Digitalk: Community, Convention, and Self-expression

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> Teens have eagerly embraced written communication with their peers as they share messages on their social network pages, in emails and instant messages online, and through fast-paced thumb choreography on their cell phones. (Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith, & Macgill, 2008)

Teens write all the time: They post messages to social networks; they chat via instant message (IM); they communicate by text. In all of these digital spaces, they write. However, the language that they use in these venues often does not follow the rules of standard written English (SWE). In fact, a conversation between two adolescents, like the one by Lily and Michael below, may be incomprehensible to an adult reader.

Lily:	heyyyy (:
Michael:	wasz gud B.I.G.?
Lily:	nm, chillennn; whatchu up too?
Michael:	WatchIn da gam3
Lily:	mm, y quien ta jugandoo?
Michael:	Yank33s nd naTi0naLs.
Lily:	WHAAAATT A JOKEEEEE, dime como yankees lostt againstt them yesterdaii.
Michael:	i n0e, th3y suCk.
Lily:	& the nationalsss won like only 16 games … one of the worst teams homieeegee.

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Michael:	t3lL m3 b0uT it, i b3T y0u fIv3 d0lLaRs th3Y g00nA l0s3.
Lily:	AHA, naw gee thats easy $ for youu ! =p
Michael:	lol i waS plAyInG w| y0u. =D
Lily:	lol imma talk to you later … i got pizzaa awaitinggg meeeee (;
Michael:	iight pe3cE

(See Appendix for translation.)

Lily and Michael represent a community of individuals who have developed and continue to negotiate their own set of conventions. They experiment with language, manipulating SWE in ways that reflect both the norms of their community and their individual needs for self-expression. The result is *digitalk*, the complex and fascinating combination of written and conversational languages that adolescents use in digital settings.

Despite the complexity of language evident in conversations like the one between Lily and Michael, teachers, parents, and popular media often bemoan the linguistic practices of today's teens, arguing that their digital writing, riddled with errors, is negatively influencing their academic work. Questions about the veracity of these claims are important. More important, however, is understanding the nature of the language that dominates the out-of-school writing of teens.

Digitalk has developed as a language code of virtual spaces. Moje (2004) claims that "all spaces are spaces of identity enactment, and these enactments shape and are shaped by literate practices" (p. 16). Adolescents' identities, then, are defined in part by the writing they do in texts, IMs, and digital social networks. In these contexts, identity is twofold: it is a group identity, or "groupness," that is comprised of "shared practices, or cultural norms, knowledge, and practice" (Moje & Luke, 2009, 421), and it is an individual identity that showcases differences among community members.

Moje & Luke (2009) would categorize these definitions of identity under the metaphor *identity as difference*, which "focuses on how people are distinguished one from another by virtue of their group membership and on how ways of knowing, doing, or believing held or practiced by a group shape the individual as a member of that group" (p. 419–20). From this perspective, "individuals select themselves into social contexts that they believe afford them the opportunity to enact important identity encodings" (p. 420). For adolescents, these "spaces" (Moje, 2004) may come in face-to-face interactions that include school clubs, organizations, and social cliques, or the spaces and communities that inhabit them may be virtual.

As these virtual communities evolve, they adopt literacy practices that must be negotiated by individual members. This process offers adolescents agency (Moje & Luke, 2009), an ability to choose their level of engagement and participation, that is often lacking in school settings. In their digital writing, adolescents decide how to represent themselves via language; the norms of convention and the need for self-expression play key roles in the choices they make, and their use of digitalk secures their identities as individuals within a community. In their academic work, this choice is severely limited, causing a disconnect between their home and school discourses.

DEVELOPMENT OF DIGITALK

In his discussion of new media literacy, Kress (2003) explains that any given mode offers affordances and limitations. The affordances and limitations of technological tools help to explain the development and continuous evolution of digital language. As communication technologies advanced from telephone to computer chat capabilities, the discourse of talk transformed. Immediate conversations that once took place orally now occur via written discourse. IM and chat features afford a blending of spoken and written languages. The immediacy of online talk allows users to hold conversations in real time, as they would on a telephone. However, as users type and send messages simultaneously, the possibility of overlapping communications exists, a problem solved in verbal communication through interruptions and abandoned utterances. This limitation of written chat technology, that messages must be typed, which is a slower process than speaking aloud, encourages users to develop shortcuts and fewer keystrokes in order to more efficiently communicate their ideas (Crystal, 2001).

Similarly, the development of text technology via mobile phone has afforded users the choice of immediate or delayed response. The limitations of the tool, which originally afforded only a numeric keypad, and the costs of text messages, which were limited in characters, encouraged users to minimize the strokes necessary to communicate efficiently. The introduction of unlimited messaging plans, QWERTY keypads, and autocorrection or auto-complete tools led to more variety in language choice. Comfort with the tools available to a user undoubtedly influences the speed with which an individual can locate and manipulate characters to send a message that is mutually intelligible. Thus, digital language continues to evolve in response to the affordances and limitations of technology and the capabilities of the users.

In 2001, Crystal documented the nature of "netspeak," the language of

various digital venues, including email, chatgroups, virtual worlds, and the Web. Seven years later, he published an analysis of texting language (Crystal, 2008), or what is popularly known as "textspeak." This change in terminology has mirrored the move from computer-based IM programs to mobile phone applications, developments in technology that have also affected how and where adolescents produce digital writing. However, like much in the digital age, where change occurs fast and frequently, these terms are already obsolete. Today teens use both the Internet and their personal cell phones to communicate with their peers, and patterns of language cross technological boundaries. Referring to the language as either "net"-based or "texting"-based does not capture its true nature; for adolescents today, the language transcends both spheres.

However, the manipulation of standard conventions most often occurs when teens "talk" to each other via their writing in texts, IMs, and social networking tools. Analysis of adolescent digital writing reveals that nonstandard conventions cross these digital spaces (Turner, 2010). Writing in these venues blends elements of written discourse with those of the spoken word (Baron, 2008), and what the terms net*speak* and text*speak* share conceptually is an attention to the oral nature of the language used in these spaces. Whether teens are sending text messages or IMs, they invariably think of and refer to the communication as talking. Talk, then, is the driving force behind much of the digital writing of adolescents.

For these reasons, the language that adolescents use in digital spaces might better be called *digitalk*. The term captures the nature of the writing, which in most cases replaces verbal communication, and it encompasses the wide variety of digital technologies that allow for this exchange. Manipulating language so that it efficiently conveys an intended message and effectively represents the voice of the speaker requires both creativity and mastery of language for communicative purposes. Becoming an adept user takes practice and knowledge of the conventions of a community. For an outsider, it is difficult to decipher and even harder to produce in an authentic way. Digitalk, then, is a new literacy of the digital generation. It is an acceptable language code in their digital communities.

COMMUNITY OF DIGITAL WRITERS

According to Vygotsky (1978), through participation in a culture, individuals internalize the language and tools of that culture. Prensky (2001) suggests that the culture of today's adolescents is highly saturated with tools of communication technology. As *digital natives* (Prensky, 2001), they have access at an early age to computers in their homes and even in

their bedrooms, and they carry cell phones wherever they go. Prensky asserts that digital natives are different because of their experience with digital technologies (p. 3). They are "'native speakers' of the digital language" (p. 1). As Vygotsky (1978) might argue, they have internalized the tools and language associated with a digital world.

Like teens of prior generations, digital natives talk to their friends on the phone; however, they are just as likely, perhaps even more likely, to communicate with each other via IM, text, or social networking tools. Adolescents in the 21st century have established communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) in a virtual world. According to Wenger, participation in such a community is related closely to identity. She argues that both developing competence in the norms of a community and understanding the practice of others in that community contribute to an individual's identity.

In his discussion of literacy, Gee (2008) identifies the roles of language and identity within a culture or community. Arguing that language cannot be divided from its social context, Gee distinguishes between "big D Discourses," which "include much more than language" and lowercase discourses, which refer to issues of language alone (p. 2). He explains that individuals possess multiple Discourses, which include language, as well as "ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing" (p. 3), that contribute to identity. These "ways of being in the world" lead to "socially situated identities" (2008, p. 3). In other words, identity develops from the interactions an individual has within a community of practice. The interactions between humans occur with, through, and because of language, or lowercase discourse. This language depends upon the "purposes and occasions" (Gee, 2008, p. 3) of the members of the community, and it is not uncommon for individuals to adopt different registers within different communities. The community identity is defined, in part, by the language its members use.

Like Wenger (1998), who believes that individuals can belong to many communities of practice, Gee (2008) asserts that individuals possess multiple Discourses. He distinguishes between primary Discourses, which "constitute [an individual's] first social identity," and secondary Discourses "to which people are apprenticed as part of their socializations within various local, state, and national groups and institutions outside early home and peer-group socialization" (Gee, 2008, p. 168). Gee indicates that primary Discourses provide the foundations for "culturally specific vernacular language" (p. 156); secondary Discourses typically engage a more formal register. Vygotsky's (1978) theory of internalization suggests that the interactions within a Discourse support an individ-

ual's understanding, use, and appropriation of language. Language, as a means for interaction, becomes a tool for identity formation. Adopting the register of a community contributes to "groupness" (Moje & Luke, 2009). Manipulation of the language, or what composition theorists call *voice*, allows for individuality within the group Discourse.

For Prensky's (2001) digital natives, who navigate a primary Discourse that is saturated with technology, language play contributes to group and individual identities. The technologies that enable the existence of virtual communities have inspired the development of a unique language system that combines elements of SWE with abbreviations, fragmented sentences, "initialisms" (Jacobs, 2008, p. 204), emoticons, and other manipulations of conventional SWE. Adolescents, empowered by the community to experiment, have embraced the creativity afforded by this nonstandard language and internalized the structures that allow for shared meaning within their communities of practice.

Because the language can be manipulated by individual language users (Crystal, 2001; Kasesniemi & Rautiainen, 2002), language choices within these communities serve as markers for individual identity. For example, Lily chooses the abbreviation *nm* to reply to Michael's question, "wasz gud" (meaning "What's good?" or "What's up?"). Within the vast possibilities of digital writing, she could easily have chosen one of the following spellings: *not much, nuttin, nothin,* or *nothing*. Her choice of the abbreviation *nm* marks her as a user of informal, digital language, a member of a specific Discourse community.

The freedom of choice in digital writing gives the impression that anything goes and that language use is somewhat random. However, communication in virtual worlds is often written, not spoken, and the rules of reciprocity (Nystrand, 1986) apply. Nystrand articulates the collaborative nature of writing; under a contract of reciprocity, each individual, a writer and a reader, "presupposes—indeed counts on—the sense-making capabilities of the other" (p. ix). To honor the contract, a writer must attend to the needs and expectations of the reader. As Lewis (1969) explains, an individual "must choose what language to adopt according to his expectations about his neighbors' language" (p. 8). These expectations lead to acceptable language conventions within a community. Therefore, to maintain reciprocity, writers in a virtual setting will use particular conventions because they believe that their readers will understand the meaning of the written text. Eventually, widespread use of these conventions standardizes them (Lewis, 1969) within a community of practice.

Because digital writers often break from SWE, they have the ability to adopt language and communication practices that define insiders from

outsiders (Cherny, 1999; Crystal, 2001). Crystal (2001) claims that this practice in Internet communities helps to "demonstrate their solidarity by evolving (consciously or unconsciously) measures of identity" (p. 60). These communities develop "guidelines, principles, rules, and regulations relating to the way people should linguistically behave" (p. 68). Like most social situations where there are norms and rules, "People who fail to conform … risk … being excluded from the group" (p. 71). Individuals can be marked as outsiders immediately by the language they use.

The work of Cherny (1999) reveals how virtual communities develop their own registers, which effectively "mark insider status in a community" (p. 85). She studied the online communities of multi-user dimensions (MUD), virtual worlds where individuals participate in role-playing games and interact with other users via chat messaging. Through linguistic analysis, Cherny identified the characteristics of a particular MUD register, which included manipulations of all five of the features of written language outlined by Crystal (2001): graphic, orthographic, grammatical, lexical, and discourse. These conventions of the MUD register marked the writing of the virtual community and served as a barrier to outsiders. Labels placed on outsiders by members of the MUD community included "newbie," "guest," or "random" (Cherny, 1999, p. 43). The "regular" (p. 43) MUD members used linguistic cues to ascertain this outsider status.

Cherny's work demonstrates that linguistic conventions evolve within a virtual community of practice. However, she acknowledges that "individual creativity sometimes results in new routines" (Cherny, 1999, p. 147). It is this possibility that allows users to experiment with language, to adopt voice in their writing, and to claim individual identities within their digital communities of practice. For adolescent digital writers, linguistic choices contribute to their individuality. Lily and Michael belong to a community of practice that is grounded in adolescent digitalk. This language allows these teens to belong to a community, even as it allows them to express their unique voices. For adolescents who constantly negotiate identity, playing with language in virtual settings is both necessary and desirable. Digitalk allows them groupness even as it allows them to find individual voice without repercussion.

Baron (2008), who examined the linguistic practices of IM written by college students, suggests that by the time individuals enter college, they have extensive experience writing on keyboards for academic work, and "their fingers tend to go on automatic pilot" (p. 70). For college students, she writes, "IM is far more pragmatic," and they "seem to have neither time for nor interest in such linguistic posturing" that would mark their

identity in a community of practice (p. 70). She contrasts this use of IM with "younger teenagers" who "may care about looking cool" (p. 70).

Baron's words indicate that language choices made by younger digital writers may be entirely peer motivated. They use digitalk as a way to belong, while college students do not. This suggestion ignores two key issues:

1) Writers adopt the conventions of their community.
2) Language allows for both an individual and a community identity.

Rethinking Baron's comments through this lens questions the automaticity of the language choices of the individuals in her data. Perhaps these digital writers adopted the conventions of a community that reflected a more academic, standardized identity. Likewise, younger writers often adopt conventions that allow them simultaneously to experiment with self and to identify with peers. For these teens, digitalk is a vehicle for both levels of identity.

LILY AND MICHAEL AS INDIVIDUALS IN A COMMUNITY GROUNDED IN DIGITALK

Crystal (2001) begins his analysis of the language of the Internet with the question, "Will all users of the Internet present themselves, through their messages, contributions, and pages, with the same kind of graphic, orthographic, grammatical, lexical, and discourse features?" (p. 9). He identifies "five broad Internet-using situations, which are sufficiently different to mean that the language they contain is likely to be significantly different" (p. 10), and his book delineates the characteristics of the language in each situation. He does not, however, examine technologies that were just developing en masse at the time of his analysis. For example, the connection between mobile phones and the Internet was still in its "infancy" (p. 10). A decade later, Crystal's question can be posed in relation to the evolving community of adolescent writers, a community based in the language of digitalk. Will all users of digitalk present themselves with the same kind of graphic, orthographic, grammatical, lexical, and discourse features? The answer involves a complex hybrid of individuality combined with a community of norms.

Despite attempts to legitimize language on the Internet through prescriptive-oriented style guides (Crystal, 2001), hard and fast rules about language do not exist in the digital world. In their writing, adolescents have embraced the freedom to manipulate and create, and they play with all five feature of language outlined by Crystal (2001). By far, however,

teens manipulate language the most at the orthographic level (Turner, Donovan, Apter, & Katić, 2009). In fact, the nonstandard spellings, capitalizations, and punctuation that define digitalk create tension when they "occasionally filter into their schoolwork" (Lenhart et al., 2008, p. ii). Though adults might view the conversation between Lily and Michael as text filled with "lazy acronyms and misspellings" (Brett, 2009, "iGuest April 23," para. 3), in actuality, the teens have adopted linguistic norms of their community.

As Lewis (1969) makes clear, conventions evolve from acceptable use within a group. When patterns of use cross media (IM, texting, social networking) and users, it is safe to assume they are accepted practice in the digital communication of adolescents. An analysis of the digital writing of 30 teens representing three suburban school communities reveals that norms in digitalk do exist. Though popular media suggest that commonalities among writers revolve around the use of emoticons (smileys) and logograms (numbers for sounds), these language choices do not surface across a majority of users in this sample. Conventions of digitalk that do emerge from the digital writing of these adolescents include (1) nonstandard capitalization, (2) nonstandard end punctuation, (3) use of multiple consonants or vowels within a word, (4) nonstandard use of ellipses, (5) lack of apostrophes, (6) use of phonetic spellings, (7) abbreviations, and (8) compound constructions to form new words (Turner et al., 2009).

Interestingly, these conventions can also be found in the writing of both Lily and Michael, who represent members of an urban school community that is quite different from the communities of the suburban students. It seems, then, that digitalk might serve as a type of "boundary object" (Wenger, 1998, p. 105) that allows adolescents from different social groups to connect in virtual communities. The existence of conventions allows for shared meaning and ensures a community identity. Choosing to use the conventions, electing to adhere to SWE, or creating new linguistic practices, all serve as markers of an individual identity within the community norms. An analysis of the conversation between Lily and Michael demonstrates the two layers of identity afforded by digitalk (see Table 1).

Both Lily and Michael identify themselves as members of a community of practice rooted in digitalk. Lily, an urban adolescent, employs each of the eight conventions found in the sample population of suburban teens, suggesting that her digital community has conventionalized similar language use. Her first utterance, "heyyy," demonstrates use of multiple consonants, a convention she repeats throughout her writing. Later in the conversation, she uses multiple vowels (e.g., *youu*). She employs ellipses

Table 1. Digitalk Conventions Used by Lily and Michael

<table>
<tr><th>Line</th><th>Writer</th><th>Text</th><th>Convention</th></tr>
<tr><td>1</td><td>Lily</td><td>heyyyy (:</td><td>Nonstandard capitalization/Multiple consonant
Emoticon</td></tr>
<tr><td>2</td><td>Michael</td><td>wasz gud B.I.G.?</td><td>Nonstandard capitalization
Phonetic spelling</td></tr>
<tr><td>3</td><td>Lily</td><td>nm, chillennn; whatchu up too?</td><td>Nonstandard capitalization/Abbreviation
Phonetic spelling
Compound construction</td></tr>
<tr><td>4</td><td>Michael</td><td>WatchIn da gam3</td><td>Phonetic spelling
Nonstandard capitalization</td></tr>
<tr><td>5</td><td>Lily</td><td>mm, y quien ta jugandoo?</td><td>Nonstandard capitalization/Abbreviation</td></tr>
<tr><td>6</td><td>Michael</td><td>Yank33s nd naTi0naLs.</td><td>Abbreviation
Nonstandard capitalization</td></tr>
<tr><td>7</td><td>Lily</td><td>WHAAAATT A JOKEEEEE, dime como yankees lostt againstt them yesterdaii.</td><td>Multiple consonant and vowel
Nonstandard capitalization</td></tr>
<tr><td>8</td><td>Michael</td><td>i n0e, th3y suCk.</td><td>Nonstandard capitalization
Phonetic spelling</td></tr>
<tr><td>9</td><td>Lily</td><td>& the nationalsss won like only 16 games … one of the worst teams homieeegee.</td><td>Nonstandard capitalization
Ellipses
Multiple consonant and vowel</td></tr>
<tr><td>10</td><td>Michael</td><td>t3lL m3 b0uT it, i b3T y0u fIv3 d0lLaRs th3Y g00nA l0s3.</td><td>Nonstandard capitalization</td></tr>
<tr><td>11</td><td>Lily</td><td>AHA, naw gee thats easy $ for youu ! =p</td><td>Phonetic spelling
No apostrophe
Multiple vowel
Emoticon</td></tr>
<tr><td>12</td><td>Michael</td><td>lol i waS plAyInG w| y0u. =D</td><td>Abbreviation
Nonstandard capitalization
Emoticon</td></tr>
<tr><td>13</td><td>Lily</td><td>lol imma talk to you later … i got pizzaa awaitinggg meeeee (;</td><td>Abbreviation
Compound construction
Ellipses
Nonstandard capitalization
Multiple consonant and vowel
Nonstandard punctuation</td></tr>
<tr><td>14</td><td>Michael</td><td>iight pe3cE</td><td>Phonetic spelling</td></tr>
</table>

Note. Emoticons were not identified as conventions in the data of suburban teens. Their use by both Lily and Michael may suggest that the community of practice in which these two individuals participated has conventionalized them.

for coherence in lines 9 and 11, and she chooses not to include an apostrophe in line 11. Phonetic spelling (*chillennn*), abbreviation (*nm* for not much or nothing much), and compound constructions (*whatchu*) can all be seen in line 3. Lily breaks all three rules of standard capitalization by using a lowercase *i,* by not capitalizing proper nouns like *yankees,* and by not consistently capitalizing the beginnings of sentences/utterances. Likewise, she chooses not to use end-punctuation in her last utterance, which is a complete sentence.

Michael also adopts several of the community conventions in his conversation with Lily. He writes with phonetic spellings (e.g., *wasz, gud*); he includes abbreviations (e.g., *nd* for *and*; *w/* for *with*); and he employs nonstandard capitalization throughout. Interestingly, both Michael and Lily use emoticons in their text. Though use of emoticons did not arise as a convention within the data analyzed, Lily and Michael accept the practice, and it is likely that other members of their virtual community adopt this linguistic marker.

Lily and Michael are clearly members of the same language community. They use nonstandard conventions in similar ways. However, what is striking about this conversation is the *difference* between the two authors. Each has adapted language to project a voice or identity that might be difficult to capture using SWE. Lily's blend of Spanish and English, her choice to reverse emoticons, and her use of all caps and symbols (e.g., *&*), all contribute to her identity within this conversation. Likewise, Michael's adoption of *L33T*, a form of writing that replaces letters with numbers or symbols, and his use of informal phonological (e.g., *da*) and syntactic (e.g., *they gonna, L33T omitted*) constructions mark his onscreen identity. In fact, his choice to end nearly every line of this exchange with punctuation, in effect leaning more toward SWE conventions and less toward community conventions, also makes a statement about his identity.

An outsider reading Lily and Michael's words can make assumptions about who these individuals are based on the language choices they make. For example, Lily chooses to blend Spanish with English; Michael easily interprets it. It is likely, then, that both are speakers of the language and that it reflects a shared identity offline. Similarly, Michael's use of *L33T*, a coded language of the Internet, may indicate his identity as a gamer or as a member of a social group that has adopted *L33T* as a language code. His linguistic choices also clearly project his voice, one that reflects urban phonological and syntactic practices. Even so, his voice is marked by the conventions of SWE, indicating a blend of vernacular and academic literacies in his identity. Regardless of how an outsider might interpret the individual identities involved, what is more important is the

communication that takes place between Lily and Michael. By using digitalk, which allows for individual manipulation and creativity within a community of writers, these teens create a shared meaning in their text. They do so within a community of practice.

It is important to recognize that not all digital communities adopt the same conventions. Just as the urban teens do, Lily and Michael both use emoticons, a feature not found across the majority of users from the suburban data sample; other communities of adolescents may differ from those presented. For instance, the digital language of a group of students from a private, religious school in a large U.S. city demonstrates the use of logograms across users and media. It also reveals few instances of using ellipses. Both of these findings distinguish this community of practice from the suburban sample.

Jessica and Rachael are two students from the urban private, religious school community. Their text conversation (see Table 2) identifies them as members of a larger community of adolescent digital writers. They use nearly all of the conventions that appear in the data of suburban teens. However, the language of their conversation also reveals that their community of practice is unique. For example, logograms, like the use of *gr8* (*great*) and the sign-off *mwaz* (probably a variation of the sound of a kiss, "mwah"), appear across users in the data from their community, a clear difference from the suburban data. Likewise, the language of this conversation is markedly different from that of Lily and Michael, teens from a different urban community. While many nonusers of digitalk would struggle to translate Lily and Michael's text, the meaning of Jessica and Rachael's utterances is more readily apparent.

The ease of translation depends upon the language used. In the example from Jessica and Rachael, the heavy use of phonetic spelling allows nonusers of digitalk to *hear* the appropriate word that signifies the intended meaning. The translation is also facilitated because the speakers lean toward the conventions of SWE. For example, Jessica begins the conversation by asking a question similar to the one Michael asks Lily, "wasz gud?" Jessica asks, "Hey wats up??? Wats doin?" Rachael's response to this conversational invitation is markedly different from Lily's response to Michael. While Lily chooses a convention of digitalk, the abbreviation *nm,* Rachael selects a more standard form, writing, "Nothing." These choices serve as identity markers; though Rachael's community would probably accept the abbreviation *nm,* she chooses to represent herself with a different version of that utterance.

The language choices of Jessica and Rachael make their texts somewhat more accessible to outsiders than those of Lily and Michael. The use of standard capitalization also supports translation by individuals outside

Table 2. Conventions Used by Jessica and Rachael

Line	*Writer*	*Text*	*Convention*
1	Jessica	Hey wats up??? Wats doin?	Compound construction Abbreviation Phonetic spelling
2	Rachael	Nothing	
3	Jessica	Excited for camp???	
4	Rachael	Ya but I going to be homesic	Abbreviation
5	Jessica	Me tooo im also gonna be … but ill be home s tog. K?	Multiple vowel Lack of apostrophe Nonstandard capitalization Compound construction Abbreviation
6	Rachael	Ok!!	
7	Jessica	Bringin ur phone? Wat we doing about that?	Abbreviation
8	Rachael	IDK	Abbreviation
9	Jessica	Im rlly excited and nervous Did u finish shoppin???	Lack of apostrophe Abbreviation Nonstandard punctuation
10	Rachael	Almost	
11	Jessica	OMG!!!! Ur awesome where did u shop????	Abbreviation
12	Rachael	Your talking cloths? what kind I will tell u wer to get it	Abbreviation
13	Jessica	Weak day	
14	Rachael	Try old nave gap	
15	Jessica	Cool, thanx have a gr8 night	Phonetic spelling Logogram
16	Rachael	gn	Abbreviation
17	Jessica	mwaz	Logogram

Note. Logograms were not identified as conventions in the data of suburban teens. They were identified in the data of the community to which Jessica and Rachael belonged. Likewise, ellipses were not identified as a convention in this community, and therefore their use in line 5 is not marked as such.

the community of practice. (Note: The use of standard capitalization may be more a function of auto-correct technology than of user choice. Some mobile phones, like the iPhone, automatically correct the first letter of each text and the first person pronoun *I*. The capitalization here could also reflect the auto-correct of a word-processing program, as the

individual typed the text message for data collection purposes.) Overall, one-third of the lines written by Jessica and Rachael closely resemble SWE. In contrast, every line of the conversation between Lily and Michael is marked by conventions of digitalk.

The ease of translation in Jessica and Rachael's conversation breaks down, however, in line 5 with the utterance, "ill be home s tog." This single phrase reminds outside readers that they are, indeed, on the periphery of a community of practice. Questions about whether this text contains a typo, or whether *tog* acts as an abbreviation for *photographer,* hinder the translation. For Rachael, however, the meaning must be clear. She doesn't ask for clarification but simply replies, "Ok!!" Likewise, when Jessica signs off with "mwaz," the language choice is understood by her recipient. These individuals share an understanding of the conventions of the community that an outsider might not. This community, however, is clearly different from the community of Lily and Michael.

Teens adopt the acceptable conventions of their digital communities in order to forge identities of membership. As Baron (2008) shares, "The fifteen-year-old son of a colleague admitted that he intentionally included abbreviations so he wouldn't look like a nerd" (p. 70). Adolescents understand that failing to meet the standards of the community has the potential to label a user as an outsider (Cherny, 1999). Interestingly, teens, who desire independence as much as they do acceptance, have adopted linguistic norms that encourage experimentation within community standards. Digitalk allows for both conformity and individuality.

TENSIONS WITH THE WORLD BEYOND THE COMMUNITY

At its core, digitalk invites authors to create, to manipulate, and to use language to mark their identities. Conventions are not prescribed. Rules can be broken or recreated. The freedom encouraged by digitalk stands in stark contrast to the norms of SWE, the writing accepted in school and the larger society.

In many cases *digital immigrants* (Prensky, 2001), individuals who have assimilated 21st century tools of technology into their adult lives, are not embedded in a community where digitalk is accepted practice. They struggle to ascertain meaning from "an entirely new language" (Prensky, 2001, p. 2), and often conversations like the one between Lily and Michael are incomprehensible to the adults in teens' lives. As Prensky (2001) might argue, where digital natives instantaneously understand, digital immigrants struggle to translate. Because adults are clearly outsiders to adolescent virtual communities, and as such do not fully

recognize the norms of digital writing, tensions surrounding language develop.

According to the results of the Pew study, "A considerable number of educators and children's advocates … are concerned that the quality of writing by young Americans is being degraded by their electronic communication, with its carefree spelling, lax punctuation and grammar, and its acronym shortcuts" (Lenhart et al., 2008, p. 3). Inherent in this statement is a prejudice against nonstandard forms of language. Despite the fact that teens like Lily and Michael merge multiple language systems, break rules systematically, and manipulate language to communicate ideas with an intended audience, adults outside their digital community see the language as "degrading," "carefree," and "lax." In short, the language teens use when writing digitally is *wrong*. Digitalk is not welcome in many settings, particularly in school.

Interestingly, research shows that adolescents are capable of navigating between school-based literacy and digital literacy (Jacobs, 2008). Some researchers indicate that students are more adept at separating the two than popular media implies and that conventions of digital writing rarely seep into academic work (Baron, 2008; Crystal, 2008). Even so, teens themselves admit to using the informal language of their digital writing in their schoolwork (Lenhart et al., 2008), and educators have a responsibility to address the issues surrounding the divide between out-of-school literacy practices and in-school expectations. This responsibility begins by addressing the prejudice against the language and the identities that teens bring to the classroom.

Individuals like Lily and Michael are immersed in a world outside of school, where the written discourse differs from SWE. As Gee (2008) might say, their primary Discourse conflicts with the secondary Discourse of school. The conflict of primary and secondary Discourses in adolescence is not limited to digitalk. Wheeler and Swords (2006) explore African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and the difficulties speakers of this dialect have in mastering SWE. These researchers argue that a student's primary discourse might be different from academic language; however, this difference does not make the student's language deficient. The authors suggest that teaching students to navigate between home and school discourses, a task they call code-switching, privileges both languages. Rather than seeing SWE as "Right with a capital *R*, and that anything else is improper, bad, incorrect, and fractured" (2006, p. 5), Wheeler and Swords acknowledge that individuals use language differently depending on community expectations. They outline a plan that builds on students' existing knowledge by contrasting their home language, or the language they use unconsciously, with the SWE that is

appropriate in school.

For adolescents in the 21st century, IM programs, cell phone text messaging, and social networking sites have become commonplace. As the Pew study (Lenhart et al., 2008) documents, teens are using these technologies outside of school, and they are becoming, or perhaps have already become, fluent in the language associated with them. As digital natives who have had access to computer technology all of their lives, they often demonstrate in these arenas proficiencies that adults in their lives lack. In essence, digitalk represents a key element of their primary Discourse. Teachers and parents should not look at this language as deficient, but rather they should embrace students' existing knowledge, as Wheeler and Swords (2006) suggest, and teach them to code-switch. If adults can guide students to see their digitalk as a legitimate, acceptable use of language within a specific community and to understand consciously the conventions that guide that community's practice, choices in language can be made consciously, and students can bridge the divide between their out-of-school discourse and the more formal register of school. (See Turner, 2009, for classroom activities that promote code-switching.)

Because of the prejudice that exists against digitalk, teens themselves do not see the writing they do in electronic venues as "real writing" (Lenhart et al., 2008, p. i). They do not value their digital practices and the competencies they develop in manipulating language for communicative purposes. Their proficiency with digitalk comes from the feedback they receive from real audiences; their peers validate their language choices, and they also serve as models for language use. The control over language and the competence that develops from regular practice enable individuals to "consciously mark" their identities (Smith and Wilhelm, 2002, p. 108).

Unfortunately, this control is often stripped from teens when they enter classrooms. Rather than valuing language play, teachers correct what they see as errors, because they expect students to conform to the prescriptions of SWE. In their discussion of the teaching of grammar, Smith and Wilhelm (2007) suggest that this kind of feedback "makes [teens] feel inferior and threatens their identity" (p. 98). In essence, traditional values that see SWE as a *correct* language and any variances as *deficient* negate the feeling of competence that is crucial for adolescents' sense of self.

In the digital world, adolescents choose the communities to which they belong; they decide to what extent they will engage in the norms of those communities; they determine the level of language play that will mark their individual identities. In school, however, this agency often does not

exist. Rather, students are required to complete schoolish tasks (Hillocks, 2002), where audience is not authentic and purpose has little value beyond the assignment. Yancey (2004) states, "What we ask students to do is who we ask them to be" (p. 739). In order to help students enact their out-of-school identities in the classroom, therefore, teachers need to close the gap between home and school Discourses by comparing and contrasting the languages of school texts and the languages used outside of school (Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, & Morris, 2008). Moje et al. (2008) argue that students must develop "metadiscursivity" (p. 112), or the ability to consciously participate in various discourse communities. These authors recognize that "some literacy activities may be more motivating and engaging to youth than others," and school tasks are often "demotivating" (p. 112). Asking students to include out-of-school writing, like text messages, IMs, and social network posts, as part of their portfolio in school, would value these Discourse practices and the language that is associated with them. Adolescents could begin to see their communications as *real* writing and appreciate their individual competencies.

When teens enter school, they are asked to conform to the conventions of SWE. In fact, they are often penalized for not adhering to the rules prescribed. Unlike in the virtual world, where they can safely experiment with the graphic, orthographic, and lexical constructions of language, adolescents must sacrifice their individual identities to reap the rewards of academic conformity. For some students, these rewards are tangible, and the motivation to code-switch is evident. For others, adjusting to the constraints of SWE is neither automatic nor welcome. Whereas their out-of-school communities value their individual linguistic expression, the academic community does not. In fact, it seems to squelch their developing identities.

As adolescents in the 21st century struggle with issues of self, educators must be aware of the possible conflict between internal goals and external pressures. The nature of digitalk is that it minimizes this tension by allowing for self-expression within communities that have established norms. As members of these communities of practice, teens are capable of shaping these norms (Wenger, 1998), giving them a sense of competence and authority they do not necessarily experience in school. Understanding digitalk as a new literacy of the digital generation, one that contributes to identity formation by allowing for membership in a group and by encouraging individual experimentation, is of utmost importance for educators of these individuals. As Prensky (2001) indicates, "Digital Immigrants typically have very little appreciation for these new skills that the Natives have acquired and perfected through years of interaction and practice" (p. 2). Valuing digitalk as a language with

norms is the first step to harnessing the power of the writing that teens do outside of school. By viewing digitalk as a unique language, one that allows for both community and self-expression, adults can support and understand the development of adolescent identities.

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APPENDIX

Line	*Writer*	*Original Language*	*Translated Language (not SWE)*
1	Lily	heyyyy (:	Hey (smiley)
2	Michael	wasz gud B.I.G.?	What's good, B.I.G.?
3	Lily	nm, chillennn; whatchu up too?	Not much. Chilling; what are you up to?
4	Michael	WatchIn da gam3	Watching the game
5	Lily	mm, y quien ta jugandoo?	Oh, and who is playing?
6	Michael	Yank33s nd naTi0naLs.	Yankees and Nationals.
7	Lily	WHAAAATT A JOKEEEEE, dime como yankees lostt againstt them yesterdaii.	What a joke. Tell me how the Yankees lost against them yesterday.
8	Michael	i n0e, th3y suCk.	I know, they suck.
9	Lily	& the nationalsss won like only 16 games … one of the worst teams homieeegee.	And the Nationals won like only 16 games so they are one of the worst teams my friend.
10	Michael	t3lL m3 b0uT it, i b3T y0u fIv3 d0lLaRs th3Y g00nA l0s3.	Tell me about it, I bet you five dollars they gonna lose.
11	Lily	AHA, naw gee thats easy $ for youu ! =p	Aha, nah friend, that's easy money for you! (smiley)
12	Michael	lol i waS plAyInG w| y0u. =D	Laughing out loud. I was playing with you. (smiley)
13	Lily	lol imma talk to you later … i got pizzaa awaitinggg meeeee (;	Laughing out loud. I will talk to you later. I got pizza awaiting me. (smiley)
14	Michael	iight pe3cE	All right. Peace.

Note. Lily's SWE translation of this text indicated that all three emoticons were "smileys." Some users may interpret them as unique emotions or actions.

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