Crystal, D. *Txtng: the gr8 db8*
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) pp. 239.
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Text messaging has arrived in the world of linguistics! David Crystal's *Txtng: the Gr8 Db8* is an entertaining and enlightening discussion of the 'great debate' surrounding the medium. The thesis of his book is that far from harming the English language, texting can have beneficial effects on literacy. This contradicts the very tenets of Britain's media: to take Crystal's examples, the *Daily Mail* reports John Humphrey's denigration of texters as "vandals who are doing to our language what Genghis Khan did to his neighbours eight hundred years ago" (which seems equally unfair to people who text and to Mongolian leaders) while *The Guardian* describes textese as "thin and – compared, say, with Californian personalised licence plates – unimaginative." Such media reports contribute towards the "huge popular mythology," as Crystal puts it, "in which exaggerated and distorted accounts of what youngsters are believed to do when they text has fuelled prophecies of impending linguistic disaster." Crystal's dispelling of this myth is both convincing and amusing: he gives, for example, short shrift to the panic that ensued in 2003 when a girl wrote a homework assignment in textese. The assignment, which began *My summr hols wr CWOT*, did not herald the downfall of English but was, suggests Crystal, "a clever case of 'trying it on', the linguistic equivalent of walking into class wearing a hoodie."

Crystal's counter-argument is, firstly, that variation in spelling is neither new nor unique to texting. Acronyms have always required insider knowledge, as Crystal illustrates with a line from a hospital memorandum: "The PHCT are going to be looking at the CRS with the CPO"[1]; logograms or homophones can be seen in *rebuses* such as *YY U R YY U B I C U R YY 4 ME* (cf. the quiz show *Catchphrase* or boardgame *Dingbats*); the long history of initialisms is evidenced by occurrences of *NB* (*nota bene*) in 1673; *pm* in 1666; and *IOU* in 1618; while *cos*, *wot*, *luv*, *thanx* and *ya* appear in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and *skool* in the *Beano*. Where respellings in texting appear novel, they result from the extension of these processes (as texters 'up the ante' on existing forms) or their combination (*2bctnd* for *to be continued*), a finding which my data[2] supports. At the same time, however, Crystal's second point is that the inevitable focus on these eye-catching forms obscures the fact that "nobody says you *have* to use abbreviated language" when texting and, indeed, not everybody does. This is perhaps not surprising in the light of Crystal's observation that it is not only young people who text. Instead, messages are 'stylistically diverse', with styles dependent on factors such as gender and familiarity with the technology, as well as age. Finally, Crystal argues that the manipulation of language in texting is appropriate and creative, and he proposes that it be exploited as such in the classroom. His conclusion is that texting should be seen as "just another variety of language" that children can learn to use appropriately, much as they need to recognise that they cannot write as they talk.

Like the abbreviations he describes, Crystal's argument is not new. The observation that text message abbreviations can be found in earlier writing is made by Kessler and Bergs (2003) who compare Valentine text messages with love letters written

by 'fallen' Victorian girls and find similar uses of *bcoz, luv, missd, gud* and the use of *xx* for kisses; while Shortis (2007) traces the use of 'Txt' features to trade names, pop music, children's spelling and webchat. Other studies note a limited use of abbreviations in their data (Doring 2002; Faulkner and Culwin 2005), and the idea that texting is creative and appropriate is widely accepted (Hard af Segersteg 2002; Shortis 2007). The main limitation of Crystal's work is his relative lack of data (as he acknowledges), and the danger is that the book risks contributing to the myths around texting that it simultaneously tries to dispel. Of the 200 or so English texting abbreviations listed in the appendices, only around 60 are attested in my data[2]: mainly number and letter homophones (*2, b4, u*), speech-like contractions (*cos, doin*) and word shortenings (*hv, spk*), but not the reduction of sentences to initial letters such as *aamof* ('as a matter of fact'). Grinter and Eldridge's (2003) study of 477 messages similarly describes teenagers shortening everyday words such as *tomorrow* and *weekend* rather than the complex sequences suggested by online dictionaries and the media. Although such corpora cannot claim to be representative of texting as a whole, they challenge findings based, as Crystal's are, on what "are *said* to be used in English text messages" (my italics).

However, Crystal's *Txtng: the gr8 db8* is possibly the first populist, full-length book to put together an argument for texting and it achieves this goal very well, with accessible, easy-to-read prose and a glossary of both linguistic and technological terms. *Txtng* is full of interesting titbits: did you know that texting is less popular in the States than in Europe because more people drive than take public transport; or that texting is depriving children of sleep? Though aimed at a non-linguistic audience, the book draws on relevant academic sources and will not only be read widely for enjoyment (no doubt after being received as a birthday or Christmas gift) but can also be used by A-level and undergraduate linguistic students carrying out investigations into the language of *txtng*, encouraged perhaps by tutors trying to be 'book.'[3]

Works Cited

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Notes

[1] In full: "The Primary Health Care Team are going to be looking at the Client Record System with the Chief Pharmaceutical Officer."

[2] A corpus of 11,000 text messages collected for doctoral research (e.g., Tagg 2007)

[3] As Crystal explains, 'book' is apparently used by teenagers, in texting and speaking, to mean 'cool' due to the fact that, when typing in 'cool' in a mobile phone keypad, 'book' is offered as the first choice by predictive texting dictionaries.

Stephen Bann (ed.), *The Coral Mind: Adrian Stokes' Engagement with Art History, Criticism, Architecture and Psychoanalysis*
(University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007) pp. 230.
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This new work on the artist, art critic, historian and aesthete Adrian Stokes, part of the collection of monographs and edited books that Penn State University Press is amassing under the umbrella of their 'Refiguring Modernism,' is a strong addition to the critical re-awakening in the field of aesthetic history and an important contribution to a growing understanding and appreciation for a figure so often lost to modernism. Indeed, Stokes is arguably the composite specimen for this series. His often difficult prose, complicated by direct reportage of his own reactions to art and the often dense discussions of Kleinian psychoanalysis in relation to his own consciousness, is frequently passed from discipline to discipline with no one field of study really claiming him for their own. Stokes's work has always been hard to situate; as the subtitle of this volume indicates, his work crosses disciplinary boundaries in innovative and idiosyncratic ways.

Stokes is, without a doubt, a difficult writer. His best known work, *The Quattro Cento* (1932), begins with an outline of his methodology, describing the book "not so much critical as creative, the author exploiting the device of fantasy to uncover the roots of Italian creative power." Perhaps its ahistorical approach was the root cause of the indifferent reviews that Stokes's best known work received. D. S. Meldrum, writing in the *Burlington Magazine* in 1932, found that the main theme in Stokes's *The Quattro Cento* "is never defined," and that the reader "must look nowhere for definitions." He later writes that "[m]any of [the work's] generalisations appear rash and some of them even ridiculous," and that the work's "expression, elaborate, involved, sometimes beautiful, and sometimes tortuous, does not contrive to make itself clear." Later works, on Venice, on Rimini, on the Ballet Russes, often suffered from the same critical reception.

In one sense then, this volume reconnects with Stokes's work at an ideological level; Stokes's own experimentation and liminality offer the twenty-first century critical