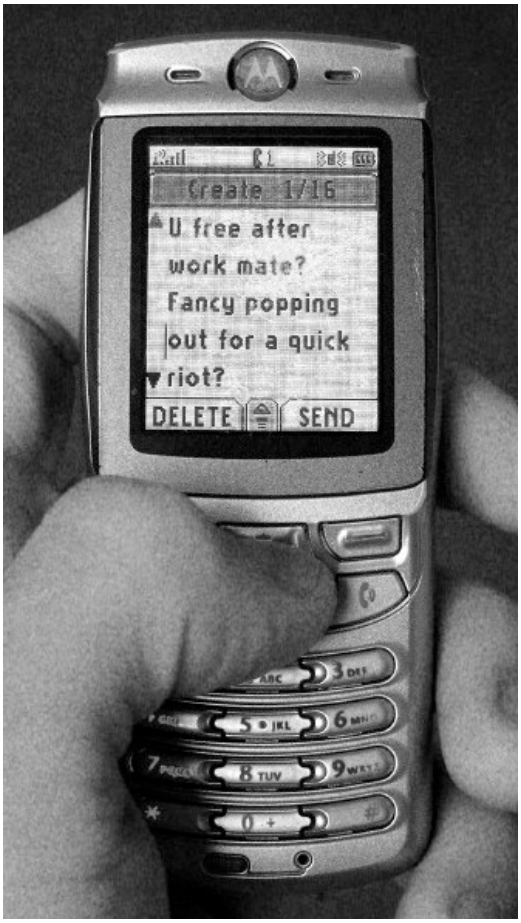
Txtonyms

Jewis Dartmelk
Centre for Mathematics and Physics in the Life Sciences and Experimental Biology (CoMPLEX), University College London, UK.

Introduction

The mobile phone (*Telephonium mobilus*) has pervaded all aspects of modern social life like a parasite (Hall 2004). And a decidedly malicious parasite at that. How often have you sent a message not to the intended recipient, but to the very person you are bitching about simply because it was the most recent name in your mind when you were scrolling through the phonebook? Another clear example of phone evil is the pocket-dial - not only is it tiresome for someone to pick up and hear nothing but your spare change rattling around, but it can be downright embarrassing when your phone decides to call your dad when you're out with the girlfriend. Having said that, you've got to be a fool to not already have changed the first name in the phone book to something like AAAA with a non-existent phone number.

Not only do people now feel like an isolated recluse if they lose their phone for just a few days, but an entirely new class of customs and etiquette has built up around mobile culture. In Tokyo, for example it is considered the height of ill-manners to fail to respond to a txt message within an hour. And the 160-character missive of gloom that constitutes a txt-dumping is becoming all the more common.



Despite its ubiquity, txt messaging is still infuriatingly fiddly. Mobile buttons seem to have been designed for only the nimblest of virtuoso-pianist fingers, and a hurried txt often results in a confused mess of superfluous letters. Even if every care is taken over precision-pressing, there is still the spectre of the predictive text synonym (coined here as the 'txtonym') to contend with – the set of words in English that are made up of the same sequence of key-presses. For example, *pub* and *rub* are both 'spelt' 7-8-2. Infuriatingly, the phone apparently picks among the possible alternatives in reverse rank order of likelihood.

It has surely now been forever lost to history which programmer compiled the first text message dictionary. But what kind of cretin would rank 'nun' as a more likely candidate than 'mum'? How often is someone ever likely to be intending 'Sorry, I'm back at my nun's house this weekend"...? Or, the equally embarrassing 'Hi, I'm already in the *car* having a few drinks'. And it would only take the barest minimum of programming to provide context-based suggestions. For example, how often have you found yourself txting a friend that you're just leaving 'good' rather than 'home'. All the dictionary needs to do is see that the word is preceded by a preposition or a movement verb (such as 'at' or 'going' home) rather than a description (i.e. 'is' or 'looks' good).

But for now txtonyms are a firm feature on the hazardous landscape of mobile communication. The author felt it his duty to perform an exhaustive search of all possible txtonyms, and warn people of the worst pitfalls to be avoided as well as show up some of the more humorous coincidences. To this end, a computer program was written to translate all English words into the corresponding sequence of key-presses and then perform a pattern-matching search for identical codes.

Results

Name txtonyms are by far the most unfortunate. Ever texted *Amy* only to find you'd inadvertently called her a *cow*? This can be particularly difficult to explain away if she's a recent ex. The word *demon* contains 666, the number of the beast, but then so too does *Simon*, *Tommy*, and *Monica*… Don't be surprised if *Anna* is a bit boring, as she is synonymous with *coma*, but strangely enough also *boob*... *Mike* might be *mild,* but *Tom* is definitely numero *uno.* Does *Alan* often *clam* up in social situations or *Heather* always irrationally think she's putting on weight, whilst *Adam* is as thin as a *bean*-stalk? *Arnold* and *Brooke* are almost certainly crippled with identity crisis as they are the exactly same person.

Some txtonyms seem particularly appropriate. One example is that *eat* and *fat* are both spelt 3-2-8. An overly *heroic* act (4-3-7-6-4-2) on the football pitch can so often result in a *hernia*. *Golf* and *hole* are both 4-6-5-3, whilst most *hotels* are *hovels*. Amusing yourself by *doodling* whilst on the phone at work could result in a very embarrassing incident (3-6-6-3-5-4-6-4 is also *fondling*). Every good hooligan knows that *pint*s and *shots* inevitably lead inevitably to *riots* (all 7-4-6-8-7). But by far the most satisfying is that *kissing* and *lipping* are both 5-4-7-7-4-6-4 whilst *tongued* is the same as *vomited* (8-6-6-4-8-3-3). Other words to be very cautious of due to their profanity-potential include *dial*, *dual*, *rips* and *coal*.

The most curious examples are those with completely opposite meanings – oxymoronic homonyms, perhaps. For example, 2-2-3 spells both *ace* and *bad*. 5-6-9-7 spells both *joys* and *lows*, *runs* and *stop* are both 7-4-6-8-7, or *polar* and *solar* (7-6-5-2-7). Perhaps by far the most fitting is 6-3-6-7, which spells *men's odor*. The longest is *rejected* and *selected* (7-3-5-3-2-8-3-3).

Txtonyms also raise another novel kind of word game – trying to find sequences of identical key-presses that spell words with every letter different. *Ever* and *duds, pubs* and *star*, and *pasta* and *scrub* are all good examples, but the longest I've managed to find is 2-7-8-7-4-3-3, which spells both *astride* and *crushed*.

Some words are particularly convenient to write, because they either involve an easy sequence of letters, or a long repetition of the same key. *Ceiling* begins with the sequence 2-3-4-5 and *empty* completes the key-press flush with 6-7-8-9. The prize for longest single run is shared by *filmstrip* (beginning 3-4-5-6-7-8) and *ventriloquy* (ending 4-5-6-7-8-9). The words with the longest repeated sequence are shown in the table below.

Sequence of five 2s	*cabbage*
Sequence of five 3s	*needed*
Sequence of five 4s	*gigging*
Sequence of three 5s	*folklore*
Sequence of seven 6s	*nonmonotonic*
Sequence of four 7s	*overspread*
Sequence of four 8s	*stutter*
Sequence of three 9s	*fuzzy*

Some sequences possess far more txtonyms than others. For example, 3-3-9 spells only *dew*, whereas there are twenty different sequences that spell more than eight words each. 4-6-6-3-7 spells ten alternatives, and 7-2-8-3-7 spells as many as eleven txtonyms. But the clear winner is 2-2-7-3-7, which spells a grand total of twelve different txtonyms:

acres, bards, barer, bares, baser, bases, caper, capes, cards, carer, cares, cases

The longest txtonym found by the program has 16 letters, but this simply reflects the limitation of the word list used. Presumably one who *antidisestablishmentarianises* would be known as an *antidisestablishmentarianiser*...

Lewis Dartnell

Reference

Hall, D. (2004). The taxonomy and ecology of the mobile telephone, *Telephonium mobiles*. *The Journal of Unlikely Science* **1 (2)**, 22-24.