Communication and Technology—the Literacy Paradox (Pp. 359-366)

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Abstract

This paper explores some of the many gains achieved by the new technologies and points out some practices that these new technologies encourage which are already undermining our literacy and redefining our cultural values. It then points to measures that can be taken to ensure that our boom in technology does not become our doom, does not institutionalize illiteracy or drag us back to mediocrity. The paper is anchored on the rationalist perspective that it is possible to combine a descriptive and prescriptive approach to language use in order to enhance communication and encourage literacy. It accepts that it is a mistake to attempt to "embalm the language," it must change and adapt, and so acknowledges the need for flexibility. But it equally cautions that the need to communicate, the need to get one's message across, or to find self-expression, should not get in the way of developing skills in literacy, such as using proper grammar and punctuation. It notes that in some aspects of language use, there are simple rights and wrongs; and these should be observed, if we are to uphold and preserve our literacy.

Introduction

When the Polish-born Alfred Korzybski wrote the book *Science and Sanity* in 1933, the world was yet to discover the word-processor. The world of digital communications technology was in its infancy, if it existed at all. Besides, Korzybski was a pathologist of language. His interest in the

continuity of culture led him to study the means of culture-transmission in society. He probed the sane and insane ways of speaking and understanding, and the social ills that result from certain forms of linguistic insanity. In his work, he advocated training in linguistic hygiene.

It is in the nature of communication that all discourse is mediated in one way or another. In the case of face-to-face communication, articulatory It organs and muscles mediate to produce sound, which is then converted into neural impulses via the ear. When people have difficulty speaking or hearing, they sometimes replace one bodily medium with another; for instance, they may use hand and facial gesture instead of voice, as in sign language. Or they may lip-read rather than listen to sound. With modern technology, it is also possible to augment some information-processing functions with such things as artificial larynxes, electronic voices, hearing aids, alphabet boards, or ear implants. Bioengineering and computer technology are rapidly blurring the line between the communication media provided by the "natural" world and the human body, and the "artificial" media (Johnstone 2002: 180). All these are laudable. But it is in the area of communicating in "virtual" environments such as e-mail; on-line chat rooms and other real-time electronic means that modern communications technology has had its greatest impact.

E-messaging and Communication

Truss (2003:17) rightly observes that "in the 1970s, no educationist would have predicted the explosion in universal written communication caused by the personal computer, the internet and the key-pad of the mobile phone." These new media have enhanced communication, self-expression and interpersonal relationships in ways hitherto unimagined. Aside from the self-evident fact that the modern communications technology has raised the status of instant personal (and even group) communication to the level of mass communication, it has also created a new generation of writers, authors and text creators. Now everyone is a writer. Everyone is posting film reviews on Amazon or Yahoo that go like this:

> I watched this film [*About a Boy*] a few days ago expecting the usual hugh Grant bumbling . . . character Ive come to loathe/expect over the years. I was thoroughly surprised. This film was great, one of the best films i have seen in a long time. The film focuses around one man who starts going to a single parents meeting, to meet women, one problem He doesnt have a child.

The prevalence of key-pad text messaging on the mobile phone has, in addition to creating instant writers and authors of various text-types, also achieved what educators have long labored to teach—how to write a summary, or précis. This way of writing is tied to the constraints and possibilities concerned with the text messaging media (of course it is claimed that some modern phones can accommodate more than 160 characters, including spaces on a page). The effect of all of this is that communication has the potential to become more straightforward through this medium. It can thus be argued that if users of this technology are by virtue of the constraints imposed by it, produce information in concise summary of essential points, statements, or facts, they will get used to it over time, and will apply the same basic strategies in other forms of communication. Except for word-initial letters, capitalization of anything in e-mail discourse represents raised voice volume in speech, and conveys metamessages of anger or urgency.

Research also shows that e-messaging via text has encouraged a high level of creativity, as interactants seek to make up for the involvement possibilities in face-to-face oral discourse which create interpersonal relation, but which are lacking in texts. For example, to display aspects of interpersonal involvement that might be displayed visually in face-to-face interaction, such as emotional affect or irony, people using the e-text media might employ creative transformations of the writing system. For example, Katoka (1997:109) shows how young Japanese women use "invented punctuation marks, pictorial signs, and intentionally transformed letters" to express emotion in letters to their friends. Some writers also use orthographic manipulations to represent intonation and supply other paralinguistic cues (such as block capitalization). In more recent times, e-mail and mobile phone "emoticoms" serve a similar function. Maynor (1978:49) also describes a number of other ways in which orthography is manipulated in e-mail to "make writing more like speech." Johnstone (191) observes too that, in some settings like in the academia, e-mail messages take the form of "pseudo-conversation," with subject headers like "COFFEEEEEEEEEEEEE!"

It is even argued that the electronic liberate interlocutors from some of the stereotyping and media discrimination that can occur in face-to-face talk. People interacting by computer (say in chat rooms or mail groups) in certain contexts cannot see each other and may not have to provide their real names or any information about such things as race, age, sex, or appearance. Thus they might be less likely to interact through a screen of predetermined

assumptions about their interlocutors' social status, authoritativeness, sexual availability, and so on. By reducing the number of social identity and status, so the argument goes, computer mediated communication has the potential to democratize interaction (Spears and Lea, 1994; Turkle, 1995).

On the other hand it is also claimed, according to Johnstone (191), that computer-mediated communication can be more "depersonalized" than face-to-face interaction. People whose immediate stimulus is written words and who are face to face with a computer screen rather than a human being sometimes seems to orient more to the medium than to the audience. For example, there is evidence that people are more willing to divulge sensitive information such as debt, psychosis, and alcohol use in a computerized psychiatric interview than in an interview with a human, even though they know that a human will eventually see the information (Greist and Klein, 1980).

E-text Messaging and Literacy

The innovations in writing brought about by e-mail and other electronic means of communicating through texts have brought with them huge implications to literacy. Today, contrary to educational expectations, people who know very little, or nothing about language and writing spend all their leisure hours attempting to string sentences together for the edification of others. And there is no editing on the internet. And as observed by Truss, "ignorance of grammar and punctuation obviously doesn't affect a person's ability to communicate messages such as "C U later." But when such messages are longer, they may turn out much like the writing of the infant Pip in Dickens' *Great Expectations:*

> MI DEER JO I OPE U R KRWITE WELL I OPE I SHAL SON BE HABELL 4 2 TEEDGE U JO AN THEN WE SHORL B SO GLODD AN WEN I M PRENGTD 2 U JO WOT LARX AN BLEVE ME INF XN PIP.

The point is that, in e-mail text messages, the rules of punctuation as we were taught in school, are hardly observed. Some may argue that as long as the message gets transmitted, it does not matter whether proper punctuation is used or not. But Truss observes:

> If punctuation is the stitching of language, language comes apart, obviously, and all the buttons fall off. If

punctuation provides the traffic signals, words bang into each other and everyone ends up in Minehead. . . . And if you take the courtesy analogy, a sentence no longer holds the door open for you to walk in, but drops it in your face as you approach (20).

Indeed, without punctuation, there is no reliable way of communicating meaning. Here is a comparison of two sentences that demonstrate what can happen in mispunctuation, and re-punctuation. One was an e-mail, but the message was not what was intended:

> A woman, without her man, is
> nothing.
> A woman: without her, man is nothing.

The real crisis is that these trends are reflecting in the texts that students produce in written tests and examinations. For example, an evaluation was made of the examination answer scripts of about 180 students in the Department of English in 2005 (100-300 level). Out of this number, over 90% were observed to have some form of difficulty with the English verb, especially the past tense form of verbs. Most had problems with verbs beyond tense. Samples drawn from tests administered to 200-400 level students showed that the problem was not only with the verb and tense. It was about everything else that constitutes correct usage: spelling, punctuation, concord, and logic. What is especially instructive in the context of the present discussion is that many of the examples indicated that the observed weaknesses were symptoms of the effect of e-mail and text messaging.

One wrote almost a whole page without any punctuation, except, perhaps the empty space to separate words (some of the time). The following example is typical:

> *am I superman*

Here the sentence begins with a character in lowercase, the sentence also contains a grammatical error (the article "a" is omitted) and ends without a question mark, typical e-text messaging stuff. And when they used punctuation marks, they demonstrated what Lynne Truss (2003:36) would describe as "a significant milestone on the road to punctuation anarchy." Take the apostrophe for instance:

> *The wine drunk by the boy's intoxicates*

In one answer script, *but* was repeatedly spelt as *butt,* and "writing" as <u>*writting.*</u> And in one instance, a student wrote, *what u did,* using the text messaging shorthand 'u' for the second person pronoun 'you,' and wrote the definite article 'the' as *ē* in "*ē* man'.

The Cultural Influence of Mobile Telephony

By far the most pervasive offshoots of the new technologies, mobile communication technology has had a tremendous impact on people worldwide. It has had a significant impact on business, leisure, travel, health and security, among others. It has raised the quality of life for many, and has become among other things a style, a way of life.

Discourse analyst (Johnstone 2002:181) has said that medium and discourse form may be related. For instance, discourse medium and interpersonal relations might be related. Mobile communication as a medium has influenced and in many cases redefined cultural patterns in many communities. A traditional telephone conversation was carried out following what was known as "telephone manners." These manners included salutations, pre-closings and leave-takings. Students were taught that the first word to utter at the start of a telephone conversation is "hello," and that a telephone conversation was considered completed only when leave-takings were initiated and acknowledged.

Today, social classes and relations of power, especially in asymmetrical relationships, seem to have been altered a great deal by this medium. For example, in many cultures in Africa, face-to-face conversation between a socially inferior person and his superior would assume predictable patterns that would make clear who has institutional power. The socially inferior person would not, for instance, initiate the leave-taking turn. But because of pecuniary considerations, people of all ages who use the mobile telephone would routinely sign off a conversation arbitrarily, sometimes giving the impression that there is a technical fault. Users of this medium have oriented themselves to this trend, so that such 'unmannerly telephone habits' are hardly noticeable and sanctionable. Seedhouse (2004:91) argues that "it is the use of . . . particular linguistic forms, topics, and types of social actions which talk the interculture into being." According to this view, it is the medium that will shape and reorient culture. However, another point of view sees the relationship as much more complex. According to this view, "talk is

reflexively related to context, culture and macro social structures, and talk is certainly shaped by culture."

There is also a psycho-clinical dimension to the use of mobile phones. It has become an addiction for many. Some psychiatrists have described this new "addiction" to mobile phones as the 21st century's new pathology. According to a study by the Special Center for Treatment and Rehabilitation From Social Addictions (CETRAS) and reported in Spain's newspaper *El País,* the most vulnerable are "single women aged 16-25, who are shy, immature and frustrated." The "addiction" leads to "an insatiable need to use mobile phones to call and send messages," says psychiatrist Blas Bombín. When they cannot use their cell phone, they suffer from "anxiety and irritability." Cell-phone "addiction" not only affects relationships with others but it is also expensive. CETRAS cites cases of patients who own eight mobile phones at the same time and who owe "as much as 800€ [$1,000] per month in phone bills."

The Daily Yomiuri of Japan carried the headline: "Attachment to Mobile Phones Reaching Point of Addiction." According to the paper, "young people appear to view their mobile phones as parts of their bodies and may even start to panic if they are separated from their phones." In the fear of being cut off from others, many keep their mobile phones on all the time, everywhere. If they "do not receive any messages on their mobile phones, they feel uneasy and irritable, and start to feel they are not needed by anybody." This uneasiness impels them to answer all incoming text messages immediately, which is often not necessary. The experience is similar in most countries where this technology has become available. The implication of this is that people are becoming more and more alienated to people, and getting more and more oriented towards machines. Sociability is declining at the expense of greater affinity to the new communication technologies. The question is, would we consider such effects a gain or pain to the core values underlying human communication?

Conclusion
Overall, the new technologies have enhanced interaction but diminished interpersonal relationships. They have de-personalized communication and interaction. Above all, the cultural force of human interaction is constantly redefined. However, the real challenge to instructors on language and communication is how they will re-engineer pedagogical approaches to address the emerging trends. E-text messaging encourages text creation,

enhances self-expression, and encourages interactive communicative behaviour. On the other hand, it weakens the desire to acquire the appropriate writing skills. It encourages the entrenchment of unorthodox, sometimes outright irresponsible text-types.

One solution is to design software that would provide more possibilities. For example, the e-mail platform could be enhanced to accommodate such text-types as italics and bold fonts. "Emoticoms" could be designed to be more vivid, more visually identifiable, and more varied, as this will provide more choices for users. Above all, literacy pedagogy must include the realization of the negative effects of a pervasive culture of text messaging, and specifically add such concomitants to their curricula. Finally, health professionals and those interested in mental health must turn attention to the addictive realities of mobile telephony and search for ways of combating it.

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