Chapter 4

TeLCU

A Model for Technology-Conditioned Language and Literacy Change

INTRODUCTION

In line with our theme of investigating the relationship between new communications technology and the way we process (i.e. speak, read, and write) natural language, in chapter 2 I outlined different views about language forms and language use in the context of new technologies, and in chapter 3, I looked at new ways of reading and accessing reading materials with the advent of new computer-mediated communication platforms that promote the production of e-materials. We found in chapter 2 that there were two main views about the relationship between CMC technology and language. One was that CMC technologies cannot actually change language and that whatever transformations we observe are part of a larger social transformation; indeed that technology itself is part of social transformation. The second view was...
that technology actually has a causal effect on language structures and use, leading to the idea that new forms of language and new ways of using and processing language arise from the introduction of new communications technologies.

In this chapter I shall build on this discussion by proposing a model in which we can capture and conceptualize these perceived new forms of language and new ways of speaking. Indeed, I go further as to present a particular study of the way some bilingual speakers of Chinese and English create new forms of language through mobile phone texting (though the concept of mobile phone texting is taken up more comprehensively in chapter seven). I shall present and discuss concrete examples throughout the chapter.

The information age is characterized by a rapid introduction of new tools and media of communication. These new tools and media include digital products such as computers, the internet and the World Wide Web (WWW), means of computer-mediated communication like email (electronic mail) and ICQ (I-Seek-You), and mobile phones. A natural issue that arises then is a study of the relationship between these new tools and human language for which they serve as media of transmission. As we encountered in chapter 2, answers to a set of questions are necessary to comprehend the issues involved. Does the introduction of these media influence the way we understand, analyze, and use language in its various forms? If so, what is the nature of this influence? Does it involve different uses of existing elements of language or does the prevalence of these media lead to new forms of language and new ways of using language?

This chapter aims to address these questions and propose some answers. In examining these questions, based on observation and analysis of issues of language, literacy, and communications technology, I 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 literacy. 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 (1998:53), for instance, observes that ‘...when we look at the far-reaching and deep changes in forms of communication which characterize the present-day email and its changing forms of language, for instance, it is tempting to attribute these changes
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