entirely without his knowledge, celebrates John’s tremendous impact on studies in oral tradition through a series of essays contributed by his students from the University of Missouri-Columbia (1979-present) and from NEH Summer Seminars that he has directed (1987-1996).**

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## **“A Misnomer of Sizeable Proportions”: SMS and Oral Tradition**

**Sarah Zurhellen**

In The Pathways Project, John Miles Foley (2011-) discusses briefly the social role of SMS (Short Message Service), suggesting that “even so-called text messaging, a misnomer of sizeable proportions given that the activity really amounts to a long-distance emergent communication enacted virtually, knits people together into interactive groups and keeps them connected and ‘present’ to one another.”<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I propose a merger of current research on text messaging and the study of oral traditions in order to shed light on the relationship between this new mode of communication and the workings of consciousness being transformed by the eAgora. Focusing first on the limitations of text messaging as a medium that unexpectedly encouraged language innovation, we can explore how text messaging language merges effective communicative practices from both oral and written technologies in order to generate more efficient communication within a newly-limited, writing-based technology. Moreover, in addition to its efficiency, the kind of linguistic play found in text messaging can be viewed as a source of pleasure for those who engage in texting (“texters”). Thus, by employing the discourse of orality and literacy, we can explain how text messaging, while impossible to imagine without the myriad writing technologies mastered before it, actually encourages its literacy-obsessed users to practice communicative techniques more often found within oral cultures, or more precisely, communicative techniques found in cultures in the incipient stages of literacy. Such cultures are ripe for language innovation precisely because they have begun to record knowledge but have not yet standardized the recording procedure. Coincident with a perspective that sees text messaging as bridging a consciousness gap between oral and literate cultures, then, is the recognition that close study of the ways in which text messaging reworks language could lead to fruitful discoveries about the most current ways in which Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) directs human life toward ever-emerging horizons of consciousness.

When David Crystal (2008) hyperbolized the emergence of text messaging in the following passage, this form of communication was already a well-developed medium. Nevertheless, his humorous figuring of text messaging’s inception, while not quite accurate, highlights precisely the form’s limits that made it such an unlikely competitor in the tightly-wound market of twenty-first-century technologies (173-74):

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank one of my anonymous reviewers for suggesting that Foley’s figuring of text messaging as “a misnomer of sizeable proportions” would make an excellent title. See the “eTools and oTools” node of the Pathways Project: [http://pathwaysproject.org/pathways/show/eTools\\_and\\_oTools](http://pathwaysproject.org/pathways/show/eTools_and_oTools).

I have this great idea. A new way of person-to-person communication, using your phone. The users won't have a familiar keyboard. Their fingers will have trouble finding the keys. They will be able to send messages, but with no more than 160 characters at a time. The writing on the screens will be very small and difficult to read, especially if you have a visual handicap. The messages will arrive at any time, interrupting your daily routine or your sleep. Oh, and every now and again you won't be able to send or receive anything because your battery will run out. Please invest in it?

SMS was originally intended as a way for mobile providers to share alerts and other service-oriented information with their networks of users. It was conceived, then, as a method of business communication, and it was imagined not as a back-and-forth process (users would not reply to the messages received from their provider) but rather as an end-to-end form of communication. In a nutshell, the idea was never to create dialogue (Faulkner and Culwin 2005:143; Thompson and Cupples 2008:143). Additionally, there were many impediments to the popularization of text messaging. For instance, during the first few years it was practiced, users could not send messages to other users outside of their network. Nor could messages be linked in order to send more than the restrictive 160 characters per text. And, of course, the keypads, which were designed with the traditional telephone in mind, required from one to four presses on a single key to produce the correct letter (Faulkner and Culwin 2005:167). Although these shortcomings have been mitigated by improvements to the networks through which messages are sent and by revisions to the keypad that made it resemble a computer keyboard rather than that of a telephone, many users continue to employ a kind of texting shorthand that is efficient, innovative, and playful. As Crispin Thurlow notes, "while much is made about the technologically imposed need for brevity in SMS, participants' messages seldom used the available space; the length (and abbreviated linguistic forms) of messages would therefore seem instead to be a function of the needs for speed, ease of typing and, perhaps, symbolic concerns" (2003:3). In considering the relationship of text messaging to oral tradition, I would like to suggest that the symbolic functioning of users' language play is of supreme importance.

Text messaging, like oral traditions, is powerfully context-driven, and the form of language innovation it engenders occurs spontaneously and organically through its users.<sup>2</sup> Crispin Thurlow (2003:6) outlines six non-standard orthographic and/or typographic forms of language development that occur in text messaging "(1) shortenings (i.e. missing end letters), contractions (i.e. missing middle letters), and G-clippings and other clippings (i.e. dropping final letter), (2) acronyms and initialisms, (3) letter/number homophones, (4) 'misspellings' and typos, (5) non-conventional spellings, and (6) accent stylizations." In addition, he takes three sociolinguistic maxims from Herbert Grice (1975) and applies them to text messaging in

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<sup>2</sup> Because of late capitalism's ability to subsume any form of cultural innovation into its own machinations, these practices were picked up by the mobile companies offering texting service, who then used such linguistic play as a marketing tool, but they belong first and foremost to texters, who constantly play with and revise their practice.

English:<sup>3</sup> “(1) brevity and speed; (2) paralinguistic restitution; and, (3) phonological approximation.” Indeed, we can already see from Thurlow’s explication of these categories various ways that text messaging seems more like speech than writing. At the same time, it is difficult to imagine a form of language that makes us more aware of language as fragmented bits that have to be put together to make meaning, which is precisely the technologizing of the word referred to first by Walter J. Ong in his seminal 1982 work *Orality and Literacy*. And with text messaging, we are undeniably still working in visual space—a visual space, in fact, of 160 perfectly segmented blocks of information, each most likely incomprehensible unless we put them together in linear order from left to right and top to bottom. However, it is precisely our consciousness of the way these 160 blocks of information, or characters, limit our traditional use of the alphabet that produces the innovative play we find in text messaging. What surfaces, moving from the unconscious to consciousness, is at least in part the phonetic meanings of our typographic symbols.

Each time a writer sends a text message, he or she must decide, often unconsciously, and always coincident with the message itself, what form the message will take—standard or innovative—and if innovative, to what extent. In its attempt to balance convenience and clarity, text messaging oddly resembles early, pre-print manuscripts. As Ong notes, “medieval manuscripts are turgid with abbreviations, which favor the copyist although they inconvenience the reader” (1982:120). Similarly, most texters utilize capitalization and punctuation, not according to standardized orthographical practices, which often require timely explication, but in order to produce the most efficient text in a highly-limited and time-consuming writing medium. Efficiency in the text-messaging medium requires the user’s balancing of brevity, speed, and comprehension.

The audience for a text message is often one person known quite well to the person sending the message. Moreover, the message, although asynchronous, is often received immediately and a reply can come almost as quickly as it could be spoken.<sup>4</sup> In fact, it would not be incorrect to understand a text message, at least metaphorically, as a kind of call to which the receiver must respond or risk disturbing the discourse expectations. Such a reading of texting as engaging a call and response function is termed the “replying norm” by Ditte Laursen (2005), where it is taken as an aspect of oral conversation that has transferred to the new medium. However, as Ian Hutchby and Vanita Tanna expand on Laursen’s claim, they offer evidence that text messaging does not merely mirror oral conversational practices (2008:157):

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<sup>3</sup> Studying the text messaging practices of bilingual English and isiXhosa texters, Deumert and Masinyana (2008) provide evidence that these rules are specific to texting in English, and that although texters communicating in other languages may employ similar practices, we should not assume this to be the case. As they explain, “The isiXhosa messages differ markedly from the writers’ English-language messages in that they contain no abbreviated material, non-standard spellings, or paralinguistic restitutions. They thus violate the sociolinguistic maxims of SMS/texting as postulated by Thurlow (2003). These bilingual writers communicate in the electronic medium using two different languages as well as two, non-overlapping sets of sociolinguistic norms” (117).

<sup>4</sup> Laursen (2005) and Hutchby and Tanna (2008) have conducted the most thorough analyses of the role of turn-taking and the immediacy of responsiveness in text messaging. Most recently, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* published a review of Sue Adams’ research into the sleep habits of American college students in which she found that “students feel compelled to wake up in the middle of the night and answer texts” (Rice 2011).

First, in a similar way to the single-action texts discussed previously, package-texts are designed and oriented not as stand-alone epistles which happen to contain multiple action components, but as conditionally relevant interactional objects. Second, not only do they therefore occasion responses, but in their structure those responses differ from responses to multi-unit turns in verbal conversation. They do not tend to favour contiguity, with last action being responded to first, but mirroring of the action-structure in the prior turn.

Thus, Hutchby and Tanna show that “the underlying framework within which sequences of texts can be generated is organized by technological affordances and not, as is the case in conversation, by the temporal unfolding of turn-construction units” (153). Instead of simply mimicking conversation, then, text messaging utilizes components of oral thought, or patterns of thinking related to orality, rather than conversation *per se*—a form of communication that occurs equally (albeit differently) in both oral and literate cultures. Nevertheless, in either case, one’s relationship with the audience is intimately tied to a shared register. As such it is a communication of the present, primarily concerned with the moment at hand and lacking any sense of past or future temporality beyond that necessitated by the immediate relationship between participants.

The intimate relationship between most text messaging practitioners also suggests one of texting’s fundamental differences from Instant Messaging (IM)—perhaps the CMC most closely related to texting and certainly the one most thoroughly researched in terms of its oral/literate hybridity.<sup>5</sup> In IM and Internet Chat, users may indeed know one another but often they do not, whereas, in contrast, text messaging is embedded in the social practices of young people as a way to stay in touch with friends, build relationships with acquaintances, and flirt with potential romantic partners. (See Kasesniemi and Rautiainen 2002.) While IM and Internet Chat can be used for these purposes, they are more often less intimate and less dependent on immediate social relationships.<sup>6</sup> The impermanency of text messaging also strongly differentiates it from other forms of CMC. Unlike instant messages and emails, text messages have no automatic archive system. Most phones will store only a certain amount of texts until the memory is full and then the texts are deleted to make room for new ones. While it is possible to save a text indefinitely, it seems to be a very uncommon practice. Similarly, “oral memorization is subject to variation from direct social pressures. Narrators narrate what audiences call for or will tolerate. When the market for a printed book declines, the presses stop rolling but thousands of copies remain. When the market for an oral genealogy disappears, so does the genealogy itself” (Ong 1982:66).

Finally, we witness the return of an important somatic component in text messaging. As Kristine Faulkner and Fintan Culwin point out, “It is no accident that the Finnish word for mobile is ‘kännykkäs’ which is derived from käsi meaning hand and thus stressing the idea of the

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<sup>5</sup> Although a full comparison of these computer-mediated discourses is beyond the scope of this essay, my research here has been informed by Werry 1996, Baron and Ling 2007, and Tagliamonte and Denis 2008.

<sup>6</sup> This claim is difficult to prove since IM and text messaging practices differ significantly according to geography with text messaging being more popular in Europe and Asia and IM-ing being more popular in the United States. Nevertheless, it is supported by Thurlow’s research, which shows that sixty-one percent of the text messages in his study were of the “high intimacy, high relational orientation” (2003:10).

mobile as an extension of self” (2005:169). From a different disciplinary perspective (that of social geography), Lee Thompson and Julie Cupples argue that while dominant culture may continue to insist on placing orality and literacy in definitely different camps, “new geographies of relations [are] com[ing] into being to reconfigure a number of spatial boundaries including those of the body” (2008:104). The pattern of memorization for keystrokes reengages the hands as important actors in the communication process and revitalizes the role of touch in the process of making meaning. Again, the role of memory in this process resembles oral rather than textual memory in that unlike textual memory, “oral memory has a high somatic component” (Ong 1982:66). Moreover, unlike for typing, there is no standardized method for learning these keystrokes. It is a process of unconscious learning at least as intuitive as it is thought-out, if not more so. And the language innovations that I have already noted are most certainly the result of intuitive rather than analytic knowledge. Although online dictionaries for text messaging abound, they are mainly a source of playfulness as opposed to utility. Very few of the “text words” one finds listed in these indexes are in use in actual text messages. Indeed, the very notion that we would even consider indexing spontaneous and transitory writing like text messaging reveals how strongly inured we are in “the ideology of the text” (Foley 2011-).<sup>7</sup>

*University of Missouri-Columbia*

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<sup>7</sup> See the “Ideology of the Text” node of the Pathways Project: [http://pathwaysproject.org/pathways/show/Ideology\\_of\\_the\\_Text](http://pathwaysproject.org/pathways/show/Ideology_of_the_Text).

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