

Mobile Phone Texting in Hong Kong

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INTRODUCTION: TECHNOLOGY AND LANGUAGE CHANGE

Mobile phone texting or communication through *short message service* (SMS) has emerged as a frequent daily linguistic, literacy, or general communicative practice in which two or more people exchange messages by coding and decoding texts received and sent from their cell phones. Mobile phone texting is almost now as pervasive and as ubiquitous as mobile phone voice communication. This communication process can be witnessed in buses, at homes, in offices, in restaurants, out in the woods, on the high seas, and even in the air! Hong Kong's main English language newspaper, the South China Morning Post (SCMP), on April 11, 2004, indicated that as huge a volume of 200 million SMS messages are exchanged monthly. SMS has become a multi-million dollar business for service providers.

Along with other kinds of digital technology-mediated communication, SMS seems to be causing a silent revolution with regards to the linguistic and communication habits of people in Hong Kong and beyond. This is especially so among the youth where one can safely say that more than 80% of people between the ages of 12 and 25 frequently use SMS as a mode of communication with their peers.

Given such a huge impact that this mode of communication has on the population, researchers and policymakers ought to turn their attention to this topic and attempt to find answers to questions about the consequences of SMS on various issues including language, communication, and our general social behaviors.

In this article, we focus on the relationship between communications technology and language change. Does the emergence of these new communications technologies affect our language and communication habits? Does it change our language, bringing in new words and structures of expressions, and does it alter our general communication patterns? In short, is technology changing our language?

In examining these questions, based on observation and analysis of issues of language, literacy, and communications technology, we propose a model called *technology-conditioned approach to language change and use* (TeLCU). This approach projects the view that there is a causal relationship between the emergence of new tools and media of communication and the creation of new forms of language and communication. New tools and media of communication

demand the creation of new forms and ways of communication. These new forms compete with existing forms and ways of communication, leading to changes in the way we use language in its various forms, including spoken and written forms.

A potential anti-thesis to TeLCU is that there is little or no causal relationship between the prevalence of new media of communication and changes in the forms of language and ways in which we use human language. While not directly arguing against the idea that there is no causal relationship between the emergence of new technology, in general, and the new ways in which language is used, Kress (1998), for instance, observes that "... when we look at the far-reaching and deep changes in forms of communication which characterize the present-day e-mail and its changing forms of language, for instance, it is tempting to attribute these changes to some technological innovation but erroneous to do so" (p. 53). Luke (2000) also takes a similar position, believing that new forms of literacy practices do not simply emerge with technological change. Rather, "technologies always emerge as products of specific cultural practices, literate traditions, and the interests and desires of those groups who design and name them" (p. 83).

This article builds on this fruitful discussion in the literature on the relationship between new technologies and the way language is used within these technologies, and argues that there is indeed a significant causal relationship between communications technology and new language and communication practices or more specifically the evolution of new ways of using language. As Adams (1996) puts it, "the new technologies are themselves dramatically changing the nature of the language we use." Such an approach is also supported by Baron (1984), who concludes that "[n]o one in the computer industry has any hidden agenda for using hardware or software development to alter human language. Yet technology can indeed drive linguistic and social change" (p. 139).

Indeed, new practices of language and communication may be attributed to a set of unique properties in new communications technology. Modern digital communications technology is characterized by flexibility, connectivity, and interactivity (Blurton, 1999) that traditional forms of technology like radio and TV lack. In other words, it is possible to have many-to-many, many-to-one, one-to-many, and one-to-one modes of communication with modern digital

Figure 1. Data collection form for data providers

Collection of SMS Texts

Instructions to participant:

a. Please write out at least FIVE SMS texts which have already been stored in your mobile phone.

b. Please write clearly in the spaces provided below.

c. The texts should be rewritten ACCURATELY, especially

- Upper and lower case letters
- Punctuation marks

a.

b.

c.

d.

e.

information and communications technology (ICT). These features of digital ICTs enable them to have a more pervasive influence on forms and uses of language.

In pursuing these questions and research agenda, this article is organized as follows. After giving background statistics and other kinds of information about the evolution of SMS, we introduce and describe our data which comprise a corpus of about 500 SMS messages collected from Hong Kong youth in April 2002. Following this, we introduce the theoretical model of TeLCU, sketching out the ways in which we believe new technologies affect our language structure and use. We then look closely at the linguistic features of the corpus, noting peculiar instances of structure and usage. The article concludes with an outline of the implications for these linguistic and communicative changes in our society with particular reference to social and educational habits, and consequences for the design of new tools of communication.

THE DATA: SMS CORPUS¹

What is SMS?

Short message service, first introduced commercially in 1995, refers to the transmission of short text messages between mobile phone users. The first SMS message was a Christmas

greeting sent out in Britain in 1992. Today, SMS has emerged as one of the major digital communication media, with an estimation of over one billion messages exchanged per day around the world. SMS had a slow beginning in Hong Kong, mainly because of the inconvenience of inputting Chinese characters with mobile phone keypads. In addition to that, text messages could only be exchanged between subscribers of the same service provider. However, the SMS market has grown rapidly in Hong Kong. In December 2001, the six major service providers opened their networks to allow message exchanges across networks (SCMP, 2002). As of April 2004, over 200 million messages are exchanged every month in the territory.

Data Collection

The collection of textual data began with a questionnaire survey conducted in April 2002. The target subjects of the survey were Cantonese-speaking youngsters in Hong Kong who use English as a second language. Since text messages involve private correspondences, prior permission was sought from the data providers. At the end of the questionnaire, the respondent was asked whether he/she would be willing to make his/her SMS texts available for the study. The study (Bodomo, 2001-2002) successfully collected 487 messages from 87 out of the 92 respondents who participated in the questionnaire survey. Data providers were asked to write

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