

CONCOURS CENTRALE•SUPÉLEC

Anglais

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4 heures

Calculatrices interdites

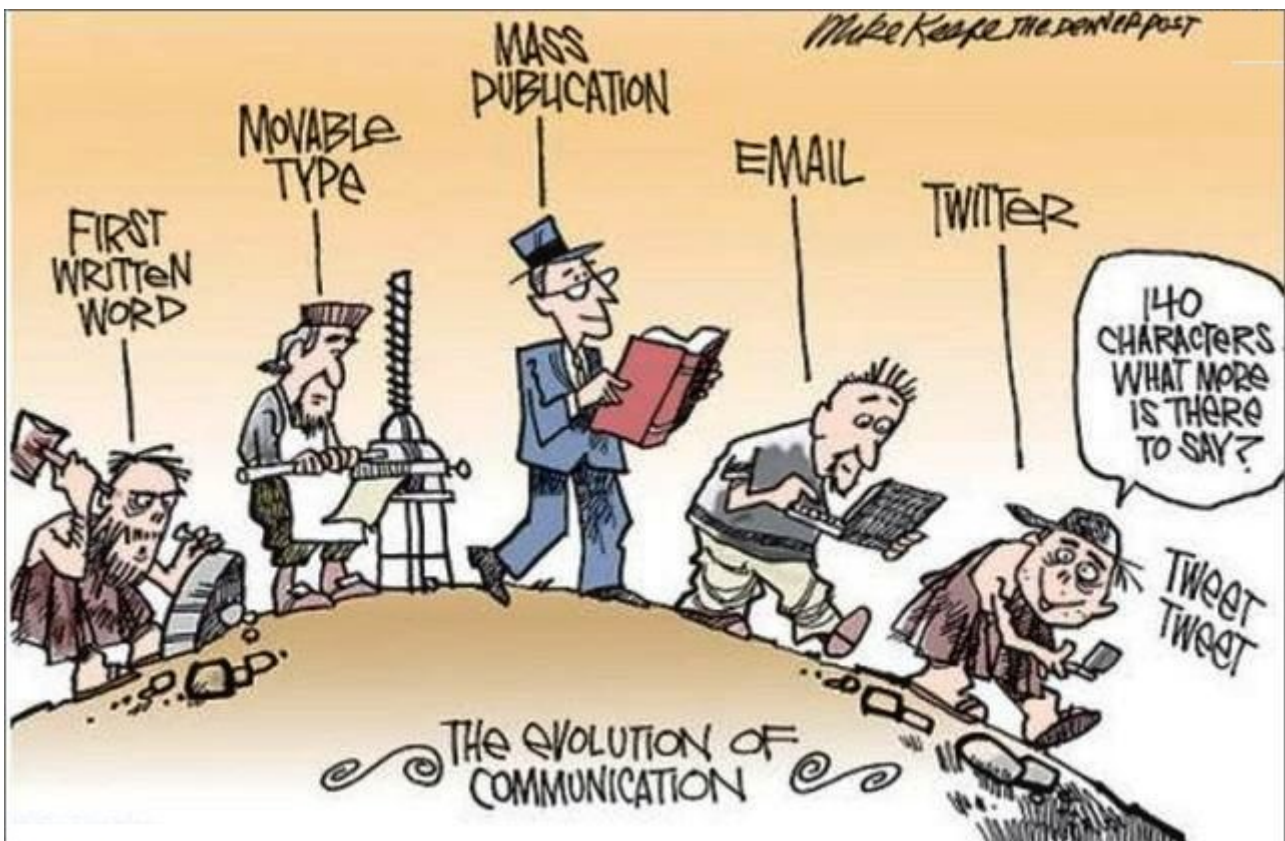
L'usage de tout système électronique ou informatique est interdit dans cette épreuve.

Rédiger en anglais et en 500 mots une synthèse des documents proposés, qui devra obligatoirement comporter un titre. Indiquer avec précision, à la fin du travail, le nombre de mots utilisés (titre inclus), un écart de 10% en plus ou en moins sera accepté.

Ce sujet propose les 4 documents suivants :

- un dessin de presse de Mike Keefe ;
- un article de Conrad Swackhamer paru dans *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review* ;
- un article de David Crystal paru dans *The Guardian* ;
- un article paru dans *The Economist*.

L'ordre dans lequel se présentent les documents est aléatoire.



Mike Keefe, *Denver Post*, 27 March 2009

Influence of the Telegraph Upon Literature

by CONRAD SWACKHAMER, *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review* (Vol. 22), May 1848

The Telegraph has ceased to be a wonder. Its astonishing exhibition of human skill no longer excites our admiration. The emotions which the actual display of its magical powers excited in the minds of all beholders — the speculations to which it gave rise among the philosophical — [...] have all passed away, and given place to more practical considerations. And now [...] we beg to be excused if we step aside for a moment into an untrodden path, and indulge in a few reflections upon the influence which the Telegraph will have upon literature.

We do not intend to speak of the universal diffusion of intelligence among the mass of the people, which every such great movement is calculated to promote — nor of the consequent increase in the number of those who will devote themselves to learning, and who will unite to lay the foundations of the great Republic of Letters in the West. We shall confine our remarks to a comparatively unimportant branch of the subject — its effect upon Style in Composition. [...] That a great revolution is effecting in this department of literature, or rather that there is manifested a continual progressive tendency towards perfection, must be apparent to every careful observer. The complicated periods which were once so much in vogue — the sentence within sentence, armed with all the paraphernalia of comma, semicolon, colon and dash, and dragging their slow length over almost an entire page before the “full stop” put a period at once to their existence and the reader’s perplexity — have been gradually disappearing — having either fallen to pieces from their own clumsy construction, or been shattered by the critic’s hammer. The florid verbosity which characterised the [...] style of Dr. Johnson; the polished sentences of Addison, whose smoothly gliding periods might almost have been set to music — have been gradually giving way to a more nervous and rhetorically perfect style. The human race seems ever on the march toward perfection in the use of the instruments which Providence has placed in its hands. At no period of his existence has the material appropriated to the use of man been so economically or skilfully employed as at present. Language is as important an auxiliary to man as the motive power of water or steam, the principles of mechanics, or the facilities which the locomotive or the Telegraph furnish. Language too, like the other great agents employed in his service, has been slowly yet certainly approaching the standard of perfection — becoming, in every succeeding generation, more surely and more readily the exponent of thought.

[...]

The high point at which it should aim, is this — the communication of thought with the utmost Facility and Clearness, united with the greatest possible Elegance of style. The first element of this perfection, facility of communication and clearness of thought, should never be sacrificed to beauty of style; and the second should always be, and is always in good writing, found in connection with the first. [...]

We said that the tendency of language is invariably toward the standard of perfection.

Strange as the assertion may seem, we declare that the Telegraph will contribute directly to the attainment of that end wherever it is used. At first view we wonder what connection a mere machine has with literature. At the second thought we recall the astonishing intellectual revolution which followed the invention of the printing press, and we blush at our forgetfulness. The manner in which the Telegraph must operate for the improvement of language is this.

The Telegraph is necessarily an expensive method of communication; yet it offers facilities which are indispensable to the man of business in this driving age of the world. Costly as it is, it must be employed. Now the desideratum of the Telegraph — the great question most important to all who have any connection with it, is this — How can the greatest amount of intelligence be communicated in the fewest words? Is not this the very question which has been for centuries theoretically proposed by scholars as the ultimatum of language? Language is but the medium of thought — which flies as rapidly and acts as instantaneously as the invisible element which flashes along the Telegraphic wire. The more closely, then, that it follows the operation of thought, the more perfectly does it perform its office. [...]

Let not the reader imagine that the influence of this invention is to be confined within the narrow precincts of the Telegraph office, or limited to the pen of the operator. When a half column or more of every paper in the Union is filled with Telegraphic despatches; when these reports form a large part of the daily reading of thousands; when correspondence is hourly prepared and revised, throughout the whole extent of the United States, with a view to telegraphic transmission, is it too much to expect that this invention will have an influence upon American literature; and that that influence will be marked and permanent, and withal salutary?

[...]

2b or not 2b?

Last year, in a newspaper article headed “I h8 txt msgs: How texting is wrecking our language”, John Humphrys argued that texters are “vandals who are doing to our language what Genghis Khan did to his neighbours 800 years ago. They are destroying it: pillaging our punctuation; savaging our sentences; raping our vocabulary. And they must be stopped.”

As a new variety of language, texting has been condemned as “textese”, “slanguage”, a “digital virus”. According to John Sutherland of University College London, writing in this paper in 2002, it is “bleak, bald, sad shorthand. Drab shrinktalk ... Linguistically it’s all pig’s ear ... it masks dyslexia, poor spelling and mental laziness. Texting is penmanship for illiterates.”

Ever since the arrival of printing — thought to be the invention of the devil because it would put false opinions into people’s minds — people have been arguing that new technology would have disastrous consequences for language. Scares accompanied the introduction of the telegraph, telephone, and broadcasting. [...]

Research has made it clear that the early media hysteria about the novelty (and thus the dangers) of text messaging was misplaced. In one American study, less than 20% of the text messages looked at showed abbreviated forms of any kind — about three per message. And in a Norwegian study, the proportion was even lower, with just 6% using abbreviations. In my own text collection, the figure is about 10%.

People seem to have swallowed whole the stories that youngsters use nothing else but abbreviations when they text, such as the reports in 2003 that a teenager had written an essay so full of textspeak that her teacher was unable to understand it. An extract was posted online, and quoted incessantly, but as no one was ever able to track down the entire essay, it was probably a hoax.

There are several distinctive features of the way texts are written that combine to give the impression of novelty, but none of them is, in fact, linguistically novel. Many of them were being used in chatroom interactions that predated the arrival of mobile phones. Some can be found in pre-computer informal writing, dating back a hundred years or more. [...]

[T]he use of initial letters for whole words (n for “no”, gf for “girlfriend”, cmb “call me back”) is not at all new. People have been initialising common phrases for ages. IOU is known from 1618. There is no difference, apart from the medium of communication, between a modern kid’s “lol” (“laughing out loud”) and an earlier generation’s “Swalk” (“sealed with a loving kiss”).

In texts we find such forms as msg (“message”) and xlnt (“excellent”). Almost any word can be abbreviated in this way — though there is no consistency between texters. But this isn’t new either. Eric Partridge published his *Dictionary of Abbreviations* in 1942. It contained dozens of SMS-looking examples, such as agn “again”, mth “month”, and gd “good” — 50 years before texting was born.

English has had abbreviated words ever since it began to be written down. Words such as exam, vet, fridge, cox and bus are so familiar that they have effectively become new words. When some of these abbreviated forms first came into use, they also attracted criticism. In 1711, for example, Joseph Addison complained about the way words were being “miserably curtailed” — he mentioned pos (itive) and incog (nito). And Jonathan Swift thought that abbreviating words was a “barbarous custom”. [...]

Texters use deviant spellings — and they know they are deviant. But they are by no means the first to use such nonstandard forms as cos “because”, wot “what”, or gissa “give us a”. Several of these are so much part of English literary tradition that they have been given entries in the Oxford English Dictionary. “Cos” is there from 1828 and “wot” from 1829. Many can be found in literary dialect representations, such as by Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, Walter Scott, DH Lawrence, or Alan Bleasdale (“Gissa job!”). [...]

But the need to save time and energy is by no means the whole story of texting. When we look at some texts, they are linguistically quite complex. There are an extraordinary number of ways in which people play with language — creating riddles, solving crosswords, playing Scrabble, inventing new words. Professional writers do the same — providing catchy copy for advertising slogans, thinking up puns in newspaper headlines, and writing poems, novels and plays. Children quickly learn that one of the most enjoyable things you can do with language is to play with its sounds, words, grammar — and spelling. [...]

An extraordinary number of doom-laden prophecies have been made about the supposed linguistic evils unleashed by texting. Sadly, its creative potential has been virtually ignored. But five years of research has at last begun to dispel the myths. The most important finding is that texting does not erode children’s ability to read and write. On the contrary, literacy improves. The latest studies (from a team at Coventry University) have found strong positive links between the use of text language and the skills underlying success in standard English in pre-teenage children. The more abbreviations in their messages, the higher they scored on tests of reading and vocabulary. The children who were bet-

ter at spelling and writing used the most textisms. And the younger they received their first phone, the higher their scores. [...]

Some people dislike texting. Some are bemused by it. But it is merely the latest manifestation of the human ability to be linguistically creative and

to adapt language to suit the demands of diverse settings. There is no disaster pending. We will not see a new generation of adults growing up unable to write proper English. The language as a whole will not decline. In texting what we are seeing, in a small way, is language in evolution.

DAVID CRYSTAL

The logo for The Economist, featuring the words "The Economist" in white serif font on a red rectangular background.

Parlez-vous SMS?

A new threat to the French language

22 May 2008

THE *baccalauréat* exam season approaches, and with it ritual agonising over the standard of French spelling. These days, fingers are pointed not only at progressive teaching, the decline of the *dictée* or the legacy of May 1968. The new culprit is text-messaging.

“Look at what text-messaging is doing to the French language,” lamented President Nicolas Sarkozy in February. “If we let things go, in a few years we will have trouble understanding each other.” Most secondary-school pupils have their own mobile telephones, and they use an abbreviated phonetic language to communicate. A2M1, for instance, means *à demain*, or “see you tomorrow”. JTM is *je t’aime* (I love you). Or try: Ta HT 1 KDO? (*T’as acheté un cadeau?*, or have you bought a present?).

Text-messaging corrupts all languages. But the French are touchy because theirs is so much an emblem of national identity. It is hard enough to protect French from the invasion of English; now self-destruction threatens. The use of English is tightly restricted in advertising or on the radio, and all English-language slogans must by law be accompanied by a French translation. So Nespresso’s ad starring George Clooney, with the catchline “What else?”, has “*Quoi d’autre?*” as a subtitle.

There are no such restrictions on text-messaging, for now. Yet it is creeping into the marketing toolbox. C CHIC, a play both on *C’est chic* (It’s chic) and the C series cars, is the name of Citroën’s exhibition on the Champs Elysées in Paris. Or take an ad designed to attract 18-29-year-olds by BNP Paribas, a bank, which has the slogan: TA + K ENTRER (*T’as plus qu’entrer*, or you only have to come in). “It is designed to break the idea that the bank is austere and closed for the young,” explains BNP Paribas. “So it’s logical to use text-messaging language.”

Some see this as a slippery slope down which “efficiency seems to authorise all imaginable offences against our dear language,” as one educationalist grumbles. Others see it as no more menacing than shorthand for telegrams or typing. Whether schoolchildren can distinguish between useful shorthand in the playground and correct spelling in an exam remains to be seen—or, rather, is a question for 2M1.