



# OMG!

By Tony Beckwith

*The following originally appeared on the blog of the Austin Area Translators and Interpreters Association ([www.aatia.net](http://www.aatia.net)).*

**According to** Ezra Pound: “The sum of human wisdom is not contained in any one language, and no single language is capable of expressing all forms and degrees of human comprehension.” Succinctly put, and right on the money.

As a translator, I work with language all the time: with verbs and clauses, colloquialisms, turns of phrase and figures of speech, with the refined communication of the highly educated, the unadorned expression of regional speech, and everything in between. Translators work *with* language and *between* languages, and strive to communicate meaning.

When I start work on an entirely new project, I am fluent in the language of the text, but perhaps not familiar with the particular subject matter, context, or jargon. As I look at certain

incomprehensible terminology (especially those impenetrable acronyms!), I am staring into the unknown.

Earlier this year, I was involved in the annual Young Writers’ Workshop at Travis Heights Elementary in Austin, Texas. In the always-delightful company of my colleague, literary translator Liliana Valenzuela, I spent the morning talking to bilingual kids about writing. We asked them to try writing a song lyric or a poem, in English or Spanish, inspired by the idea that communication can be accomplished through a wide variety of words and phrases. “Good morning, Mom,” for example, is just one of many ways in which to transmit a greeting to a parent at the breakfast table. We could say, “Whazz shakin’, Momma?” and still get the point across.

When we suggested to the kids that their generation was actually expanding the boundaries of language and creating a new variation of English and Spanish through their

extensive use of texting and e-mail, we were rewarded with poems like this one:

C U later  
que te vaya well  
ahí nos vemos  
and BBL

The second and third lines say: “I wish you well / see ya around.” The first line, “(see you) later” was not much of a challenge, but BBL? No clue. I suddenly felt that old familiar feeling and realized that I was staring into the unknown. So, we shifted into research mode, and asked our students to educate us about their new language, which consists, to a remarkable degree, of abbreviations and acronyms like BBL, which means “bye bye luv” or “be back later.” (*Of course!*)

The concept is simple. Those of us who have fumbled with a tiny keypad on a handheld electronic device fully understand the desirability of a system that abbreviates the number of symbols

we must type. Younger, more skilled keypad operators, who are texting each other at speeds I can only imagine, also need a streamlined, stripped down language that allows them to type at the speed of conversation.

The idea is hardly new, since we have been saying things like “AKA” to express “also known as” for years. FYI, we’ve had RSVP, L&M, DNA, FBI, and lots of other BS besides, OK? Acronyms, those lethal landmines in the lexical landscape that can make even seasoned interpreters weep, have been around for a long time. We now know that they were simply early examples of what today we call text lingo, or textlish, depending on whom you ask.

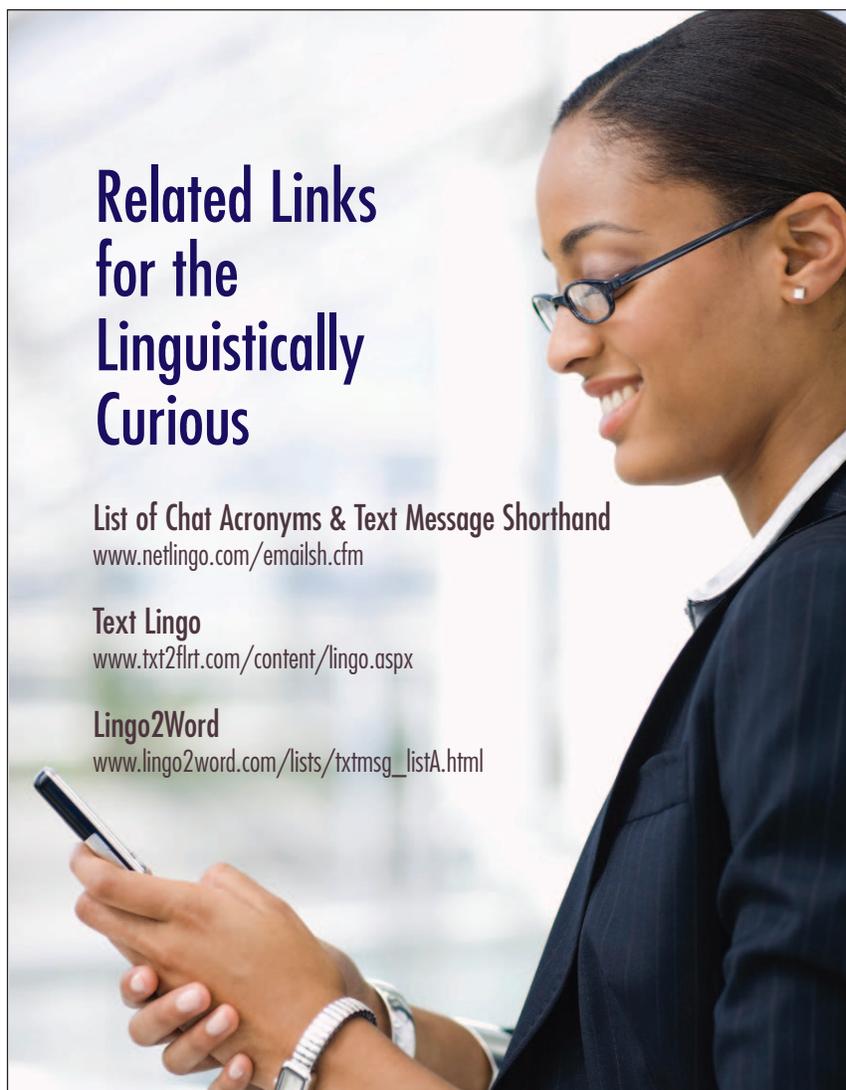
Most people have probably received an e-mail in which a humorous anecdote ends with “LOL,” and we have learned that it means “laugh out loud,” which is simply a cute alternative to the more traditional, “hahaha.” Some of us regularly use “BTW” in an e-mail when we mean “by the way.” Another familiar one is “OMG”—frequently expressed *con brio*: “OMG!!!”—which, of course, means “Oh my God.” This one has a vaguely sophomoric ring to it, but then text lingo is mainly a reflection of adolescent life, so that should come as no surprise.

We should not assume that this is just another passing kid’s fad, because it is not. Like rock and roll, I think that texting will be with us for generations to come and will, over time, have a significant impact on language and communication. Those kids at the Young Writers’ Workshop will be my age in a few years’ time, and by then they will have been using an evolving version of this acronymic, abbreviated language for their entire lives. By then there will probably be libraries full of poems and novels and essays on obscure subjects, all written in acronyms (LOL!). People will speak acronymish (with a lower-case “a”) and there will be lectures and operas and plays, all using an avant-garde lit-

erary style to capture the timeless beauty of the classics: “2B or nt 2B, thts th Q.” Literary criticism will enter its golden age as the interpretation of a text becomes increasingly subjective, and editors will occasionally text-message writers to say that “My acrnym is bigrn yrs.” The Internet is already offering dictionaries and glossaries of all kinds to those who Google “texting dictionary” or something along those lines. The list of acronyms and abbreviations obviously gets longer every day as new ideas and situations are condensed and distilled down to the fewest number of symbols, then expressed as a new “word” in a text message.

Am I ready to call these creations “words?” Not exactly, but I suppose I will be, sooner or later (perhaps we could call them “wrds”). In the meantime, I am going to start learning more of them, and not just because I may be called upon to translate them one of these days. The fact is that some of these acronyms already fit very easily into my normal discourse: how much easier and quicker to type “AFAIR” instead of the now unacceptably long “as far as I recall.” Not to mention TTYL, MYOB, or 2G2BT! And my personal favorite: BFFL (“best friends for life”). Wait a minute, surely *that* deserves to be a wrd?

*ata*



## Related Links for the Linguistically Curious

List of Chat Acronyms & Text Message Shorthand  
[www.netlingo.com/emailsh.cfm](http://www.netlingo.com/emailsh.cfm)

Text Lingo  
[www.txt2flrt.com/content/lingo.aspx](http://www.txt2flrt.com/content/lingo.aspx)

Lingo2Word  
[www.lingo2word.com/lists/txtmsg\\_listA.html](http://www.lingo2word.com/lists/txtmsg_listA.html)