Foreword

The digital revolution allows us to exchange vast amounts of information at incredible speed with any number of people at any place on the globe. These fascinating technological innovations have undoubtedly left their imprint on communicative behaviour around the world. New types of discourse and new communicative practices have arisen (along with malpractices, like cyberbullying). Applying, for example, the Jakobsonian communication model to private communication, the overall impression one gets is that it is especially the expressive and the phatic functions of language which have come to the fore in the digital age. An increasing number of people simply love to share their views, thoughts, experiences and feelings with others, whether they know the addressees or not, and whether the addressees want to know them or not. This apparently deep-rooted human urge to communicate, to let fellow human beings know of one's existence is something underlying much private digital communication these days. Computer-mediated communication (short: CMC) is uniquely suited for this purpose since it offers at the same time anonymity and the opportunity for sharing privacy (whether real or faked).

Digital communication thus offers a rich field of study for all disciplines studying human communication, including sociology, anthropology, psychology, communication studies and, above all, linguistics. Relevant questions raised by the professional linguist relate to communication, variation, language structure and, inevitably, language evolution. What, for example, is the effect of the various digital tools on communication? How do established discourse and social behaviours adapt to the new media (like beginning or ending a relationship via SMS), and which new genres or discourse behaviours develop? To what extent are these new CMC genres and innovative discursive practices universal, i.e. purely the result of responding to the medium-inherent possibilities and constraints, or influenced, maybe even significantly shaped, by the local discursive practices in different continents, cultures and societies? This is an issue of universal vs. glocalized CMC, as it were. What about special constraints of CMC at the workplace? Do different social groups make different use of CMC -- what about age, what about gender (e.g. gender-specific discourse and politeness strategies)? In which ways are the structural properties of languages affected by digital communication? What about different CMC styles and the increasingly diminishing gap between (spontaneous) spoken and (highly informal) written communication? On a more specific note, the interplay between economy and iconicity is worth exploring in CMC. These two are well-known as competing forces shaping language(s) in language typology and historical linguistics. In CMC, however, iconicity is not only an important means of expressiveness (think, for example, of emoticons), but it is clearly and more importantly at the service of economy – with economy being used in the double sense of being brief and, as a welcome side effect, potentially cheap (thus the often manipulated orthographies in texting or chat discourse).

The above questions concerning the effect of CMC on language structures and potential language changes relate to any language, of course, but they relate to English, in particular. There is no denying that digital communication has significantly strengthened the role of English as the global lingua franca. For specialists in the linguistics of English it is thus fascinating to explore (a) the ways in which English is put at the service of the various digital genres in different parts of the world, and (b) the extent to which these new English-medium discursive practices are affecting the structure of the English language (at least in the guise of International Standard English or English as a Lingua Franca) and may result in language change. Also interesting to explore it is how different varieties of English (stylistic, social, ethnic, regional) are exploited for the purposes of self-styling and identity construction.

The present volume offers insights into almost all of the above issues and others not even mentioned. Having consulted this Handbook, its readers will be in a much better position to judge the various dimensions of how, and to what extent, the digital revolution has affected human communication, and to what extent the revolution of communicative practices has brought (or may in due course bring) in its wake also major new steps in the evolution of language, especially of English. Moreover, and this is another asset of this volume, it lays at the feet of its readers the cultural richness and discursive diversity of the global CMC communities on five continents, for once not neglecting what is going on in developing parts of the world. It is obvious that, with such a vastly dynamic and fast moving target as CMC, this Handbook can offer no more than a snapshot of the current world of digital communication and possible, or even likely, developments in the near future, as for example the evolution of new genres such as webzines, the increasing importance of social participation technologies, location-aware social network services, or the virtual classroom of the present and future. But this snapshot is truly impressive and will no doubt be appreciated by a broad readership inside and outside the field of linguistics.

For professional linguists there is another bonus: they are not only interested in CMC affecting communicative behaviour and language structure, but also in the question what the theoretical and methodological toolkit of their discipline can bring to bear on the analysis of CMC, in general, and all the CMC-related issues raised above, in particular. In this respect, too, the present volume is rich and highly instructive. The theoretical models and methods employed for the various aspects of digital communication worldwide include more narrowly linguistic ones like Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday), Natural Semantic Metalanguage (Wieržbicka), Critical Discourse Analysis, and a host of pragmatic theories and methods relevant for analyzing conversational behaviour, as well as frameworks reaching beyond core linguistics into discourse studies, humour research, sociology, anthropology, and ethnography.

Finally then, if the author of this foreword was granted a humble wish, then he'd already ask for a second edition of this Handbook in 10 or 20 years time. It will be most interesting to see what will happen in one or more decades, once the currently still young medium (young relating to both to the age of the medium and the bulk of its most extensive users) has become an established medium used regularly and frequently by all age groups. Will communicative habits in CMC change? Will age be a potential factor in this? And what about technological advances and the no doubt fast-growing flatrate offers by mobile companies and internet providers? Alone or in combination, these two factors can safely be expected to do away with the money and space constraints which we are operating under now and which influence especially the SMS and CMC behaviour of young users (pupils, university students) and people with very low incomes. Take texting: if there is no longer any need in being brief because texting devices and mobile screens have become far more comfortable, then why continue being so extremely economic and use icons, abbreviations, acronyms, or cryptic letter/number combinations (like b4n 'bye for now'

or afaik 'as far as I know')? Maybe everything we immediately associate with texting today will be no more than a passing fashion, a vague memory for the adolescents of the year 2030—just as telephones with a dial and a cord, or personal computers with disk-drives and floppy disks for adolescents now.

But first we should take stock of the rich diversity of digital communication and discursive practices as they have developed around the globe in the nascent 21st century and enjoy the chapters in this most timely Handbook.

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