Foreword

In the name of progress, we have perhaps adopted computer technology at such a pace that few of us can slow down enough to ponder whether it is technology that is driving us, or whether it is that we have clear purpose in guiding where technology is heading. There is no better example than the interaction between human languages and technology. Dr. Adams Bodomo has been in an ideal position to observe, collect data, experiment, and analyze the phenomenon in one of the most dynamic places on earth, from a social and linguistic perspective: Hong Kong SAR, China. This book is the culmination of his research work on the relationship between human language and information technology there. To help appreciate its significance, let me explain my viewpoint on the role of technology in the Information Age.

The Lana Project (1971-1976) by Duane Rumbaugh, Sue Savage-Rumbaugh, and William Fields had the clear purpose of investigating the ability of chimpanzees to acquire language. The application of information technology resulted in the development of a computer-based language training system, as summarized on www.greatapetrust.org:

Lana is a female chimpanzee born in 1970 at the Yerkes National Primate Research Center. Her name derives from the LANguage Analogue (LANA) project, which sought to develop a computer-based language training system in an effort to investigate the ability of chimpanzees to acquire language. Lana joined the research as a subject when she was two and a half years old. The research was the first to interface a keyboard with a chimpanzee. At that time, it was believed that only humans could use symbols. Lana demonstrated that she could discriminate between lexigrams and associate them with ideas. As she progressed, she would sequence words and use them grammatically, later starting to create novel utterances in response to unplanned events that affected her life. For example, Lana would request that the research technician refill her computer vending device when it

was empty of treats, or request an item she had seen outside her room that the computer had no facility to provide to her. Lana exhibited language learning, and her experimental accomplishments were extraordinary. Equally important to her legacy is the lexigram keyboard, developed by Duane Rumbaugh, which has served as the primary communicative interface for ape language research at Decatur, Georgia for the last several decades. This keyboard is composed of three panels with approximately 384 noniconic arbitrary symbols. When the apes depress a key, the word represented there is spoken by a digital voice and the lexigram is displayed on a video screen.

This is a classic example of successful application of technology to serve a clearly stated purpose in computer-mediated communication (CMC). It starts with what one wishes to accomplish, to be followed by how technology can help. By contrast, the development of many of the information communication technology (ICT) in common use today are driven by space-age trends of miniaturization and speed, rather than any linguistic or literacy concerns. Designers strive mainly to package more processing power into ever-shrinking devices. It is then little surprise that the need to type on tiny keyboards and read on even smaller screens, often while one is in motion, leads to the distortion of standard languages. The merit and legitimacy of such emerging forms of language is subject of debate. However, whether viewed as evolution or deformation, one can hardly argue that they are by design and on purpose.

Meaningful purpose is the domain of education. With clear standards for what one wishes to accomplish, the question can then be asked on how CMC can help. Views on literacy can be orthodox (adherence to standard languages) or liberal (open to new language standards), but should not be allowed to drift, even in the guise of multiculturalism and diversity. In the perhaps unique and peculiar case of Hong Kong, the politically-correct and complacent claim of bi-literacy and tri-lingualism [两文三语] may have degenerated into a euphemism for deficiency in all. In the past, citizens motivated by conforming to colonial rule maintained language standards that afforded them the relative competitive advantage of knowing better English than their mainland compatriots, and better Chinese than Westerners. With sinking standards in English and the native Cantonese not being official Chinese, Hong Kong runs the risk of being marginalized in this age of globalization. Is code-mixing (the prevalent blending of Cantonese and English) the culprit? Is this predicament exacerbated by ICT-driven colloquialism? The fact that we have the technology to communicate with Lana the chimpanzee, does not mean that we all have to use CMC that way, do we? Can educators rise to the occasion to set clear purpose to improve language standards, with the help of CMC technology? For anyone intrigued by or having a stake in these critical issues, this book by Dr. Adams Bodomo provides

indispensible insight with background data and analysis for constructive discourse and deliberation.

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