Understanding the ‘mess’ in text messages

An analysis of humorous text message exchanges shared in social media platforms

Att förstå röran i textmeddelanden

En analys av humoristiska SMS-dialoger som delats i sociala medier

Anna Andersson
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Abstract

The concept ‘mess-understanding’ has circulated in online media and is so prevalent that it is now included in the Urban Dictionary. The folk concept of mess-understandings is a pun for misunderstandings arising in an online media context. Posting one’s own or others' miscommunication and/or typographical errors has grown to be a popular way of sharing humor via cross-platform sharing on the Internet. The aim of this paper is to analyze short message service (SMS) dialogues shared in social media, with a special emphasis on those with the highest degree of ‘shareability’ and/or popularity. The study specifically focuses on understanding linguistic and communicative reasons behind these dialogues being treated as humorous by users. As such, the study aims to shed light upon current cultural conceptions of communication and humor. Data was collected from the photo sharing website Pinterest from users who had posted or reposted ‘screen shots’ from their own or others' SMS conversations. In order to collect as much valuable data as possible, a manual search strategy was developed with three different word strings which resulted in a corpus of 160 dialogues. Content analysis of the data revealed certain recurrent humor themes, such as allusions to sexual conduct or bodily functions, generation gaps, technology difficulties, and lexical ambiguity.

Keywords: misunderstanding, short message service (SMS), humor, social media, cross-platform sharing, Pinterest

Sammanfattning på svenska


Nyckelord: missförstånd, textmeddelande (SMS), humor, sociala medier, Pinterest
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1 Introduction

Texting is a brilliant way to miscommunicate how you feel, and misinterpret what other people mean.1

As a result of technological advancements, patterns of communication have changed rapidly over the last decade. Communication through online social network services and smartphones has become increasingly common and has brought along a new type of ‘texting-language’. Textual interchanges have existed for centuries and the different ways of transmitting them keep on expanding with new alternative ways. There are, however, some conventionalized procedures and codes for how we perceive and interpret messages which have evolved from people's mutual understanding of communication, but these procedures are also open to an individual, subjective interpretation. Idiosyncratic ways of interpreting messages are complex in terms of the recipient not always understanding the message that the sender is actually trying to convey which can lead to misunderstandings. All human communication relies on shared norms for how and when we use particular styles and registers, and in terms of short message texting (SMS), different understandings of texting norms, as well as technological restrictions, may result in communication problems and misunderstandings.

A misunderstanding is defined as a "failure to understand something correctly".2 Reasons for communication misunderstandings are, for example, the ambiguity of symbols (Wood, 2000, p. 53), differences in the communicators' backgrounds and values, or because individuals have been socialized in different cultures or speech communities (p. 66). A misunderstanding in new media contexts is sometimes referred to as 'mess-understanding' and is so prevalent that it is now included in the Urban Dictionary, which is an online dictionary of slang words and phrases that are submitted by users. Following is the definition from the Urban Dictionary website:

Messunderstanding is a definition for a misunderstanding but with text messages. As for example a text message intended to be funny or ironic but instead, in the hands of the receiver /sic/ reads as an insult or is taken too seriously. The misunderstanding is directly linked to the forum of the communication. In ordinary spoken conversation, a weird comment followed by a smile helps the other participant to

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1 Behrman, S. [StanleyBerhman]. (2013, October 7). Texting is a brilliant way to miscommunicate how you feel, and misinterpret what other people mean. [Twitter post] Retrieved from URL: https://twitter.com/stanleybehrman/status/387458377875337216
2 http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/misunderstanding
understand the irony, whereas in text messages it can be misunderstood or – messunderstood.

The folk concept of mess-understanding, which is a blending of the word *message* and *misunderstanding*, is a pun for misunderstandings arising in computer-mediated contexts, such as in mobile phone text messages. The posting of one’s own or others’ miscommunication in the form of screenshots has grown to be a popular way of sharing humor on social network services online. Humorous dialogues where misunderstandings have arisen are often saved via *screenshots*, which is a copy of the display on a digital screen seen at a given time. When using a Smartphone to take a screenshot, it is automatically saved as a graphic file. Humor has a close connection with social network platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Pinterest. The sharing of screenshots of problematic text messages has become a humorous phenomenon appearing on the Internet and people around the globe both upload and share them on different networks with the purpose of amusement. Aside from making a screenshot of an authentic dialogue, it is essentially possible to manipulate and edit an existing dialogue, or create a new one. This means that humorous text message exchanges may be shared not necessarily on the basis of their authenticity, but also as a strategy for doing humor online. As such, we can never know for certain the degree of authenticity of these screenshots, namely who the original ’uploader’ is. Nor can we for a fact know if the conversations in the screenshots are deliberately constructed, taken from a ’real-life’ conversation or whether they have been created or manipulated with a different purpose, such as generating humor appreciation. However, given how common the sharing of text message dialogues has become, it is relevant to study the content shared as a social media practice on its own, regardless of the authenticity of the original dialogue. Consequently, the present paper focuses on the sharing of text message dialogues, and the features of such dialogues that appear to make them ‘shareable’. That is why this paper only focuses on clarifying different linguistic patterns of misunderstandings and what this tells us about current cultural conceptions of communication and humor – not the degree of authenticity that these messages possess.

### 1.1 Presentation of aims

The aim of this paper is to distinguish different themes of misunderstandings in text message exchanges, with special emphasis on those with the highest degree of 'shareability' and/or popularity on Pinterest, which is one of the world’s largest social photo-sharing networks.

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with over 100 million monthly active members (Isaac, 2015). The study also sets out to understand computer-mediated communication behavior by investigating what these text messages tell us about current cultural conceptions of online communication and humor.

The study addresses the following research questions:

- Which types of so-called mess-understandings do users on Pinterest consider as humorous?
- From a linguistic standpoint, what components do such mess-understandings share?
- What do these classifications of mess-understandings tell us about the construction of humor in social media?

One of the most obvious ways in which communicative behavior has evolved is reflected in textual evidence stored in virtual environments. Electronically-based language use is a rich resource for researchers interested in language behavior and possible changes in communication patterns. Baron (2008) explains the relevance of linguistic studies of electronic communication as follows:

If it turns out that electronically-based language is altering linguistic norms and expectations, then it seems self-evidently important to understand the nature of those changes and their potential impact on our linguistic and social lives (Baron, 2008, p. xi).

Since very little in known about the particular phenomenon examined in the present study, the research conducted here is expected to yield knowledge that can direct linguists toward new research questions. Furthermore, by exploring mess-understanding shares in social media, the study also aims to make a methodological contribution in terms of how to collect and analyze chunks of dialogue shared as one post. This paper targets social media as a phenomenon and common features regarding communicative misunderstandings that are being shared. Humor is the central focus of the research and misunderstanding is a central empirical concept in examining the construction of online humor.

2. Theoretical background

In the present chapter, the theoretical background that is relevant for this study will be presented. It starts by addressing humor and its connection with social media - which is the basis of the overall understanding of the perspective that the paper takes. Subsequently follows an account of the phenomenon of cross-platform sharing and short message services.
2.1 Humor and social media

The scientific study of language and humor did not emerge as a field of study of its own until the 20th century (Ermida & Chovanec, 2012, p. 2). However, due to humor’s never ending evolution, especially through its proliferation in the media, new grounds of research are constantly generated for linguistics today. The tendency to elicit laughter and provide amusement can be described by the term humor. Many attempts have been made to specify and explain what humor really is and what is considered as humorous. What counts as humor is really impossible to define and the very things that people consider to be humorous seem to change over time (Attardo, 1994, p. 3). People often mention the importance of humor when they are asked about important parts of their lives. By way of example, people often list “sense of humor” as a priority in potential companionships (Morreall, 2013), which shows how crucial humor is in society. Humor has no limitations, just like our fantasies. That is why new themes of humor and new ways of expressing it keep on expanding boundlessly.

According to Ermida and Chovanec (2012, p. 1) humor and the media are two completely different, but yet closely connected, phenomena. From video sharing websites, (such as YouTube), to entertaining bulletin board systems; online media have a plethora of linguistic manifestations of humor. Humor in the media can be regarded as both a discourse device and a sociolinguistic phenomenon due to the fact that it comprises different functions of communication. Linguistic humor in online media is a challenging topic that is important to the history of humor studies - it addresses two paradigms; the structurally oriented approach (dealing with the structure of the humor) and the interactional and pragmatic ones (concerning humoristic communication and its contexts) (Ermida & Chovanec, 2012, p. 1). The study conducted for the present paper can be said to touch upon both these approaches, as it focuses on the pragmatics of texting as well as on more general patterns of online humor in the sharing of message exchanges.

One approach to humor and language involves studying naturally occurring conversations. Attardo (1994, p. 314) argues that a particular approach, conversation analysis, “is the field of linguistics best suited for investigating humor in its spontaneous setting – conversation – and for studying its functions and relevance in the process of communication”. However, online communication requires a different approach to language and humor. The Internet plays a large role in the creation and spreading of humor and different ways of investigating it must be made even though one may benefit from the research available on humor and interaction, like for instance Attardo’s types of jokes. Even though text message humor accounts for a substantial proportion of online humor, there is little research to be found on it. Nevertheless, Attardo (1994) writes about two subtypes of jokes – canned jokes and conversational jokes. A canned joke could be described as ‘joke telling’ and can be recycled
over and over again as long as the situation permits it to occur. A conversational joke is spontaneously improvised during a conversation and depends on contextual factors for its setup. However, these two subtypes of jokes can sometimes be hard to distinguish. Does a conversational jokes become a canned joke when told outside of its original scenery? (Attardo, 1994, p, 296). This question is highly relevant to this study due to the fact that people choose to upload their conversational jokes in order for others to see them and recycle them. This turns the conversational jokes into canned jokes due to the fact that they are ‘told’ outside of the context in which they were originally produced. Furthermore, Attardo (1994) outlines the social functions of humor, and argues that they can be divided into two categories, referred to as primary functions and secondary functions:

Primary functions of humor in conversation are effects that the speaker may (wish to) achieve directly by using humorous segments or texts in his/her discourse. Secondary functions of humor are effects that are achieved either indirectly or without the knowledge or intent of the user (Attardo, 1994, p. 323).

Such a division of functions can also be applied to communication in text messages. Sometimes they are intended to be funny, other times they unintentionally turn out to be humorous.

2.1.1 Cross-platform sharing
A study by Oeldorf-Hirsch and Sundar (2010) revealed that out of 460 undergraduate students at a large American university, almost 90 per cent used at least one website for sharing photos online. According to Boulton (2014), the first uploaded image came to the Web in 1992. The large merchandising of digital cameras in the early 1990s brought with it several websites where people could upload and store their images. The first instance of photo sharing was Webshots that launched in 1999. Not long afterwards came sites like Yahoo and Photobucket. As digital cameras dropped in price, more people could afford to buy one – and along evolved the idea of photo-sharing. Flickr quickly became the largest image-hosting site where people could share photos, follow and interact with other users. Not only was it a photo-sharing website, it was also a social network. Other companies were quick to copy the idea and Instagram soon became the number one choice of photo-sharing. Lately, websites such as Pinterest have added a twist to sharing photos, namely by allowing people to use other users’ photos in order to create ‘albums’ of photos that match their taste or interest (Boulton, 2014, p, 148). A photo on Pinterest is called a pin. Most of the pins originate from Pinterest’s own bookmark button. With the help of this feature, people can make use of and share a picture from one platform to another. The social media scientist Dan Zarrella made a free-form type-in response box that asked the question: “What makes you want to share web content in a one-to-many way?” in order to gain knowledge about what, how and why people
spread content on the Internet. The survey received 420 usable answers altogether. According to Zarrella's report, people share in a one-to-many method had to do with ‘audience relevance’, which stood for 18.6% of responses. With this method, sharers share content that they thought would be relevant to others (Zarrella, n.d.). Figure 1 is taken from Zarrella's study and shows “the percentage of respondents who share specific types of content one-to-many”.

Figure 1. Content sharing statistics (Adapted from Zarella, n.d).

As the bars in Figure 1 show, humor is the second most popular content type to share in a one-to-many way, which shows that it is a popular feature in the world of social media. As such, the present study will offer a window into the linguistic and communicative content of such humor shares.

2.1.2 SMS (short message service)

*Short message service* (SMS) or *texting* was developed during the 1990s (Crystal, 2001, p. 228). More than one third of the world’s population uses mobile phones today (Baron, 2008, p. 129.) and the sending of text messages constitutes a significant part of mobile communications. The technology of mobile phones, particularly texting, has generated particular forms of language use:

It has been labelled ‘textese’, ‘slanguage’, a ‘new hi-tech lingo’, a ‘hybrid shorthand’ a ‘digital virus’. It has been described as ‘foreign’, ‘alien’, and ‘outlandish’. It is so much viewed as a new language that texters have been called ‘bilingual’ (Crystal, 2008, p. 13)
According to Baron (2008, p. 145), the top reasons for sending text messages are 1) arranging to meet in a few minutes, 2) arranging to meet in a few hours, 3) sharing news, 4) killing time while waiting or traveling, 5) keeping in touch and 6) asking for advice. Discussions about abbreviations, acronyms and emoticons but also untidy sentence mechanisms like spelling, punctuation, and grammar began in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Baron, 2008, p. 28). These features have contributed to its own kind of language, sometimes referred to as Textspeak, which is an “informal name for the kind of abbreviated language used in text messaging, and sometimes for any kind of text messaging, whether abbreviated or not” (Crystal, 2008, p. 187).

Emoticons, that is, symbols expressing various non-verbal aspects of a message, can also be considered to be part of so-called Textspeak. They allow users to express emotions and reactions due to of the lack of paralinguistic cues (Frehner, 2008, p. 121). They are graphic devices also referred to as smileys, where the meaning is in the shape of the symbols. They can be read sideways as in for instance :-) (=‘smile’) or straight ahead as in ^_^ (=‘cute’) (Crystal, 2008a, p. 38). The small keypad and limited characters space when texting has also led to more use of abbreviations. For example, users may use a rebus-like style, such as CUL8R for "see you later", or abbreviations such as "msg" for "message" (Crystal, 2001, p. 262). Lists with over 500 examples of both abbreviations and emoticons have been published, but probably only five percent of them are ever being used (Crystal, 2008, p. 24). Furthermore, along with ways of compressing text messages’ content evolved the ‘text-replacement’ function AutoCorrect, sometimes also known as predictive texting programs (Baron, 2008, p. 17). The function of automatic correction of words typed was developed and designed to correct typos and misspelled words and is set up by default with a corpus of typical writing errors. Users can type a few letters, and the software then offers a full word or alternatives, “predicting the user’s intent” (Baron, 2008, p. 17). While this invention can be a very positive tool, it can also at times be an obstacle. “It frequently changes words without rhyme and reason, and if you hit ‘send’ too quickly, it can lead to some funny, confusing, or just plain embarrassing results” (Madison, 2011, p. 1). Reports also suggest that texting is used for other purposes like for instance sexual harassments, bullying and rumor-mongering (Crystal, 2001, p. 229). This is also associated with taboo terms, which are words and phrases that are considered to be inappropriate in certain contexts that often are related to religion, politeness, and prohibited behavior (Yule, 2010, p. 260). Slanderous language and impoliteness often arise out of the attempt of trying to be funny or ironic (Crystal, 2001, p. 127). In sum, as this review of literature has shown, research on humor and social media sharing is sparse, and the present study attempts to contribute to linguistic work on humor in social media, as well as to studies of cross-platform communication.
3. Material and methods

This section will start off by giving a short explanation of how the social media platform Pinterest is set up (3.1). Then follows an in-depth description of the data collection and the coding of hits (3.2) and after that a section about the coding of texters’ identity (3.3). Finally, there is a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the study (3.4).

3.1 The social media platform Pinterest

In 2015, the Social Network Pinterest announced that they had surpassed 100 million active members (Isaac, 2015), which makes it one of the largest free websites in the world. It is a competitor to the world’s number one search engine Google, but the difference between the two is that with Pinterest you can ‘pin’ or save your photos of interest while browsing the website. Pinterest has been referred to as “a contemporary digital version of creating a collage or scrapbook” where images and posts can be “collected, grouped by common theme and displayed to others via an online pinboard“ (Pearce & Learmonth, 2013, p. 3).

The word Pinterest is a linguistic blending between the word pin + interest. With a regular search engine, photos that users want to save have to be downloaded, e-mailed, printed out or made into a bookmark on the computer. With Pinterest, users can instead directly pin what they like online, and each pin also includes a web link to the original website from where the image was collected (Pearce & Learmonth, 2013, p. 3). According to the Pinterest Help Center information, pins function as so called visual bookmarks linked back to the page where they first came from. This also means that all pins found on the website have been uploaded by another user, a so-called pinner. Most of the pins originate from Pinterest’s own browser button. By the help of this feature, people can make use of and share a picture from one platform to another, “therefore encouraging users to explore the images and videos in their original context” (Pearce & Learmonth, 2013, p. 3). All pins on Pinterest are divided into different categories or themes. If entering Pinterest’s category humor, one will find all kinds of different pins related to the subject. The fundamental idea behind these categories is to discover new pins that occur in the feed. Another method to discover pins that one is interested in is to use the search field, which is the approach adopted in the present study.

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4 http://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/Pinterest
6 Information retrieved from https://about.pinterest.com/
3.2 Data collection and categorization

The method of collecting data was constructed as a point-in-time study, which means that the data was gathered during a single specific day, due to the fact that the results of the very same search strings can vary from day to day. As the study also aims to make a methodological contribution in terms of collecting and analyzing cross-platform shares, the search strategy is explicated below.

In order to obtain a corpus of data of text message screenshots as extensive as possible for the scope of the study, different search strings were tested in order to find the ideal single word(s) or strings of words that would result in the highest number of relevant hits. Eventually, the final formulations were the three word strings misunderstanding + text + message, text + message + fail and text + message + funny. They were entered in Pinterest’s search field where the three different combinations yielded hits that together formed the corpus. All hits were then saved via screen grabs. However, a number of hits occurred in more than one search string, which made an exact and reliable count from each search string difficult. Instead, results from all three searches were combined into a corpus, as illustrated in Table 1. The corpus initially consisted of hundreds of hits on screenshots, but the search results were examined for screenshots with text message exchanges that included a misunderstanding of some kind. Following the definitions outlined in section 1 (p. 1), all screenshots that fit the basic criterion of a communicator’s failure to understand something correctly were included in the corpus. Those that did not, such as misunderstandings occurring because of for instance blackouts or memory loss when a texter was intoxicated, were excluded. Titles, hash tags and comments on the screenshots from users on the website were also considered in the sorting process.

Table 1. Search strategies and total number of hits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of data: pinterest.com</th>
<th>Retrieval date: November 12, 2015</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nr</td>
<td>Word string</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>misunderstanding + text + message</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>text + message + fail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>text + message + funny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total hits</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The final corpus resulted in 160 hits on screenshots. This systematic way of building a corpus was to find the most common categories of misunderstandings. Each screenshot was classified into different subcategories on account of what appeared to be the cause of the misunderstanding. Finally, the subcategories were combined into five main categories on the basis of features shared by the different subcategories. This procedure gave the five main categories *Addressee, Textspeak, Technology trouble* and *Jokes and irony*, and *Ambiguous cases*. In this last category, the few instances that were difficult to classify (but still corresponded to the criteria for misunderstandings) were placed. All screenshots in the final corpus of 160 text message exchanges were analyzed, and some illustrative cases from each category are discussed in section 4.

### 3.3 Coding of texters’ identity

Even though the data are publically distributed, this study uses anonymization as an ethical principle in order to ‘protect’ the texters’ integrity. In accordance with recommendations from The Swedish Research Council (Swedish Research Council, 2011) this ethical principle of protection will replace any names and places appearing in the screen grabs. Personal information about the texters should under no circumstances be revealed, but it is vital to underline that it is difficult to guarantee non-recognition. The conversations that are used as examples in this study will be anonymized through elimination of any existing names by constructing the conversations between the sender (S) and the recipient (R) instead. Also, rewriting the screen grabs into textual dialogues will increase the anonymity of texters and pinners.

In order to secure users’ and texters’ anonymity, a coding chart was constructed for the presentation of screen grabs. Initially, there is the subheading *unit* where the different texters have been given a *code* instead of their actual name. All texters are always given the role of *sender (S)* if they send the message or *recipient (R)* if they were the recipients of a first message. Texters with for instance a feminine name becomes *female (F)* and someone *unidentified* becomes *U*. In cases where the relationship between participants was relevant to the analysis, a code such as *grandparent* was used. Table 2 lists the most common codings with examples of message exchanges.

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7 *Unidentified* is a texter whose identity was impossible to determine.
**Table 2.** Coding of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sender (referent)</strong></td>
<td>(S)</td>
<td>(S) Hi how are you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Recipient (referent)</strong></td>
<td>(R)</td>
<td>(R) Fine, thanks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td>(C)</td>
<td>(C) Don’t forget to pick me up after school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>(P)</td>
<td>(P) No worries sweetie.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>(F)</td>
<td>(F) Would you like to go for ice cream sometime?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>(M)</td>
<td>(M) Sure. How about tomorrow?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandparent</td>
<td>(G)</td>
<td>(G) How’s my favorite grandchild doing?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unidentified</td>
<td>(U)</td>
<td>(U) Hi. It’s me. What’s up, pal?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2 is an example of what a screenshot could look like taken from an iPhone. When sending a text message, the chat box will appear in green color (or blue when using iMessage, which is texting over Wi-Fi) and the recipient’s chat box will always be grey. This enables people to notice the difference between what the sender has sent and what the sender has received from the recipient. This is an important feature in this study, as the sender/recipient status as well as the order of messages sent are essential to understanding the dialogue.

![Screenshot from a Smartphone’s chat window](image)

**Figure 2.** Screenshot illustration.
3.4 Strengths and weaknesses of the study

All studies inevitably face challenges, and have their limitations. Tagg (2012) conducted a study on the discourse of text messaging, and reports having faced many of the same challenges as I did when doing this project. She mentions several issues which one has to consider when collecting a corpus of data grounded in text messages. The size of the data is always a challenge for corpus linguists and “text messaging raises particular challenges; partly because of the shortness of text messages and partly because the challenges in collecting data will tend to limit how many messages you can reasonably acquire” (Tagg, 2012, p. 42). Text messages are in fact usually very brief. The shorter a message is, the less information is there to collect and base theories on. The experience of collecting data in the form of text messages from Pinterest was in many ways a challenge. In the context of a small-scale 10-week study, it is not possible to collect a huge amount of data. Considering the time frame, the size of the corpus must be balanced between being representative enough and to be possible to analyze within the period of time available.

The goal was to collect the text messages ranked high in terms of popularity on the site. Initially, I contacted Pinterest through a personal email, as I was interested to learn how their search engine functions. However, they answered with an automatic message saying that they did not have the time to answer because of the small amount of staff that worked at the company. Without drawing any definite conclusions, how search engines generate their search results probably remains a company secret as all engines compete against each other. It might help them to reduce the chance of rivals discovering how to copy their special technique. The systematic way in which search engines sort results is, at any rate, a complex procedure. But from having tested different search methods and read about other people’s theories, aspects like keywords (keywords are used to retrieve certain photos in Pinterest’s search engine), likes (the like-button is used when users express that they like a photo), repins (to repin a photo means adding a pin to your own board) and freshness (a photo that is recently uploaded or pinned) seem to matter to the ranking.

Another issue is the so-called representativeness of a corpus. Tagg (2012, p. 42) brings up this issue in relation to studies of text messaging, and discusses whether a corpus can ever be said to be truly representative of an entire population. We can never know for certain if the text messages collected are representative of how people actually communicate today, due to the fact that we do not really know if they are authentic or constructed. Even though the aspect of representativeness has to be considered, it is also a motive of why this study only sets out to investigate the relationship between text messages and social media. Also, they way in which we text is an individual process, even though related traits can be found in
many of them. It is difficult to claim that patterns found in a small sample are representative of communication patterns of an entire population. Representativeness is linked to *message selection*, which is “the possibility that people will self-select text messages – and the fact that this is necessary in ensuring ethical concerns are met” (Tagg, 2012, p. 43). This is highly relevant to the study given that the data collected is based on Pinterest users’ own pins – in other words self-selected text messages. This means that *they* have decided that these text messages are humorous. Since this study does not contain any interviews with the text messages’ originators, texters do not get the chance to describe and explain their practices. Thus, there are some limitations regarding the context for and communicators behind the text messages examined. While reading this study, bear in mind that it sets out to investigate the corpus as a whole rather than each texter’s data and its authenticity.

4. Analysis and results

The present analytical section sets out to examine and clarify different types of linguistic humorous themes found in the corpus of text message exchanges. Initially, the quantitative results of the corpus were divided into main categories in order to present a general overview. Subsequently, the main categories were divided into different subgroups, and a qualitative analysis of the dataset was made. The different categories are explained in detail through analysis of typical cases in section 4.2. The findings are then discussed in terms of social phenomena and online humor in section 4.3.
4.1 Quantitative account of the distribution of the corpus

**Figure 3. Main categories in the dataset**

Figure 3 presents the five main categories of the study. Firstly, there is the category *Technology trouble*, which includes text messages where the misunderstanding is grounded in the technological mishaps, or in the lack of knowledge of how to handle a technological device such as a mobile phone. Secondly, there is the category *Textspeak*, in which misunderstandings occur because of texting-specific conventions or technological possibilities, such as corrections made by AutoCorrect or uses of abbreviations, acronyms or emoticons. Thirdly, there is the category *Jokes and irony* where the misunderstandings are caused by two factors: either the absence of paralinguistic cues, such as non-verbal features or tone of voice, or that someone simply does not understand the gist of a joke. After that follows the category *Addressee*, which contains text messages where the source of the misunderstanding is some confusion as to the identity of someone referred to, or because the recipient is not responding to messages. Finally, there is the category called *Ambiguous cases*, which includes those screenshot dialogues that were difficult to classify, or were not considered to be relevant to any of the main categories. The reason for keeping these instances in the corpus as opposed to excluding them was that they did fit the initial search criteria, although a closer scrutiny revealed that they differed from the remaining dialogues – either because it was hard to determine why they had been shared, or because the misunderstanding was not located inside the dialogue. One such example is presented at the
end of this section. Table 4 shows the distribution of subcategories in each main category, including the number of screenshots in each subcategory.

Table 4 shows the distribution of subcategories in each main category, including the number of screenshots in each subcategory.

Figure 4. Sub-categories

To begin with, the category Technology trouble includes the sub-categories Wrong Number (49) and Not Delivered (3). These two groups include misunderstandings resulting from a user having trouble with the technology on mobile phones.

Furthermore, there is the category Textspeak, which includes the sub-categories AutoCorrect (40), Abbreviations and acronyms (5), Lexical ambiguity (3) and Emoticons (2), all of which are contributing factors of misunderstandings. It could be argued that the examples in the subcategory AutoCorrect would fit into the main category Technology trouble. However, as the predictive texting function is such a common reason for misunderstandings in this corpus, one can argue that the presence of AutoCorrect has become a part of the particular language use of texting. AutoCorrect will in many cases without texter’s awareness, insert words, letters or sentences without the texter noticing the corrections made.

Next is Jokes and irony, which has with the sub-categories Irony (16), Ignorance (13) and Puns (10). In these three categories, the misunderstandings are caused by the fact that someone does not understand a joke or irony.

Last is the category Addressee, which resulted in two different sub-categories: First, in the sub-category Wrong referent (9) the misunderstandings are grounded in the ambiguous use
of pronouns. Secondly, there is the subcategory *Lost phone* where the misunderstandings occur because people tend to text their own or someone else’s phone that has been lost.

### 4.2 Qualitative analysis

In this section, a qualitative analysis of the dataset is performed where each category is explicated through analysis of individual text exchanges.

#### 4.2.1 Technology trouble

Texting is not always easy, at least not for everyone. The category of *Technology trouble* concerns the way in which the technology has in some cases become an obstacle when sending or writing text messages. It includes the subcategories *Wrong number* and *Not delivered*.

#### 4.2.1.1 Wrong number

Whether it is caused by technology trouble or ‘slips-of-the-fingers’, humorous misunderstandings because of texting the wrong number are common. In text message exchange 1, the sender is a grandmother whose intention is to send a text message to her husband to ask him to “set out the lasagna from the fridge” when he comes home. She accidently sends the text message to her grandchild whereupon the grandchild responds and explains that she has texted the wrong person. The grandma apologizes for her mistake and wishes her grandchild a nice day. Thereafter she continues to send the same message to her grandchild as if she is having major trouble with figuring out how to use her phone properly.

**Text message exchange 1**

1. S  Dear when you get home please set out the lasagna from the fridge [G]
2. R  Gram you texted the wrong person. This isn’t grandpa [C]
3. S  Oh I’m so sorry sweet pea have a nice day! [G]
4. S  Dear when you get home please set out the lasagna from the fridge [G]
5. R  Grandma it’s still me. [C]
6. S  Dear when you get home please set out the lasagna from the fridge [G]
Oops silly potato [G]

Most of us have probably at some point accidently texted the wrong person whether it was because of pressing the wrong button on the phone or because of a lack of technological skills. Either way, the result is often a feeling of embarrassment. The humorous theme found in text message exchange 1 is the generation gap; we find it amusing when older people struggle with new technology.

However, sending a text message to the wrong number does not always have to lead to something negative. In text message exchange 2, the girl believes that she is texting a friend and does not realize that she actually is texting her object of romantic interest. She utters that she wishes the boy she is texting with was hers. As the boy replies “I wish he was yours too” the girl understands that she has texted the wrong person and feels embarrassed. The boy then declares that their love for each other is mutual by asking her out.

**Text message exchange 2**

1  S  Hey, what’s up? [M]

2  R  Nothing, wishing (-name removed-) was mine… [F]

3  S  Really? Because I wish he was yours too <3 [M]

4  R  ohmygoshh…kill me now. [F]

5  S  No, its fine. You just made me asking you out a whole lot easier :) [M]

There were so many examples similar to text message exchange 2 in the corpus that it almost made it a bit suspicious. Maybe it is a common phenomenon amongst people today to reveal something ‘by mistake’. Either the recipient pretended to have sent the message in line 2 to the wrong person in order to get something off her chest in a charming way – or she made a real slip-up. Either way, it is the awkwardness and the way the sender counters her love declaration that makes this exchange humorous.

**4.2.1.2 Not delivered**

Everything is not bulletproof in the world of technology and not every text message that has been sent reaches its final destination immediately, which can lead to humorous misunderstandings. The recipient explains that he was drunk last night and that he ended up “banging” the sender’s wife. What he actually meant was that he smashed (“banged”) into the sender’s wife’s car when he drove out from his house. But unfortunately that part of the message was not delivered. The word “bang” is also a vulgar slang, which according to the
Concise Oxford English Dictionary means ‘to have sexual intercourse’. It gets even worse when the part where he asks the sender to “say sorry for him to his wife” is not delivered and he then adds “and your daughter”. The result of this exchange is that the sender only gets the first and the third text message, which combined turns out to be that he “ended up banging your wife and your daughter”.

**Text message exchange 3**

1. S  What’s up? [M]
2. R  Dude, you’re going to kill me. I was a little drunk last night and talking to your wife and I ended up banging her [M]
3. R  car in the driveway when I pulled out. I think I hit your daughter’s bike too. I’ll come fix it later, but please say sorry for me to your wife [-Not delivered-] [M]
4. R  and your daughter [M]

One main difference that separates texting from e-mailing is the fact that when sending a text, one often sends unfinished parts of it at a time - contrary to e-mailing where people usually finish a message before sending it off. The downside of sending chunks of a message instead of a complete version of it is the possibility of one part not being delivered, which is what happened in this text message. Delays in a conversation can be both ambiguous and irritating, but Pinterest users, as apparent in their shareability, treat such misunderstandings as humorous.

### 4.2.2 Textspeak

Even though Textspeak has evolved from the English language, it does not mean that all English speakers understand it. Different people may have different interpretations that can lead to humorous misunderstandings. The category of Textspeak includes the subcategories **AutoCorrect, Abbreviations and acronyms, Emoticons and Lexical ambiguity**.

#### 4.2.2.1 AutoCorrect

AutoCorrect is a technological aid but at the same time a commonly occurring reason for why humorous misunderstandings happen. In text message exchange 4, the sender asks the recipient what he is doing and the recipient surprisingly answers that he is “sittin in the fridge”. The sender instinctively assumes that the answer is based on AutoCorrect’s automatic spell-checker function, by writing: “check your phone. AutoCorrect!”.

The recipient then explains that he is truly sitting in the fridge and that it is not a result of AutoCorrect.
Text message exchange 4

1  S  Hey love :) what’s up? [F]
2  R  Not much. Sittin in the fridge [M]
3  S  Hahahahaha, (-name removed-) check your phone. Auto correct! Hahahahaha: [F]
4  R  What are you talking about? I’m sitting in the fridge eating a banana [M]
5  S  …i worry about you sometimes, love. [F]

The function of AutoCorrect was developed and designed to correct typos and misspelled words and is set up by default with a corpus of typical writing errors (see Baron, 2008, p. 17 on predictive texting programs). However, the predictions of a technological device are not always correct, and the frequency of screenshots where predictive texting underlies the misunderstanding in my data indicates that AutoCorrect impacts communication. This is an example of how AutoCorrect has become a part of our public mind but also how it at times is an overrated technology. Even though our brains naturally possess the ability to sift out nonsense, the influence of AutoCorrect on our everyday interpretation of text messages apparently also becomes an obstacle for communication, which makes it humorous.

In text message exchange 5, AutoCorrect mechanically changes the word decorating to defecating which according to the Concise Oxford English Dictionary refers to the act of discharging of faeces from the body. The recipient seems a bit shocked before realizing that it was a misunderstanding caused by AutoCorrect.

Text message exchange 5

1  S  Heyyyyy what are you up to [U]
2  R  Not much. I’m just defecating [sic] outside. [U]
3  S  Ewwww. Why? Are your toilets broken? [U]
4  R  Lmao. No, there’s fine. I’m DECORATING outside. Christmas lights. [U]
5  S  Ha. Good. I was starting to worry. [U]

The function of AutoCorrect is designed to facilitate the typing of messages, but clearly, there are also drawbacks. In many cases AutoCorrect interferes in the content of messages. The
lexical error in text message exchange 5 creates a kind of language barrier between the sender and the recipient and that is one reason why it becomes humorous. The second reason is the word defacating, as many people consider ‘toilet humor’ to be funny.

In text message exchange 6 a mother sends a greeting to her daughter (presumably in her late teens) asking how she is, by using the descriptor “pregnant”. In response, the recipient does not reciprocate the greeting, but instead asks a question pertaining to knowledge she did not know her mother had. The sender replies with a correction of the key word in line 1, and offers “perfect” as a substitute for “pregnant”. The messages in lines 2 and 3 were sent simultaneously, thus changing the entire context for a response. With the sender’s correction, the recipient replies “Oh nevermind”, indicating that she wants to retract what was written in the second message. The sender, however, has already read the second message, and responds in line 5 with an expression of surprise, disbelief or bafflement (wait WHAT), also indicated in the use of capital letters.

**Text message exchange 6**

1. S: How’s our pregnant little daughter? [P]
2. R: Mom how did you know? [C]
3. S: I meant perfect [P]
4. R: Oh nevermind [C]
5. S: Wait WHAT [P]
6. R: Am I in trouble? :*( [C]

As such, the misunderstanding is a consequence of AutoCorrect but it might also depend on the fact that the time-aspect might have affected the dialogue. Nor can a text message that has been sent be withdrawn – which causes a humorous unintentional news delivery in this case.

### 4.2.2.2 Abbreviations and acronyms

Abbreviations and acronyms are supposed to make our way of texting more efficient and quick, but they also result in humorous misunderstandings at times. In text message exchange 7, the sender is trying to flatter the recipient by invoking a language game, initiated by a seemingly innocent question about the number of letters in the alphabet. As the sender expected and desired, the recipient answers that there are 26 letters. The sender then admits that he forgot, and adds the five letters “U”, “R”, “A”, “Q” and “T”. The recipient answers “What?”, probably feeling a bit confused about why these letters in particular were forgotten.
The sender then orders the recipient to “Say the letters out loud”, which would be ‘you are a cutie’.

**Text message exchange 7**

1. **S** There’s 21 letters in the alphabet, right? [M]
2. **R** 26 [F]
3. **S** Oh I forgot... U R A Q T [M]
4. **R** What? [F]
5. **S** Say the letters out loud [M]
6. **R** How do you forget ‘a’? [F]

The persistent flourishing of abbreviations sometimes regulates the way people communicate and has in many cases evolved into something that may obstruct communication. The humorous theme in message 7 is language play – made possible through the contrast between pronunciation and writing. The acronyms “U R A Q T” could be described as a rebus game, which can cause misunderstandings in any context where we are unfamiliar with the matter (Crystal, 2001, p. 229). Either the recipient answers back “How do you forget ‘a’?” because she genuinely does not understand how he could forget the first letter of the alphabet, or she ironically tries to avoid his flirtation. Another linguistic aspect that is interesting in text message exchange 7 is that it becomes a blend of verbal and written communication, as the acronyms do not make sense unless the letters are read as if they had been pronounced in speech, one by one.

In text message exchange 8 the sender is asking her child when s/he is coming home. Apparently it takes a long time before the sender gets an answer and the parent therefore impatiently writes “Hello?? WTF??”. The abbreviation ‘WTF’ is to many youngsters a familiar shortened form of the vulgar slang phrase ‘what the fuck’, but in this case the sender thinks it means “Wednesday, Thursday or Friday”.

**Text message exchange 8**

1. **S** When are you coming home? [P]
2. **S** Hello?? WTF?? [P]
3. **R** Mom! Do you know what that means? [C]
4. **S** Yeah, are you coming home Wednesday, Thursday, or Friday?
As teenagers are showing a growing proficiency in Textspeak language, it is no wonder that the older generations can feel excluded or misguided at times when trying to keep up with texting language use. This is altering the way in which parents and children are communicating. The central humorous theme in text message exchange 8 is the generation gap, as it hampers the communication between the two texters.

4.2.2.3 Lexical ambiguity

The category lexical ambiguity contains, as the label indicates, humorous misunderstandings arising from ambiguous meanings of a particular word. In text message exchange 9, the word “coke” has two different meanings – either the beverage Coca-Cola or the drug cocaine. The sender is clearly referring to the beverage, when asking the recipient for some money to buy it. However, whether the recipient really believes that the sender meant cocaine, or if the whole dialogue is deliberately ironic, remains a speculation.

Text message exchange 9

1 S hey dad can i have some money for coke? [C]
2 R yea sure is $70 enough? [P]
3 S dad its like $1.50 [C]
4 R WOW prices went down since i was a kid! well have fun
   snorting your coke im on may way to give you the money
   now. [P]
5 S WAIT WHAAT?!?!? im talking about coca cola! AND YOUR FINE
   WITH YOUR SON DOING COCAIN? WTF DAD?!?!?! [C]
6 R ill give you $100 to shut you up and not tell mom! [P]

The presence of having more than one meaning within a single word or phrase in the language in which it belongs to is called lexical ambiguity and that is what makes this misunderstanding funny.
4.2.2.4 Emoticons

Emoticons are a way of coloring our written communication with feelings, attitudes, or nonverbal behavior. But sometimes it causes humorous misunderstandings. In text message exchange 10, the sender expresses his excitement over a test, which apparently has gone well. The recipient surprisingly responds back with a ‘destructive’ smiley. The smiley with the “awkward face” as the sender puts it, could be described with the words disappointed, ashamed or upset, which is confusing to the context due to the fact that something positive has happened. The recipient then explains that he thought the smiley was an illustration of a Chinese person, as Chinese people are supposedly known for being intelligent.

Text message exchange 10

1  S      Hey dad! i got a 98 on my AP Bio test! [C]
2  R      Yay I’m proud of you! [P]
3  S      Thanks [C]
4  R      -_- [P]
5  S      Why that awkward face? [C]
6  R      What are you talking about, that’s a chinese smiley face, cause you’re so smart [P]

Symbols are a way to convey additional meaning about what is being written due to the absence of paralinguistic cues. In this case the additional meaning in the form of an emoticon does not turn out the way the recipient intends it to (that is, the son did not understand this particular emoticon), so the humorous theme is then the miscommunication resulting from not understanding the emoticon. However, it is possible that father did, in fact, make an unintentional mistake, and when the son pointed it out, the father tried to come up with a logical explanation, which is another possible humor theme here. Like text message exchange 8, the humor is caused by the generation gap between the two texters.

4.2.3 Jokes and irony

Detecting irony or recognizing a joke does not always equal simplicity, especially in the world of texting, which involves a lack of paralinguistic cues. Irony is when someone says one thing but means the opposite and it is even harder to understand in textual contexts than verbal and often leads to humorous misunderstandings. The same thing goes for jokes. This category includes the subcategories Irony, Ignorance and Puns.
4.2.3 Irony

Irony is a reoccurring reason for humorous misunderstandings in text message exchanges. In text message exchange 11 the sender is being sarcastic by the use of a hyperbole. A hyperbole is when someone clearly overstates something to mean the opposite (Claridge, 2010, p. 6). In sentence 3 the sender actually indicates, through a sarcastic wit, that he did not wake up at three in the morning and checked the microwave even though he states the reverse. What the dad does not understand is that he is being sarcastic.

Text message exchange 11

1  S  DAD WHERE ARE YOU ITS THREE IN THE MORNING?!?!?!?!?!?! [C]
2  R  I left to fix something. Did you see the note I left on the microwave? [P]
3  S  Yes dad. When I woke up three in the morning thinking you abandoned me the first thing I did was to check the microwave. [C]
4  R  Oh so you saw it? [P]

Detecting irony in text messages is not always easy due to the lack of paralinguistic cues and can hence result in misunderstandings. Either the humorous feature found in text message exchange 11 is ‘ignorance’; that is that the father does not understand his sons sarcasm – or the father is actually being sarcastic by countering his sons sarcasm in line 3 with his own sarcasm in line 4.

4.2.3.2 Ignorance

In this sub-section, it is the stupidity of the texters that contributes to the dialogues being funny. In text message exchange 12, the sender uses both lies, like for instance that the sender’s pin number was seen yesterday at an ATM, and sarcasm when answering that it is “1234”. It might also be a pun what is humorously referred to as the dopeler effect (i.e. a pun on the term Doppler effect in physics), which means that stupid ideas (like reveling your pin code just to prove a point) seem smarter when they come at you quickly (House, 2008, p. 599). Either way, the whole conversation turns out to be a big misunderstanding for the recipient, contrary to the sender who fulfilled his or her personal agenda - to steal her money.

Text message exchange 12

1  S  Hey [-name removed-]. I saw your Pin number yesterday at
the ATM. [U]

2  R  Hah! Oh, really? I doubt it. What is it? [F]

3  S  1234 [U]

4  R  Wrong! Its 5634 [F]

5  S  Thanks. I have your credit card, Btw [U]

6  R  Pfft. You need my pin number to use it. [F]

In text message exchange 12 it seems like the recipient is struggling with the social scene of the conversation and she is not able to make sense of it. She fails to identify the insincerity and deception. It is evident that the recipient’s idiocy is the central humorous theme. It is almost painfully obvious to know what the sender's intention really is – but this whole conversation is most likely (and hopefully) entirely made-up.

4.2.3.3 Puns

Virtual creativity and playing with words when texting is a common reason for humorous misunderstandings. In text message exchange 13 the sender implies that she wants to get married to the recipient. The recipient accepts her inquiry by illustrating, in text, getting down on one knee, as the asterisks indicate a description of non-verbal behavior or action. The girl expresses her excitement by writing “Omygoodness. I'm gonna cry” in line 4, whereupon the male replies in line 6 that he went down on one knee in order to tie his shoe.

**Text message exchange 13**

1  S  Can we please get married?! [F]

2  R  Any given day:) [M]

3  S  Now! [F]

4  R  *gets down on one knee* [M]

5  S  Ohmygoodness. Ohmygoodness. I’m gonna cry [F]

6  R  *ties shoe* [M]

7  S  ASS [F]

8  R  :) [M]

The humor in text message exchange 13 is probably due to the classification of humor where females are offended or upset over something a male did or said to them. ‘Offended females’
or ‘male humor’ is a common concept on social media today. It is the actual turn that causes the problem here; he indicated one thing but did another.

### 4.2.4 Addressee

In this category, misunderstandings result from some ambiguity as regards a referent in the conversation, or from the fact that the person addressed does not respond to messages. The category includes the subcategories *Wrong referent* and *Lost phone*.

#### 4.2.4.1 Wrong referent

Pronouns can sometimes be ambiguous, which means that they are open to more than one interpretation, which can lead to humorous misunderstandings. In text message exchange 14 the sender is writing that she misses someone referred to with the masculine pronoun ‘him’. The recipient assumes that the sender is referring to her former boyfriend, whereupon the sender explains that she is actually referring to their male fish that recently passed away:

**Text message exchange 14**

1. S  I miss him :( [U]
2. R  Well you shouldn’t. He was a jerk. And he cheated on you and played you. You deserve alot better! [U]
3. S  ...what? Pssh. Who cares about that loser? I meant our fish...he is died [U]
4. R  (-name removed-)?!?!?!?! NOOOOOOO D: [U]

Just as in real life situations it can sometimes be difficult to understand to whom a speaker is referring, and pronouns represent one grammatical category where context is necessary in order to understand their proper referent. In linguistics, pronouns are substitutions for nouns such as ‘he’, which refers to a male (Carter & McCarthy, 2010, p. 243). Have we not all been a part of a social sphere where two acquaintances are called the same name? Let us say that the name is *Tom*. Whenever someone in the social sphere mentions the name Tom, it is sometimes hard to know which Tom is being referred to. What is even more difficult is when someone calls one of the Toms *him*. If the pronoun *him* was mentioned after the same person has already been introduced by name earlier in the conversation, the referent of *him* would be obvious to the recipient. However, if *him* is the first presentation of the person, it does not have a referent and is therefore ambiguous. The humorous theme in text message exchange 14 represents an unexpected turn, as the focus of the interaction changes from a person to a deceased pet. The misunderstanding arises in the use of a pronoun with an unclear referent.
4.2.4.2 Lost phone

People sometimes tend to text one’s own or someone else’s phone that has been forgotten or lost somewhere, which can lead to humorous misunderstandings. In contrast to most screenshots in the corpus, examples in this category do not have a response from the recipient, but instead several consecutive text messages from the sender. The sender in text message exchange 15 has apparently discovered the recipient’s phone, and tries to contact the recipient by texting and reminding him/her that the phone was left at home. What the sender does not appear to realize is that since the phone is in a different place, the recipient cannot see the message.

Text message exchange 15

1  S  Sweetie you forgot your phone at home [U]
2  S  Why don’t you answer me? [U]
3  S  Darling? [U]

Mobile phones have become a central part of our everyday lives and everyone knows that losing or forgetting it can be very stressful. This is a similar case of ‘I lost my glasses that are actually on the top of my head’. To text someone’s lost phone could possibly fit into the category of technology trouble, but the central humorous theme is rather the stupidity of the user failing to understand the relationship between a lost phone and the ability to continue communicating than in the difficulty of handling a phone.

4.2.5 Ambiguous cases

The category Ambiguous cases entails a collection of text messages from the corpus that did not fit into any of the previous categories. The misunderstandings did not really occur in the actual textual exchange, and as such, they did not fit into any of the other categories. Text message exchange 16 is an example of an ambiguous case found in the corpus. Here the sender sends a photo of himself holding a big tortoise throwing it into the water. The horrified recipient asks the sender if the animal really was thrown into the water and explains that it is a tortoise, not a turtle - as tortoises cannot swim.

Text message exchange 16

1  S  Found this guy walking around our backyard today . [-photo of a tortoise being thrown into water-] [U]
2  R  Did you throw it in the water!?!?! [U]
3  R  That’s a tortoise not a turtle. It can’t swim [U]
The reason why text message exchange 16 was categorized as an ambiguous case is not because it involves cruelty to animals; it is because the ‘misunderstanding’ was not caused by anything expressed in the text message exchange, but rather, by the image attached to the exchange. The misunderstanding, then, does not arise in the exchange as such, but in the sender’s original action (throwing the non-turtle in the water) and the recipient’s negative assessment of that action. It is reasonable to assume that the humor of this screengrab lies in the twist that the conversation takes, but just like similar instances in the category, the miscommunication lies at a different level than in the other categories. When analyzing the data, a total of four of the screenshots were deemed as ambiguous cases, for similar reasons as in (16) above.

5. Discussion: Social phenomena and online humor

Evidently, the many communicative advantages of texting have also led to new communicative disadvantages. The innovation of Textspeak with its abbreviations, acronyms, AutoCorrect functions and emoticons was supposed to favor the efficiency of writing text messages more quickly— but in many cases it resulted in the opposite. How many digital tools and linguistic inventions can really be applied without risking damaging the communication between two parts? Even though the developing of language and the different ways of using it is probably a positive process, its accompanying drawbacks will never completely stop or disappear. We can all try to stick to the conventional communicative ‘rules’ that are set up from people’s mutual understanding of communication, but the room for individual interpretations is always going to be a possible obstacle for communication. Even though both adults and teenagers text these days (Crystal, 2008, p. 90) there is a great issue of an age gap found in the empirical material, which shows that today’s older generation has a hard time understanding and assimilating all these new linguistic features found in Textspeak. However, it is not only the texting language that is an issue for the older generations, it is also the impact of technology and all the trouble it triggers. It may not be that older people always want to use the same kind of language and modern technology that youngsters use, but maybe they have to. Being able to speak and communicate in the same language as the recipient, whom the sender is talking to, is normal human behavior. However, human miscommunication is also a source of shared humor, used in the world of cross-platform sharing in efforts to generate appreciation from other users. The sharing of screenshots of text message exchanges, whether authentic or constructed, becomes a form of metacommunication – users communicate about communication through re-posting and commenting on communication that took place in another medium. The types of so-called mess-understandings that users on Pinterest consider humorous are, for instance, toilet humor, sexual allusions, generation gaps, and technology difficulties, but also the way we
find different sorts of ambiguities humorous. From a linguistic standpoint, the components that such mess-understandings share are, for instance, social improprieties, lexical ambiguities, abbreviated language, wrong word choice, and the lack of paralinguistic cues. We are constantly trying to find effective ways of expressing ourselves in writing, but strategies for simplifying communication may instead complicate our exchanges with others. The struggle of conveying our feelings and thoughts, but also interpreting other people’s messages, can probably only be solved by real face-to-face communication or at least with oral communication (for example by talking on the phone). What these classifications of mess-understandings tell us about the construction of humor in social media is that the evolvement of humor is limitless and creative. The many different directions that humor is going to take are always going to be somewhat unpredictable. However, at the same time it is probably always going to be affected by communicative trends in society.

6. Conclusion

The cross-platform sharing of text message exchanges in social media reflects modern society of today. The Internet has become a central forum for the sharing of humorous content, and the posting of 'taboo' topics and lexical improprieties is a recurrent phenomenon. People are forced to use their own frame of reference to interpret message content due to the lack of paralinguistic cues, which leads to language barriers such as lexical ambiguity or generational difficulties. Moreover, the technologies of today that lie behind sending text messages sometimes interfere in the communication. In other words, misunderstandings are often driven by problems with technologies, such as predictive texting programs, or pressing the wrong buttons on the phone, which are some of the most common reasons for humorous misunderstandings shared in social media platforms. Through studies such as the present one, one can get information about the ‘humor of the time’ which becomes a representation of how people’s sharing provides us with evidence about conceptions of humor. It would indeed be interesting to delve further into new perspectives on authentic language use because more research needs to be done in the field. It would be fascinating to repeat this study in ten years to see if the categories of humor have stayed the same or if they have changed into something completely different.
References


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