Chapter 7

The Grammar of Mobile Phone Written Language

INTRODUCTION: TECHNOLOGY AND LANGUAGE CHANGE

In the last chapter, I concentrated mainly on mobile phone voice communication. In this chapter, I will focus on mobile phone text communication. Mobile phone texting or communication through short message service (SMS) started slowly, as we saw in chapter 6, but has quickly 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, if not more among some segments of users like young people. 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

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newspaper, the South China Morning Post (SCMP) edition of April 11, 2004 indicates 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 computer, the Internet or other digital technology-mediated communication, SMS seems to be causing a silent evolution or even a revolution with regards to the linguistic and communication habits of people all over the world. 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 policy makers 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 behaviours.

In this chapter, I focus on the relationship between communications technology and language change, with particular reference to mobile phone texting. Does the emergence of these new communications technologies affect our language and communication habits on mobile phones and beyond? 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, I have proposed a model called Technology-conditioned approach to Language Change and Use (TeLCU) in chapter 4. As stated in that chapter, 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.

This chapter 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) which 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).
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