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Is It Really “Fine”?: An Analysis of the Paralinguistic Function of Punctuation in Text Messages

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**Is it really “fine”?:
An analysis of the paralinguistic function of punctuation in text messages**

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**In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
the Scripps College Bachelor of Arts
From the department of LINGUISTICS**

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Abstract

This study has two major purposes: (1) to investigate if and how punctuation conventions have been rewritten in text messages to compensate for lack of paralinguistic cues and (2) the sociolinguistic implications of these findings. Data for this study was collected through an online, anonymous questionnaire in which participants gave their judgments about the meanings and function of punctuation used in sample text messages. The results show that punctuation is used to convey differences in meaning in direct and indirect ways and most are dependent on the context. Furthermore, age showed to be a factor in punctuation style and interpretation. The results here challenge the notion that texting is detrimental to one's literacy skills and is in fact a site of linguistic innovation.

Introduction

It's fine

It's fine.

Imagine that you sent a text message to a friend asking to reschedule meeting up with them. Your friend replied with one of the examples above. Both replies have the same semantic meaning and some people would interpret both messages to mean that the friend is unbothered by the request to reschedule. To others, however, the presence of the period in the second reply might ring alarm bells that the friend is not truly ok with the situation.

Text messages are notorious for being “tone” ambiguous. In face-to-face conversations, the listener gathers information not only from what the speaker is saying, but also from paralinguistic cues. Paralinguistics are the unspoken aspects of conversation that give layers of meaning to what is being said. Examples of paralinguistic cues are facial expressions, the tone used and body language. All of these are absent in text messages. With the absence of nonverbal cues like facial expressions, it can be difficult to interpret the intention of the sender. Is the sender mad? Do they truly mean they are satisfied with the situation or are they expressing their dissatisfaction in a passive-aggressive manner? When faced with a tonally ambiguous text, my friends and I have consulted each other for confirmation if we are reading the tone of the text message correct, analyzing the use of emoticons, wording and punctuation—an exclamation point generally means everything is fine while an ellipsis sounds the alarm. This problem is so widespread that a website called hetexted.com was created, dedicated to helping women

decipher the meanings of text messages sent by a male who might be interested in her. The poster will give the text message she received verbatim and any relevant information.

Other members will comb through the wording, punctuation, use of emoticons, etc. of the text to decode the message and provide feedback on how the poster should respond.

A friend of mine once commented that I need not end every sentence with a period, joking that I did not need to prove I was educated through every text message; in other words, texting fell on a more informal register and punctuation can have sociolinguistic effects besides just ending a sentence, and can send messages (perhaps unintended) about the user's identity or stance. Texting, as opposed to synchronous means of communication like face-to-face conversations or instant messaging, allows the responder time to carefully draft and articulate their message if they choose to do. Everything in the message is intentionally placed (or omitted) by the sender. A trend in texting is that punctuation is usually omitted, particularly periods. If punctuation has become optional and is often omitted, what does it mean when a text message does have punctuation marks? Do we use punctuation as a way to compensate for the lack of paralinguistic cues used in face-to-face conversation such as tone and body language?

I hypothesize that punctuation in text has adapted to accommodate the absence of paralinguistic cues found in face-to-face conversations to help convey the emotions of the sender and to help the receiver of the text message correctly interpret the tone of the message. This means that since its inception, text messages have re-conventionalized punctuation marks and their meaning. This study seeks to test these claims by looking at how texters interpret and use punctuation in this new context. I will look at whether

different punctuation choices convey different meanings directly and indirectly on a semantic, pragmatic, paralinguistic and sociolinguistic level. What do they indicate about the speakers' mood or stance? Does the omission of punctuation carry as much information about the intent of the speaker as using punctuation? Are these meanings consistent from context to context or somewhat variable? Does each punctuation mark carry its own specific meaning that is used in specific situations or do they fall on a spectrum? Which grammatical rules still persist and which have changed or faded away over time? In terms of sociolinguistic functions, what expectations might texters have about the use of punctuation by different speakers? Conversely, what judgments do texters make about the speaker based on the punctuation used in a text? Do social factors such as age and gender affect how one decides on and interprets punctuation? Furthermore, do speakers use punctuation to establish a type of relationship with the hearer? On a broader scale, if there is a difference in text interpretation, does this pose a communication problem?

In an attempt to address these, this study focuses on the most commonly used punctuation: periods, exclamation points, question marks, commas and the absence of these. This study seeks to find if the age is a factor in punctuation choices in two ways: if the age of the speaker of the hypothetical text messages used in the study affect the interpretation and if the age of the participants themselves affect how they interpret and respond to the texts.

Previous Literature

The majority of linguistic research that has been done on texting falls into three categories: those that look at the effects texting has had, if any, on writing skills and literacy, ones that analyze the use of textisms, and ones that examine the use of texting from a sociolinguistic perspective.

Thurlow and Poff (2013) provide an overview of the discourse surrounding the phenomenon of texting, aptly named “Text Messaging”. Texting is a dynamic medium of communication. Studies on the subject have spread across disciplines from medicine and its use in aftercare treatment to political campaigning, from environmental protection and texts as a tool to spread knowledge to the local villagers to business and commercial uses. Expectedly, many studies have been done on the social and psychological effect mobile phones and text messages have had on people as they become more integrated into people’s daily lives. In terms of linguistic research, texting has been examined cross-culturally (mostly through gendered and linguacultural lenses,) on an interactional level and pragmalinguistically, namely lexical and stylistic features. Additionally, despite the persistent public concern that texting has a detrimental influence on literacy and Standard English language skills, studies continuously find that these concerns are largely unfounded. In fact, many have discovered that texters are aware that text language and texting styles are context specific and have clear notions of when to use it.

3.1 Texting, child literacy and writing skills

Kemp, Wood and Waldron (2014) find that use of unconventional grammar while texting does not signal poor grammatical abilities. The study looks at texts from 243 students

ranging from primary to college level in the United Kingdom and analyzes correct verb agreement, punctuation, spelling and textisms. The study found that despite the implementation of QWERTY keyboards on cellphones, textisms still occurred and some grammatical mistakes were deliberate, likely in an effort to save time texting and/or assert one's place in a social group. Overall, the most common error was to omit sentence-level punctuation, followed by word-grammar errors and finally missing capitals.

Unconventional punctuation was the least common.

Though the article does not explore the topic of unconventional grammar on a sociolinguistic level, it does raise several questions I wish to pursue. Given that sentence-punctuation was the most common error in both children and young adults, I want to investigate what it means when the speaker uses punctuation deliberately.

The research conducted by Tagg, Baron and Rayson (2012) diverges from Kemp et al (2014) article and other articles (Plester, Wood and Bell, 2008) that are concerned with the potential deleterious effects texting has on conventional English. The researchers recognize that texting has led to unconventional spelling, but instead of seeking to find mistakes, set out to construct a set of spelling rules specific to the medium of texting. The categorization of the spelling variations reveals that some are used with more frequency than others. Examining the surrounding content of the categories suggests that the frequent use of some variations is motivated by brevity, speed, intelligibility. Others reflect local dialects, the motivation to present a certain kind of identity, and/or the relationship between the speaker and the listener. The success of the researchers' ability to create a set of spelling rules from text messaging dispels the notion that spelling in text messages is

chaotic and damaging to conventional English and supports the idea that texting is a separate entity from conventional written language.

This supports my idea that punctuation rules have developed over that the meaning of a punctuation mark in text messages is various and context-dependent. It is unlikely that groups of adolescents communed to discuss the proper ways to write a text, and teachers certainly did not discuss texting as part of the lesson plan (unless it was to admonish students using textisms in formal writing.) Despite this lack of communication and a voice of authority on grammar, conventions have still naturally developed over time. This strongly suggests that texters regulate their own messages and those of their peers, deciding what the boundaries of acceptability are in terms of spelling. Parkes (1993) charted the history of punctuation and noted that marks that are common today (e.g. the exclamation point and the question mark) were late additions to text. These marks came about after a long trial of experimenting and discarding other punctuation marks and through years of use before their meaning solidified into what they mean today.

3.2 Textisms

There is a plethora of studies regarding the curious textisms and the gendered styles in texting. Thurlow (2003) challenges past linguistic studies in “Generation txt? The sociolinguistic of young people’s text messaging” and argues that they have over-generalized linguistics patterns and trends found in young people’s text messages and have discredited the youth. He finds instead that young people are using text-messaging to mimic face-to-face communication and manipulate conventional discursive practices in creative and logical ways. Texts can overall be categorized into two sections: formal and

transactional which involve the exchange of information and are practical; and informal and relational, used for a social phatic purpose. Thurlow points out that these text messages fulfill the sociolinguistic maxims of SMS. He defines the maxims as brevity and speed, paralinguistic restitution, and phonological approximation, all of which serve the principle of sociality, the driving force of messaging. Personal stylings, however, must also be considered when forming theories about discursive patterning in text-messages.

The article, “Development of SMS Language from 2000 to 2010: A comparison of two corpora,” by Torrado compares two corpora of text messages to examine the development and usage of language devices SMS over the span of a decade. The author draws a relationship between English pronunciation and spelling, arguing that despite many changes words undergo when translated into text speak (ie. misspellings, typos, abbreviations, contractions, etc.) the new form of the word retains the pronunciation of the original “correctly” spelled word. In this comparison, the devices examined were reductions, phoneticised respellings, word deletion and punctuation and smileys and other symbols. The study finds that phoneticised respellings are indeed the most common recurring device used. The author presents two explanations: it is to avoid confusion and ambiguity if a word used in the message has a homophone, or that speakers have challenged the conventional spelling and are making a more explicit connection between English pronunciation and spelling. Brevity is the leading reason for the recurrence of these phoneticised respellings. However, some words lie outside this rule in which the resulting word is longer than the original, likely in an attempt to capture the way people talk. Some still fall outside of this classification, such as lotsz for ‘lots’ and frendsz for

‘friends. Torrado classifies such words as ‘stylish talk.’ The development of stylish talk over the years suggests that in SMS messages, “the way of writing [has become] as important as the content.” (82)

Torrado dismisses the usage or absence of punctuation and capital letters from her analysis, stating that these aspects “are not purely linguistic” (78). However, I disagree and think the presence of capital letters and punctuation can not only reveal how the individual wants to express their identity, but also add pragmatic meaning to the message.

Bernicot, Volckaert-Legrier, Goumi and Bert-Erboul (2014) investigates the acquisition of textisms in a group of children who had never owned or used a mobile phone before the study over the course of a year. The study found that by the end of 12 months, girls used textism in 57% of the texts they sent and boys used about 47% in theirs. Importantly, there was a high density of textisms in the first month of using a mobile phone, despite having no prior experience. The authors propose that this is not because the children had poor writing skills (on the contrary, it was the opposite,) but that “the participants ‘knew’ by cultural transmission that SMS rules were not the same as classroom writing rules” (41).

Ling, Baron, Lenhart and Campbell (2014) examine the gendered styles of texting in “Girls text really weird” and find that the differences in styles and navigating between these styles are extremely important in cross-gendered communication. Girls describe text messages from boys as transactional and unenthusiastic; boys describe messages from girls as being too effusive and using paralinguistic features that are unnecessary. This difference in styles lead to misunderstandings in cross-gendered communication, one in

which punctuation and abbreviation usage has a role in. Boys must adopt the girls' style of texting (which has become the standard style) when texting a girl, lest they risk upsetting the girl or wrongly convey disinterest. Interestingly, when listing the characteristics of a typical text from a boy, one girl pointed out the lack of punctuation and another followed with the comment, "No enthusiasm." It becomes clear in the interviews that although punctuation and textisms are used as paralinguistic devices primarily by girls, the meaning of these and the significance of the presence or absence of a device are understood by both genders. Punctuation was used to bridge the emotional and expressive gap between the two styles.

Though the study focused on how girls and boys made fine-grained interpretations of text, it did not closely examine how the groups were using the paralinguistic elements to interpret texts and instead swept across the elements in broad strokes. As my focus group will likely be college students as opposed to the middle schoolers in this study, in my research and questionnaire, it is clear that I will need to account for and investigate the potential difference in styles.

Ong'onda, Matu and Oketch (2010) analyze unconventional SMS language used in text messages and online chat messages sent from Kenyan university students in "Punctuation as a sociolinguistic variable in text messages". They found that conventional rules of capitalization, end marks, hyphens, apostrophes and quotation marks give way to creative uses to serve the sociolinguistic maxim of paralinguistic restitution. Texters vary their punctuation as strategic markers to signal tone, humor and intimacy and to represent their facial expressions or mood. While this is the closest to what I plan to do

for my thesis, the authors did not inquire the texters' own interpretations of the texts they had sent or if a slight variation in punctuation would change the "meaning" of their message. Secondly, the text messages were presented as messages in isolation, meaning without any context or of the texts the speaker was replying to. Notably, they did not look for any relationship between the social group the texter belonged to (ie gender, class, and age) and the punctuation used.

3.3 Texting and expressing emotion

To explain how misunderstandings can occur in conversations, Birner (2013) argues that each utterance has a locutionary point, an illocutionary force and a perlocutionary effect. The illocutionary force of an utterance is the intended meaning of the speaker; however an utterance can have multiple perlocutionary effects, that is, how the listener interprets the message. Sometimes, there is a "mismatch" between the illocutionary force of an utterance and its perlocutionary effect that is highly context-dependent. This difference can be minimized through the use of multiple paralinguistic elements. In a face-to-face conversation, the listener interprets the meaning of the utterance based on verbal and nonverbal cues: the facial expression of the speaker, the tone they are using, and background knowledge of how the speaker feels regarding the topic at hand. Despite these cues, misunderstandings between the speaker and listener can still arise. Expectedly, the absence of such nonverbal cues like tone and facial expressions from the conversation as they often are in text messages leads to confusion and misunderstandings between the texter and receiver.

To minimize the potential risk of misunderstandings, texters utilize emoticons, punctuation and other methods to better convey the illocutionary force of their message. Dresner and Herring (2010) examine the use of emoticons and argue that the primary function of emoticons has evolved from simply expressing emotions as previously thought to supporting the illocutionary force of the speaker, that is, to convey pragmatic meaning. Emoticons are also used to mitigate face threats, usually requests that are seen to impose on the receiver's autonomy and time or utterances that could be interpreted as criticisms. Sometimes, they are used to separate how the texter feels about the topic being discussed and how the texter feels about the receiver. The researchers point out that there is not a one-to-one mapping between any of the emoticons discussed and a particular illocutionary force; emoticons are quite versatile and change meaning depending on the context. The researchers bring up an important dimension of texting: everything written is intentional. While facial expressions are "given off rather than expressions given," emoticons are always produced consciously and intentionally (13). I particularly love this last part! Maybe mention it again later in your analysis?

While emoticons have been used to minimize the risk of the recipient misunderstanding the intended meaning of a text message, not all individuals who text employ the use of emoticons. Hancock, Landrigan and Silver (2007) investigated strategies texters use to express emotion and argue that text messages can still successfully express emotion. They found a positive correlation between usage of punctuation, disagreement, negative affect terms and verbosity. Importantly, these strategies were effective in conveying the sender's emotional state and the receivers were able to detect

the receiver's emotions with little difficulty. Though the researchers examined the use of punctuation, the exclamation point was the only punctuation mark listed. In my personal correspondences with friends and family, I have seen ellipses and period marks used to carry emotional content. It is unsure if participants did not use a range of punctuation marks, or if the researchers did not analyze their usage.

Either way, this study seeks to fill that gap by examining several punctuation marks in isolation and in comparison with each other in an attempt to find nuances. The study also presents various situations for participants to determine which punctuation is the most appropriate and elaborate on their choices.

3.4. Texting as a form of relationship maintenance

The absence of nonverbal cues in face-to-face conversation in text messages is of significance when considering that the majority of texts are sent for the purpose of establishing or maintaining a relationship. Texters, especially females, use text messaging as a tool to maintain social relationships (Ling et al, Thurlow 2003, Ong'onda et al 2010,) A study done by Ito and Okabe (2005) found that the youth were "driven to the personal medium of the mobile phone to cement peer communication" to maintain some level of privacy in their homes. Furthermore, most of the messages were described as "insignificant" or "not urgent" by informants and were used to maintain the sense of a shared social space and accessibility between close friends. Deaf people have also enthusiastically taken to using SMS to maintain relationships (Power, et. al., 2008). Other studies have found that texters send text messages with sexual content or with the intent to engage in a romantic relationship with the receiver (Thurlow, 2006; Ling et al, 2012).

Despite the norm that boys are taciturn and significantly less expressive in their texts than girls, a boy will modify his concise form of texting when texting a girl he likes (Ling et al).

Methodology

4.1 Participants

A total of 198 people participated in the study: 161 women, 26 men, 8 who identified as nonbinary and 3 who did not answer. Participants were at least 18 years old and could read and write in English. As the goal of this study was to see if age, gender or ethnicity was a factor in interpreting punctuation, participants fell on a wide spectrum. Of the 198 participants, 152 were between the ages of 18-30 years old, and 56 were 30 years or older. The majority were female college students. Demographics were unbalanced with females making up 83% of participants and 18-23 year olds making up 73% of the total participant pool. Unfortunately, ethnic identity was asked for until later on, so only 34% of participants self-identified. Of this group, 70% were Caucasian.

4.2 Materials

Data was gathered through an online anonymous questionnaire¹ to gather felicity and grammaticality judgments of the following punctuation marks: period, comma, ellipses, exclamation point, question mark and no punctuation. The online anonymous questionnaire was created using the web-based survey platform Typeform and was distributed online through social media. The questionnaire consisted of 31 questions broken down into six sections. The first section gathered basic background information of the participant including age, ethnicity and gender of the participant. Participants were also asked to indicate how frequently they texted and the relationship and age of the group they texted the most.

¹ The questionnaire is provided at the end for reference

The second section, labelled Intensity, consisted of six questions. For each question, participants compared two messages that were identical except in the punctuation used as shown in the example below:

Imagine you receive the text below from a friend:

A) What happened?

B) What happened

Is there any difference between A and B?

Participants were invited to elaborate on any differences in meaning or tone between the two texts they noticed. To see if participants would interpret the messages differently depending on who sent the text, the identity of the texter (friend, parent or boss) was provided.

The third section tested to see if the repetition of a punctuation mark (ie. ! vs. !!!) would increase the emotional intensity of a text or give it a different meaning through a series of yes/no questions. In total, there were four questions that examined periods, exclamation points, question marks and commas. The one for exclamation points is shown below:

A) What do you mean you stole my Girl Scout cookies?

B) What do you mean you stole my Girl Scout cookies???

The fourth section consisted of six questions, and participants chose from pre-written options or provided their own interpretation. Two had participants respond to a situation from a series of messages or infer what the sender of a text was feeling. Four of these, like the example below, asked participants to guess what the texter was feeling based on the received text.

Your significant other asks if they can see a movie with a friend instead of spending the night with you. You had been planning for the night and are slightly annoyed with them. You text them:

- A) Well have fun you two
- B) Well have fun you two...
- C) Well have fun you two.
- D) Well have fun you two!
- E) Well have fun you two?

In the fifth section, Guess Who?, participants guessed the identity of the person based off a single text message. There were four questions total, each were identical in wording and differed only in punctuation. For example, participants had to guess if a friend, someone looking to hook-up, parent, coworker/business partner and stranger had sent the text “Hey! How’s it going?”. Participants could select as many as they wished.

Finally, the last section was similar to the previous section. In this case however, participants had to guess how a friend was feeling with only a single text and punctuation as their clues. There were four questions total and all had the message “I’m fine” matched with either a period, ellipses, question mark or exclamation point. Participants guessed how their friend was feeling from seven options and could select as many as they thought applicable.

You asked a friend how they are and just received this text from them: I’m fine...
They are likely:

- A) Annoyed
- B) Fine
- C) Feeling fantastic
- D) Unsure of how they feel
- E) Unsure why you are asking
- F) Upset and don’t want to talk to you
- G) Upset and want you to ask why

4.2 Data analysis

Data was coded and analyzed using SPSS cross-tabulation. Variables that were studied were the age of the participant. It is important to clarify a few terms and methods here. “Texter” is the person who sends the text; “reader” is the one who receives the text message. The “younger generation” refers to participants who self-identified as 18-30 years old; the “older generation” refers to those 30 years or older. Finally, several questions enabled participants to select more than one option; this does not mean that these options co-occurred but that all chosen were appropriate to the situation.

Results

5.1 Overview

Overall, for most of the forms of punctuation that I tested, differences in meaning were found. I will now go through a number of punctuation “pairs” discussing how they differed semantically. The pairs tested were:

- A) period vs. null punctuation
- B) period vs. ellipses
- C) period vs. question mark
- D) question mark vs. null punctuation

Overall, periods were found to exhibit more negative emotion than any other punctuation and were used to end conversations an average of 90.28% of the time. When paired against nothing, periods were read as passive aggressive and upset while no period carried a neutral tone. Both periods and ellipses typically expressed negative emotion, but ellipses indicated less severity in tone and that the texter wished to continue the conversation.

When used in a question-structured sentence, periods were seen as either ungrammatical or expressing intense negative emotion overall while question marks indicated the texter was curious and was asking a question in a typical manner. When texts with question marks were compared to those without, the majority found the question mark meant genuine interest or concern while no period revealed a lack of interest from the texter.

5.2 Exclamation point and Question mark

Both exclamation points and question marks were interpreted universally the same amongst participants. Exclamation points generally express positive feelings such as

excitement; question marks indicate uncertainty or concern. While I will not discuss these further, it is important to note that these are consistent in meaning while the other punctuation marks are not.

5.3. Intensity results

This section of the questionnaire focused on whether speakers used sequential repetition of punctuation to interpret the degree of emotional intensity in a text message. As expected, the majority of participants said that the repetition of exclamation points and question marks (!!! and ???) indicated a friend was more emotional than if they had used a single exclamation point or question mark at 64% and 78%, respectively. This was not the case for commas and periods. A string of commas was seen as ungrammatical by 46% and 46% said a string of periods served a different function than a single period mark. I will address this later on.

5.4 Guess Who results

This section of the questionnaire addressed whether speakers associated particular punctuation patterns with specific categories of senders by tasking them with guessing the identity of an anonymous text message. All four questions had identical wording “hey how’s it going” and differed only in punctuation. Out of the five choices (friend, someone looking to hook-up, stranger, parents and coworker or business partner) ‘friend’ was the most popular choice overall. In question 24, 26 and 27, ‘friend’ dominated at 81%, 77% and 72%, respectively. In question 25, however, ‘friend’ at 48% was a close second to ‘someone looking to hook-up’ which gained 49% of the vote. Crucially important were the social groups that were not chosen as often. ‘Parents’ had only 25% and 15% of the

vote for questions 24 and 25, respectively; ‘coworker/business partner’ ranked at 20% for question 26; and ‘someone looking to hook-up’ gained only 22% in question 27.

Importantly, these results reveal the flexibility of texting styles and support the idea that the relationship between the texter and receiver significantly affects the punctuation used and the level of formality in a text message. These results are analogous to a previous study done by Tagg, Baron and Rayson (2012) that demonstrates that spelling variations can reflect the relationship between the speaker and listener.

Discussion

6.1 Punctuation

6.1.1 Periods: The mark of doom

I hypothesized that the seemingly innocent and banal period had developed to connote a tone of strong negative emotion when used in text messages and that the young adults were highly sensitive to this punctuation mark. The results show some strong support for this hypothesis. Periods were consistently associated with negative emotions such as anger, passive aggressiveness and harshness. Questions 8 and 31 address the tone imbued by periods: According to 60.5% of the participants, the period carries a negative tone in question 8; only 2.1% said it carried a positive tone. Similarly, the text in question 31 was widely interpreted as negative, with “annoyed” as the dominant tone at 64%. Questions 8, 9, 11, and 12 strongly show that many take into account the age of the sender and their texting style; 94% of participants said that a period was neutral when used by parents but only 35% said it was neutral when used by a friend. The interpretations of the period compared to no sentence-final punctuation significantly differed depending on the age of the participant as well. I will address this in a later section.

6.1.2 Ellipses: It depends...

I hypothesized that ellipses marked passive aggression. Again, the results of the study show support for this interpretation. This was confirmed in question 18:

You promised a friend that you would water their plants but forgot to. You send them an apology via text they text back, “Yeah...it’s fine...”

Participants were then prompted to guess what their friend was feeling. 78% of participants said that the friend was likely “being passive aggressive and will secretly hold

a grudge against you”, 17% said “Other” and 15% said the friend was “furious with you and you’ve got some groveling to do”. Only 9% said that the friend was not bothered and that they had been forgiven. Of those that said “Other”, they all agreed that ellipses indicated either disappointment or annoyance; about a third of them also indicated that the ire directed towards them was only temporary and would pass. Interestingly, some disagreed that the message was passive aggressive. One wrote that the friend is “kind of annoyed but not hiding it so it’ll probably pass”. While I initially thought this was a passive aggressive message because the semantic meaning of the message itself “Yeah it’s fine” is a positive one, it juxtaposes the use of ellipses, which typically displays displeasure. However, the participant’s observation that the friend is “not hiding” their annoyance, suggests that the very presence of the ellipses itself helps mitigate the severity of the message.

While periods close the door on communication, ellipses seem to act as a tenuous invitation to extend the conversation. When asked what the response “I’m fine...” would mean after asking a friend how they were, 67 % of participants said the friend was likely “upset and want you to ask why” they are upset. This surpassed the second most popular choice “annoyed” by 49 votes, or 23%. While other options also received votes, the only options that conveyed positive emotion, “fine” and “feeling fantastic” were the bottom two; “fine” received only 43 votes and “feeling fantastic” received none. Again, the low rankings of the only two positive emotions strongly suggest that ellipses often convey a slightly negative tone.

The strong ranking of “upset and want you to ask why” could be explained by comparing it to the way we speak. Imagine that you are emotionally exhausted or sad. Someone asks how you are and you reply, “I’m fine.” It is unlikely that your voice is bright and peppy or rises in pitch towards the end. Moreover, when one does not want to talk to others, one might punch out each word as if in an attempt to physically battle the listener. Instead, your pitch might lower or you exhale at the end, slightly dragging out the word “fine”. To many, this is a sign that something is distressing the speaker and is a call for sympathy. The fact that many interpreted the ellipses in a similar manner suggests that ellipses are akin to dropping off in tone, a pause or an elongation of a phrase, almost like a sigh. Ellipses, and punctuation in general, mimic the way we speak and convey our mood. This is in line with Ong’onda, Matu and Oketch (2010) and further argues that punctuation is the text message equivalent of facial expressions or tone in face-to-face conversations.

6.1.3 No punctuation, no problem

While an English teacher might cover a student’s paper in red scribbles for forgetting to add periods, I speculated that the lack of sentence-final punctuation in text messages has developed over time to adopt a neutral tone. While this was generally the case, it became clear that the interpretation of a text featuring no sentence-final punctuation was highly dependent on the context and identity of the sender. One participant wrote “Having punctuation at the end doesn’t leave [the text] open for other interpretations”. Conversely, having no punctuation at the end opens the text up to several interpretations.

6.1.4 Ellipses vs. Period

In the third section that addressed intensity of emotion, 64% and 78% of participants said that the contiguous repetition of exclamation points and question marks signaled that the texter was more emotional than if they had used a single exclamation point or question mark, respectively. However, in question 14 many said that a single period as opposed to several in a row meant different things at 46%. English distinguishes between a period and ellipses, so this distinction most likely carried over, hence the majority of them categorizing them as different things. As seen in question 18, several indicated that the ellipses used was not angry, only annoyed while only 15% thought the ellipses meant the friend was furious with them. Compared to the period, which many saw as cutting or harsh, the ellipses would seem softer in tone. Yet, 32% of participants saw the ellipses as more emotional than a single period in question 14. It is possible that it could simply have been the phrase used and that in this context, the ellipses did indicate a stronger level of emotion than a single period.

6.1.5 Periods vs. Null punctuation

Given that periods were strongly interpreted as signs of negative emotion, I suspected that spaces have adopted a neutral tone and were used most often in casual, day-to-day text messages. To test this, participants were told that they had to cancel plans with a friend at the last minute and received one of the texts below in response in question 8. They then wrote if they saw a difference in tone or meaning between the two texts below:

- A) It's fine.
- B) It's fine

About 64% of participants said that the messages above were different in meaning, tone or intent. Overwhelmingly, of those that indicated the two texts were different in meaning or tone, about 76.7% of them agreed that the message with the period sounded more upset, angry, annoyed, frustrated or passive aggressive than the message without. Some indicated that a period was “more formal and therefore aggressive” and carried a tone of finality. One noted that “even if there was more thought, no further conversation would occur”, while another said “the words kind of float into the air” when there is no period and the sentence is left open.

Interestingly, one explanation for the difference in meaning was that it takes time to type a period, implying that the sender must be experiencing strong emotions to warrant such behavior. This is interesting because not only does it suggest a reason why periods have come to carry a negative connotation but that this happened because of practical purposes. Young adults, college students in particular, text at a high rate of frequency. About 34% of college-age participants said they text every hour and 45% of college-age participants said they text several times throughout the day. Due to the high volume of text messages being written each day and hour, the period likely has become superfluous and was omitted for the sake of expediency. Thus, over time through a process of normalisation, a lack of a period became the “neutral” tone marker.

6.1.6 Period vs. Question mark

To test if a period still carried a negative connotation, question 13 featured an unconventional use of the period. This was designed to see if participants would see this

as ungrammatical or if they could still detect a difference between the two messages. In question 13, participants again compared the following two text messages:

- A) What happened?
- B) What happened.

While most either indicated there was not a difference or rejected text B on the grounds that it was ungrammatical or confusing, 46.2% of total participants said there was a difference. Of those, many saw text A as an invitation to confide whereas text B was a demand for information. The general consensus was that the friend who sent text A was genuinely concerned while the sender of text B was angry, serious, disappointed, aggrieved, etc. This further demonstrates that periods carry negative emotional content. As a question mark is the conventional punctuation used with wh-question structured sentences, using a period in a standard question-structured sentence is highly unconventional and seen as intentional. I have already discussed how the period has fallen off for the sake of expediency. Here, the time it takes to not only add a period but to also change it from the conventional question mark compounds the intensity of negative emotion. The appropriate reaction? As one participant said: yikes.

Two other explanations arose that need further examination. One is that texter B had some prior knowledge about the situation referenced in the text. Some participants suggested that the period indicated that the friend “probably knew what already happened” or “knew about the situation in some way”. Notably, no context was given for this question--participants had to come up with situations on their own. What this means is that a single press of a button, a simple small dot, held a pragmatic function of alerting the receiver that the texter already knew what the context was. Secondly, participants came up

with a variety of situations in which text B is deemed grammatical and felicitous. Some saw it as an act of commiseration and an acknowledgment that the texter and receiver both went through an unusual or strange situation together, “like we both went through a weird experience together and now they’re texting me to be like “wtf was that”. In other words, unlike the period in “It’s fine.” which many saw as the texter distancing themselves, the period here is a mark of inclusivity and a sign of a shared experience and assumed feelings shared between the texter and reader.

6.1.7 Question mark vs. Null punctuation

With the hypothesis that null punctuation indicated emotional neutrality, I wanted to see if this still held in other contexts compared to other sentence-final punctuation. Since a period is the conventional punctuation mark used for canonically structured sentences, I wanted to see if the omission of a question mark in wh-question structured sentences would be interpreted as neutral as well.

In question 8, most participants distinguished between a period and no punctuation; the text without punctuation was seen as less aggressive and more neutral than the text that had a period. The results of question 10 which featured a question mark and a space with wh-question syntax, however, show a slightly different, but important, result. No punctuation, instead of being interpreted as neutral, was seen as overall carrying an air of indifference. Many said that if a friend texted them, “What happened?” they would feel that the friend was genuinely concerned about their wellbeing. If the friend texted “What happened”, however, many accused the friend of being unconcerned or not invested in the participant’s wellbeing or situation. The rest of the answers were widely

varied ranging from disbelief to boredom, from sarcasm to disappointment amongst other emotions. A few, however, said that the friend was likely shocked or too emotional to take the time to type the question mark. Others indicated that the text would likely be followed by another question or that only their closest friends would text them without using any punctuation (probably because they have already established a close emotional bond and thus do not need to express their concern for their friend's well-being explicitly.)

6.2 Sociolinguistic Effects

6.2.1 Individual Use Patterns

One factor that arose was the differences in individual texting style. Several participants noted that the meaning of the period depended on their friend's texting style and they would keep this in mind when interpreting the tone. For example, if a friend consistently uses a period, the period is unmarked and re-interpreted as being neutral whereas a lack of sentence-final punctuation would be unusual and an indicator of emotional distress.

6.2.2 Formality vs. Informality

From a young age, we are conditioned that we must speak formally in situations that involve speaking to authority figures such as teachers, employers or officials or people as a sign of respect. Informal or casual language is inappropriate in this context. Similarly, when it comes to writing, the virtues of proper grammar and punctuation are extolled. Teachers emphasize the importance of correcting grammatical mistakes and writing formally for academic papers. I expected the emphasis on proper grammar and formality to hold true in texting as well when one was corresponding with someone they were not on familiar terms with.

This indeed seem to be the case particularly when a comma was used. While a string of commas did not indicate any pragmatic meaning, it seems to be a strong indicator of formality. In the Guess Who? Section, ‘coworker/business partner’ fell low on the totem pole of potential identities of an anonymous text in questions 24-26 at an average of 23.3%. However, in question 27 which featured a comma, ‘coworker/business partner’ skyrocketed to second place at 65%. Commas, unlike exclamation marks and other punctuation, work only to separate phrases or lists to make the message easier to understand in text messages. In other words, commas do not appear to serve any paralinguistic function. Thus, commas are examples of standard grammar. Standard, or “proper”, grammar and punctuation is used most often in the academic and business world and is often seen as a sign of respect to whomever the message is addressed to. This is a clear indication that familiarity with another individual significantly affects the formality of a text message. The results here are analogous to other findings. Kasesniemi and Tautianinen (2002) found in their study that teenagers were highly sensitive to the relationship between them and the receiver in their text messages. The degree of formality of a text would increase the more distant the receiver was from the family and social circle. Thus, the presence of a comma can reflect the emotional distance and intimacy between the sender and receiver.

Conversely, the type of person who was least likely to use commas was “someone looking to hook-up”. On the other hand, exclamation points, no punctuation, and ellipses in particular were acceptable punctuation for people looking to engage in a casual, physical relationship. In each case, “someone looking to hook-up” ranked at second place

for exclamation points and no punctuation and first place for ellipses but fell to last place at 22%. Interestingly, “someone looking to hook-up” was the most popular choice for the greeting “Hey...how’s it going” amongst female 18-30 year olds. This was not the case for male 18-30 year olds which strongly suggests that ellipses are used mostly by (heterosexual) males to initiate a sexual relationship. This suggests that punctuation belies the intentions the texter might have or the type of relationship they wish to pursue with the receiver in this type of context. To avoid a faux pas and unwittingly flirt with a future business partner or end a potential relationship before it has begun, texters must be conscious of the text punctuation convention and their own texting styles. A single comma can set the tone of a relationship.

Participants also distinguished between texting styles of parents and bosses and which texting style was appropriate for each group. In comparing the text A “It’s fine” and text B “It’s fine.” in question 12, one said that both messages would be fine from either a parent or a boss but not both. Four participants also cited that text A was too casual or unprofessional from a boss. Again, this reinforces the association of Standard English with the professional and academic world. One participant begged to differ: “I don’t think he would punctuate a single phrase sentence. He has enough other things to do, so it would just be like some sort of quick thumbs up”. Notably, this participant considered the responsibilities of the texter, their boss, but did not consider this in question 11 which featured the same text messages in question 12 but from a friend. This shows that people take into consideration a multitude of factors--in this case, the responsibility of their boss--when interpreting the tone of a text.

6.2.3 A Generational Gap

“B” ends with a period” - 50 year old male participant

Of those who have decried texting, they are typically teachers, parents and the older generation. In other words, individuals who had grown up before the texting phenomenon and had firm beliefs about proper grammar and punctuation were the ones most likely to use punctuation in traditional ways. Their staunch support of proper punctuation compounded with their avoidance of keeping up with technology led me to hypothesize that they are less likely to a) deviate from convention and experiment and therefore b) understand the subtle nuances of text punctuation.

Questions 8, 9, 11, and 12 tested for differences in interpreting a message. Questions 8 and 9 featured the same text messages and questions 11 and 12 were paired up as well; however, questions 8 and 11 were texts from a friend while questions 9 and 12 were from a parent or boss. Questions 24-27 targeted perceptions of the texter’s identity based on similarly worded greetings. Despite that the texts from a friend and texts from a parent or boss used identical texts messages, an overwhelming majority only saw a difference in the texts from a friend and not when it was from a parent or boss. Even when taking into account that most of the participants were 30 years or younger, the overwhelming consensus that whether or not a period is used conveys any other meaning from a text from a parent or boss means that this belief is held across generations. This strongly suggests that:

- a) people older than 30 years old tend to use proper grammar and punctuation
- b) younger adults, however, do not

Secondly, those who interpreted the texts from a friend differently depending on the punctuation mark used, many did not find a difference in the corresponding texts from parents. This illustrates that many participants (most of whom are college-age students) are aware of the differences in style and account for these sociolinguistic differences and interpret the tone and meaning of a text accordingly.

Upon examining the results it became clear that not only did texting styles differ between generations but that the age of the participant was also a factor in how participants interpreted the meaning of punctuation in a text message. When asked to identify the difference in meaning or tone between two texts, eight participants who identified as thirty or above only pointed out the different punctuation marks used. It is possible that they did not read the instructions carefully; however, if this were the case, I would expect more participants to point out the same thing. This was not the case. Of participants who identified 18-30 years old and indicated that there was a difference between two similar texts, all pointed out pragmatic differences instead of grammatical ones. Therefore, it is more probable that the different usages of punctuation are not part of the older generation's texting vocabulary, hence, why the eight participants were unable to judge the different semantic meanings of punctuation marks.

To give a more concrete example, question 31 asked participants to imagine what their friend was feeling based off the text message "I'm fine.". For 18-30 year olds, the top interpretations were "annoyed" at 76.3% and "upset and doesn't want to talk to you" at 57.9%. If a friend used a period, they were sending off a clear signal that they did not want to talk and that their anger was likely directed at you. While many of the younger

generation viewed periods negatively, 73.9% of the participants thirty years and older stated that if a friend had replied, “I’m fine.” with a period, it would not send off any alarm bells. When used by this age group, the period not only did not have a negative connotation, it did not carry any paralinguistic information.

Conclusion

Though English teachers and older generations might shake their fists at the supposed ungrammaticality of text messages amongst young adults, the results show that punctuation is used (or not used) in innovative ways that are generally accepted by the 18-30 year old demographic. Punctuation marks compensate for the lack of paralinguistic features, conveying information of how the texter feels to the receiver. They are shown to fall on a spectrum and whose meanings are dependent on not only the context but also the relationship between the texter and receiver.

Punctuation usage is not completely free of rules, however, and must be agreed upon by a larger community. Many agreed that a period was synonymous with a strong negative emotion, ellipses were typically cast with a slight negative emotion, and null punctuation was neutral. Additionally, when a period was used instead of a question mark to end a question-structured sentence, one participant wrote “[it] would get on my nerves. Lack of punctuation is better than incorrect punctuation”. It seems that some basic grammar rules still apply.

While a single punctuation mark might not seem significant, considering how integrated texting has become in our daily lives, this can pose an issue in communication. For example, a child might send an angry text message, but the parent might misread the tone and not understand the intent behind the text. Another situation could be that two individuals who are starting to text each other have different texting styles but unfortunately, assume the other texts in a style similar to them. This small assumption

leads to a slight miscommunication and one thinks the other is being passive aggressive or interested.

The drastically different interpretations between ages reveal that despite texters wielding exclamation points and periods to better convey their meaning and tone, punctuation is a site of misinterpretation. Secondly, even amongst the younger generation who held widely-agreed upon interpretations, in the last section that asked them to guess what a friend was feeling, many participants selected more than one potential mood. This supports the theory put forth by Birner that while each utterance has an illocutionary force or intended meaning, it can be interpreted in multiple ways and the original message can get lost in interpretation.

Those over the age of 30, particularly those who were 50 years or older did not register the effect a punctuation choice might have the meaning or tone of a text message. Fortunately, young adults showed to be quite “fluent” in texting punctuation and were able to deftly navigate through multiple meanings by taking into considering the age and texting style of the texter or person they were sending the message to.

This study countered some widely held views that texting has a deleterious effect on the writing skills of youth. Perhaps unfortunately, language and the way we speak influence the way others perceive us. For many, speaking Standard English and writing well are signs of intelligence. In the responses as well, some of the comments of the older generation echo of long-held views regarding language usage, ascribing personality traits to those who do not use proper grammar such as laziness or stupidity. From the outside, unconventional punctuation usage appears not as conscious actions to express subtle

nuances and pragmatic meaning otherwise lost in the barren text message, but as careless mistakes or signs of violating proper grammar rules. In their eyes, that is a sign of laziness or stupidity. In reality, however, it becomes clear that people have harness the use of punctuation marks to compensate for the lack of paralinguistic cues and are using punctuation in novel ways to better communicate with their peers. In particular, younger generations have a wider vocabulary of punctuation marks and are more conscious of subtle differences in text messages than older generations. In the eyes of college students, it is the older generation who is not fluent in text-speak.

We must also take into account that texting had not always been so integrated into our daily lives. Moreover, there are no formal rules regarding punctuation usage. It is not written in a textbook that one must never use a period lest one be upset. (If there were such a guidebook, it is doubtful that teachers would have it in the classroom.) These rules naturally developed over time through communal regulation and self-censorship, and the meanings of punctuation marks and the appropriate contexts in which to use them had to be learned. Since rules are not ossified by textbooks or texting experts, this means that text messages are a site susceptible to change in which texters can reinvent the meaning of punctuation marks.

Future studies

Many of the questions used in the questionnaire featured texts the participants received. It is likely that those who are sensitive to how the texter uses punctuation would conversely alter their own punctuation style when composing a text to others so that it is better understood. Secondly, this study focused mostly on sentence-final punctuation marks. The comma did not, however, add any pragmatic meaning. This suggests that the most important markers of tone or emotional state of the texter is inscribed into sentence-final punctuation. A future study could research if the punctuation used in the final sentence could cancel the tone conveyed through punctuation used in sentences preceding it.

Future research could test for punctuation usage with gender as a factor. Romantic comedies oft use text messages as a comedic tool, usually with a female character agonizing over a text message from her romantic interest. As silly as the situation may seem, a study conducted by Ling et al., 2012 found that boys and girls had significantly different texting styles. However, despite the norm that boys are taciturn and significantly less expressive in their texts than girls, a boy will modify his concise form of texting when texting a girl he likes.²

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Questionnaire

Section 1: Basic Info

1. How old are you?
 - a. 18-23 years old
 - b. 24-30 years old
 - c. 30-50 years old
 - d. 50+ years old
2. What is your gender identity?
 - a. Female
 - b. Male
 - c. Nonbinary
 - d. Prefer not to say
3. Which ethnic group do you identify with the most?
 - a. White, Caucasian, European American, Other in this category
 - b. East Asian, East Asian American, Other in this category
 - c. South Asian, South Asian American, Other in this category
 - d. Latinx, Latin American, Other in this category
 - e. Black, African American, Afro-Caribbean, Black African, Other in this category
 - f. Middle Eastern, Arab, Middle Eastern American, Other in this category
 - g. Native American, Indigenous American, Alaska Native, Other in this category
 - h. Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, Other in this category
 - i. Other
4. How often do you text?
 - a. Every Hour
 - b. Several times throughout the day
 - c. A few times a day
 - d. Every couple of days
 - e. Weekly
 - f. Rarely
5. Out of the groups below, who do you text the most often?
 - a. Friends
 - b. Family
 - c. Acquaintances
 - d. Other
6. Out of the groups below, who do you text the most often?
 - a. People around my age
 - b. People older than me
 - c. People younger than me

7. Do you use a smartphone?

Section 2: Interpretation

8. You had to cancel plans with a friend at the last minute and just received one of the replies below from your friend:

A) It's fine.

B) It's fine

Is there any difference between A and B? If there is, please explain in the "Other" box.

9. You forgot something at your parents' house and ask your parents to send it to you. They respond with one of the following:

A) It's fine.

B) It's fine

Is there any difference between A and B? If there is, please explain in the "Other" box.

10. Imagine you receive the message below from a friend.

A) What happened?

B) What happened

Is there any difference between A and B?

11. Imagine you receive the message below from a friend:

A) Do whatever you want

B) Do whatever you want.

Is there any difference between A and B?

12. Imagine you receive the message below from your parent or boss.

A) Do whatever you want

B) Do whatever you want.

Is there any difference between A and B?

13. Imagine you receive the message below from a friend.

A) What happened?

B) What happened.

Is there any difference between A and B?

Section 3 Intensity

14. A) You can have some.

B) You can have some...

a. They mean different things

b. A is more emotional than B

c. B is more emotional than A

d. There is no difference in meaning or tone

- e. Don't know/haven't seen it before
- 15. A) I can't believe you ate all of my Nutella!
- B) I can't believe you ate all of my Nutella!!!
- a. They mean different things
- b. A is more emotional than B
- c. B is more emotional than A
- d. There is no difference in meaning or tone
- e. Don't know/haven't seen it before
- 16. A) What do you mean you stole my Girl Scout cookies?
- B) What do you mean you stole my Girl Scout cookies???
- a. They mean different things
- b. A is more emotional than B
- c. B is more emotional than A
- d. There is no difference in meaning or tone
- e. Don't know/haven't seen it before
- 17. A) Hey,
- B) Hey,,,
- a. They mean different things
- b. A is more emotional than B
- c. B is more emotional than A
- d. There is no difference in meaning or tone
- e. Don't know/haven't seen it before

Section 4: (Lost in) Translation

- 18. You promised a friend that you would water their plants but forgot to. You send them an apology via text and they text back, "Yeah... it's fine...". They are:
 - a. Choose as many as you like
 - b. Clearly not bothered and you have been forgiven (whew!)
 - c. Furious with you and you've got some groveling to do
 - d. Being passive aggressive and will secretly hold a grudge against you
 - e. Other
- 19. You text a male friend asking if you should try this hobby you heard of. He texts back "Yeah if you want to "
 - a. doesn't care
 - b. is being supportive
 - c. secretly thinks you should pick a different hobby
 - d. Other

20. Your significant other asks if they can see a movie with a friend instead of spending the night with you. You had been planning for the night and are slightly annoyed with them. You text them:
- Well have fun you two
 - Well have fun you two.
 - Well have fun you two...
 - Well have fun you two!
 - Well have fun you two?
21. You just heard that your favorite musician is performing nearby soon and you invite your friend to the concert. Your friend texts back, "I think I can go...". You think that
- Your friend definitely wants to go. Who wouldn't?
 - Your friend is unsure about their availability at that time
 - Your friend doesn't really want to go but is being polite
 - Your friend is uninterested in going. Period. (Maybe you should find a better friend.)
 - Other
22. You text a female friend asking if you should try this hobby you heard of. She texts back "Yeah if you want to "
- She likely:
- doesn't care
 - is being supportive
 - secretly thinks you should pick a different hobby
 - Other
23. Your significant other is about to meet up with an ex of theirs. You don't want them to think you are upset, so you text back:
- Well have fun you two
 - Well have fun you two.
 - Well have fun you two...
 - Well have fun you two!
 - Well have fun you two?

Section 5: Guess Who?

24. Hey! How's it going?
- friend
 - someone looking to hook-up
 - stranger
 - coworker/business partner
 - parents

25. Hey...how's it going
- friend
 - someone looking to hook-up
 - stranger
 - coworker/business partner
 - parents
26. Hey how's it going
- friend
 - someone looking to hook-up
 - stranger
 - coworker/business partner
 - parents
27. Hey, how's it going?
- friend
 - someone looking to hook-up
 - stranger
 - coworker/business partner
 - parents

Section 6: Are you fine?

28. You asked a friend how they are and just received this text from them: I'm fine!

They are likely:

- fine
 - feeling fantastic
 - upset and don't want to talk to you
 - unsure why you are asking
 - annoyed
 - unsure of how they feel
 - upset and want you to ask why
29. You asked a friend how they are and just received this text from them: I'm fine?

They are likely:

- fine
 - feeling fantastic
 - upset and don't want to talk to you
 - unsure why you are asking
 - annoyed
 - unsure of how they feel
 - upset and want you to ask why
30. You asked a friend how they are and just received this text from them: I'm fine...

They are likely:

- a. fine
- b. feeling fantastic
- c. upset and don't want to talk to you
- d. unsure why you are asking
- e. annoyed
- f. unsure of how they feel
- g. upset and want you to ask why

31. You asked a friend how they are and just received this text from them: I'm fine.

They are likely:

- a. fine
- b. feeling fantastic
- c. upset and don't want to talk to you
- d. unsure why you are asking
- e. annoyed
- f. unsure of how they feel
- g. upset and want you to ask why