

## “How Hashtags, Texts, and Tweets Are Influencing Digital Language”

### Excerpt Transcript

Excerpt from ([July 29, 2016](#)) episode of Science Friday.

<p><b>JOHN DANKOSKY</b></p>	<p>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.</p>
<p><b>KEY &amp; PEELE SKIT</b></p>	<p><u>KEY</u>: I've been trying to reach out to you all day. Are we on for tonight? [PHONE BEEPS]  <u>PEELE</u>: 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]  <u>KEY</u>: 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?  <u>PEELE</u>: Do you even want to hang out? Oh, that's considerate. Like I said, whatever.  <u>KEY</u>: Like I said, whatever? This is-- [PHONE SLAMS]</p>
<p><b>DANKOSKY</b></p>	<p>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?</p> <p>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.</p>
<p><b>GRETCHEN MCCULLOCH</b></p>	<p>Hi, thank you.</p>
<p><b>DANKOSKY</b></p>	<p>We were talking in the introduction about sarcasm being lost in translation. Why is sarcasm, Gretchen, so hard to convey digitally?</p>
<p><b>MCCULLOCH</b></p>	<p>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.</p>

<b>DANKOSKY</b>	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?
<b>MCCULLOCH</b>	I think there are some pitfalls, and particularly, making sure to gauge who your audience is. 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.
<b>DANKOSKY</b>	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.
<b>MCCULLOCH</b>	I think we're using hashtags to communicate a second channel or a second layer of information that provides context. 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.
<b>DANKOSKY</b>	Mm. Digital tone, as we've been saying, is so hard to get across at times. 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.
<b>CELIA KLIN</b>	Thank you, it's great to be here.
<b>DANKOSKY</b>	So can you talk about this, about using a period at the end of a single word text?
<b>KLIN</b>	<p>Yeah, we did a really simple study a couple years ago taking a look at the role of periods in text messages. 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.</p> <p>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</p>

	<p>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.</p> <p>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. These are very informal and chatty kinds of texts. So I think that period in some ways was-- it was over punctuated.</p> <p>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.</p>
<p><b>DANKOSKY</b></p>	<p>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?</p>
<p><b>MCCULLOCH</b></p>	<p>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 text-isms 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.</p> <p>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.</p>
<p><b>DANKOSKY</b></p>	<p>Celia, you do have a thought about this, about how the digital language that we've adopted is changing formal language?</p>
<p><b>KLIN</b></p>	<p>I don't see this as being dangerous to formal 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</p>

	<p>very sensitive and linguistically clever. We create what we need to express what we want to express.</p>
<b>DANKOSKY</b>	<p>So let's hear from a high schooler. Fiona's calling from Minneapolis. Hi, Fiona.</p>
<b>FIONA</b>	<p>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 -- is that a tendency that's common, or?</p>
<b>DANKOSKY</b>	<p>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?</p>
<b>MCCULLOCH</b>	<p>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 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.</p> <p>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?</p>
<b>DANKOSKY</b>	<p>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.</p>