Klára Sándor

Back to Natural

Although the mobile telephone has spread at a sweeping pace and the ways in which the use of the mobile can influence language is a recurring issue of public interest concerning mobile telephony, surprisingly few papers on the linguistic aspects of mobile telephony have been published. Most publications on this subject are case studies which deal with some partial issues,[1] while a more general approach to this topic is less frequent.[2]

In this paper, I shall sum up the results of a six-year study on the relationship between mobile telephony and language, particularly those results which I think may attract the greatest public interest or can be considered the most important in relation to the theory of language.

After briefly describing the linguistic properties of mobile communication, first I will consider the question raised most frequently, i.e., whether the mobile telephone "deteriorates" language. Then I will discuss the altered relation between literacy and orality; finally, I will propose my views

[1] See, for example, Bella Ellwood-Clayton, "Virtual Strangers: Young Love and Texting in the Filipino Archipelago of Cyberspace", in Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *Mobile Democracy: Essays on Society, Self and Politics*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2003, pp. 225–235; Rich Ling, "The Socio-Linguistics of SMS: An Analysis of SMS Use by a Random Sample of Norwegians", in R. Ling and P. E. Pedersen (eds.), *Mobile Communications: Re-Negotiation of the Social Sphere*, Surrey, UK: Springer, 2005, pp. 335–349; Ylva Hård af Segerstad, "Language Use in Swedish Mobile Text Messaging", in Ling and Pedersen, *op. cit.*, pp. 313–334; Vicki Yung, "The Construction of Symbolic Values of the Mobile Phone in the Hong Kong Chinese Print Media", in Ling and Pedersen, *op. cit.*, pp. 351–366. For openings used in mobile conversations, see Emanuel A. Schegloff, "Beginnings in the Telephone", in James E. Katz and Mark Aakhus (eds.), *Perpetual Contact: Mobile Communication, Private Talk, Public Performance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 284–300.

[2] See Klára Sándor, "Mental Safety in Your Pocket", in Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *A Sense of Place: The Global and the Local in Mobile Communication*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2005, pp. 179–190; "The Fall of Linguistic Aristocratism", in Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *Mobile Communication: Essays on Cognition and Community*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2003, pp. 71–82; Paul Levinson, *Cellphone: The Story of the World's Most Mobile Medium and How It Has Transformed Everything!*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

on why we like the mobile phone as much as we do. All three issues will be examined from a strictly linguistic perspective – other social (sociological, economic, political, or social psychological) effects of mobile communication and the philosophical interpretation of such effects are discussed in an increasing body of studies, several of which were published in the same series which incorporates the present volume.

I built my conclusions on a corpus of about 4,000 SMS messages I myself sent or received, 250 hours of chats through WAP, two "SMS diaries"[3], twelve focus-group discussions on habits of using the mobile, and observations of users' behaviour in public settings (streets, public transit vehicles, trains, airports, workplace meetings, banks, shops, etc.).

What are the characteristics of mobile communication? This may seem a trivial issue, but questions concerning mobile use show that it is not: there is no such thing as a single mobile genre – for either voice calls or written messages. Similarly to other versions of natural human communication mediated through different channels, the genre and style of a conversation in mobile communication is also defined by the relations of communicating partners to each other, to the actual context, and to the occasion as well as to the topic of conversation.

It is true, however, that the communications channel itself influences communication: there are certain topics, functions, and styles which are more frequent in and linguistic features which are more characteristic of mobile communication. Some mobile users claim that they use their telephone only in emergency cases. A British survey[4] revealed that many people also attribute the label "emergency" to cases when calling someone or writing a message is urged by an internal, affective condition rather than some external circumstance. The mobile, primarily SMS messaging, is also often used for courtship:[5] to initiate new contacts, maintain existing ones, or break off worn-out relationships. In these cases, the channel also serves as protection and, compared to a personal or telephone conversation, provides us with more time in which to "save face", to think about

[3] Focus-group discussions revealed that one of the participants kept a diary of SMS messages written and received each day, while another participant had an acquaintance who did the same. Both of them were ready to allow me to look into their diaries and thus help me with my research – I would like to take this opportunity to thank them.

[4] Kate Fox, "Evolution, Alienation and Gossip: The Role of Mobile Telecommunications in the 21st Century", 2001, http://www.sirc.org/publik/gossip.shtml.

[5] See also data presented by Bella Ellwood-Clayton, "Virtual Strangers: Young Love and Texting in the Filipino Archipelago of Cyberspace", *loc. cit.*

the proper answer; in almost every situation we can send or receive SMS messages without the risk of others interfering in our private sphere. Narration is another frequent mobile genre. Here the primary goal is to create a sense of co-presence, sharing experiences at the time and pace of events. These messages may be supplemented with pictures and audio or video recordings. Narration often turns into a longer "report" comprising multiple messages sent at certain intervals. Another similar and frequent mobile genre can be called "little nothings": we use these calls, or, more frequently, SMS messages to inform others about ephemeral events, emotional flashes, and the trivial things of our everyday lives.

The conventions of traditional letter writing and fixed-line calls do not apply to mobile communication unless we write to or call someone who has not recorded us in his or her address book (or we believe they haven't). The mobile performs sender or caller identification based on the stored contact list, so the fixed-line openings which define the called and the caller are usually omitted. However, a new development seems to have emerged: callers often ask for confirmation that their calls are not inappropriate. This resembles the apology formulas which are often used in Hungary to open fixed-line calls ("Excuse me for disturbing you", "I'm sorry to disturb you at home", etc.) but it is less formal ("Am I disturbing you?", "Can we talk now?", "Bad timing?", "Where are you?", "Is it OK now?", etc.). In fact, relatives and close friends rarely use such formulas because they assume that the persons called would not answer if they thought that the call was inappropriate, or they would tell if that was the case. For SMS messages, there is no need for salutation or signature. The absence of openings and closings commonly used in traditional letters or fixed-line calls makes us feel as if we were engaged in a continuous conversation with each other because our dialogues are not closed and thus they do not have to be re-opened. In fact, we can write to the same person several weeks later without making it clear in the salutation that a new conversation has begun: we can pick up a dialogue which has been "sleeping" for some time.

The most frequently mentioned property of SMS messaging is that the rules of orthography may be ignored. We can omit letters or spaces between words, capitalization and punctuation, and we can use abbreviations and acronyms. People who write SMS messages know that their partners will attribute misspellings to rapid typing, and thus they do not correct these errors or they may even retain them in the text to suggest informality. Writers often use phonetic spelling in order to imitate speech. Emotivity may appear in a more expressed form in SMS messages: emotions can be expressed by combined punctuation marks, emoticons (smileys)

and interjections (*Come on! Cool! Hey! Ookay*, etc.). Some SMS exchanges show dialogic organization: partners often exchange messages in several turns, which resemble the units of face-to-face conversations. Communication is much less explicit than usual in written genres because partners consider the content of previous turns to be parts of their shared preliminary knowledge in the same way as people involved in face-to-face conversations do. Quite often, the discourse markers usual in conversations (e.g., *so, now, well*, etc.) appear in SMS messages as well. Composition is frequently elliptical even in "single" messages (those which do not trigger further turns or are not included in an SMS dialogue) and it may shift towards a "telegraphic" style: articles and pronouns which are redundant with respect to understanding may be omitted. Wording is less planned and the strand of thoughts is as spontaneous as it is in the more informal genres of speech. Consequently, most SMS messages are in fact written texts which have the features of orality.

The linguistic features described above are often interpreted as signs of "language deterioration" in public discourse. The primary reason for such concerns is the presumption in the normative approach to language that language has a perfect variant, which is apparent mainly in written texts but should be used in spoken language as well. Although this approach is rather common, it is by no means reasonable from a linguistic point of view. Without diversity, no language can fulfil the functions in which it is used: we can express identity or group membership and represent the variety of relations between us and various possibilities of interpretation only through a language that lives in multiple varieties, and, as is the case in other evolutionary processes, only a language that lives in multiple varieties is capable of changing.[6] The diversity of spelling in SMS messages – from standard orthography to orthographic slang – is an expression of the natural functions of language.[7] One fails to learn correct spelling not because diacritics are omitted in SMS messages, since such omission may also be characteristic of others who follow the standard rules

[6] For a discussion concerning the evolutionary nature of language change, see Klára Sándor and György Kampis, "Nyelv és evolúció" ["Language and Evolution"], *Replika* 40 (2000), pp. 125–143.

[7] Nonetheless, neither the common abbreviations of medieval codices nor the "deficient" keyboard of typewriters used earlier, lacking keys for long vowels in Hungarian, had an influence on language. For the latter, see Susan Pintzuk, Miklós Kontra, Klára Sándor and Anna Borbély, *The Effect of the Typewriter on Hungarian Reading Style* (Working Papers in Hungarian Sociolinguistics, No. 1), Budapest: Linguistics Institute, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 1995, also accessible at http://www.nytud.hu/buszi/wp1/index.html.

of orthography in their formal texts. "Badly written" text in SMS messages is often a deliberate wink at the partner which indicates that "we are in close contact with each other, so we can afford relaxed communication". It does not apply to orthography only: the diffusion of mobile telephony does not "debase" language. Change in language is a much more complex process than it is considered to be by many. Each instance of change is influenced by a host of factors; the emergence of a technological device itself is not enough to bring about significant changes in language.

Concerns about mobile communication are in fact fears of orality. The above discussion on the linguistic features of mobile communication revealed that mobile conversations fulfil the same functions as everyday personal conversations. The mobile telephone allows us to occasionally manage tasks to be done and provide information, but mostly we chat, court, share our experiences with others, and speak about "little nothings" to each other. As to the written language of the mobile, Bolter's statement about computer-mediated written communication[8] also applies to SMS messaging, i.e., in this case too, the mental model for text-writing is the one which is associated with spoken rather than traditional written text. Therefore, some aspects of mobile communication and computer literacy make it clear that the advent of the era which Walter J. Ong described as the age of "secondary orality"[9] is inevitably here. Ong dates the era of secondary orality from the diffusion of radio and the telephone, when orality regained a greater role in communicating information, as opposed to earlier times when literacy was the primary channel of mediating non-commonplace information. The age of internet-networked and mobile-networked existence has some additional great novelties: in addition to permanent availability provided by mobile technology, the multimediality and interactivity that characterize face-to-face conversations have also reappeared in communication mediated by technological devices.

These changes should be welcomed rather than feared: they foster the return of the communicational context which is the most natural for humans.

A significant portion of theories concerning the development of human language share the idea that the emergence of language is closely related to early humans' demands for community. Dunbar[10] argues that

---

[8] Jay David Bolter, *Writing Space: Computers, Hypertext, and the Remediation of Print*, 2nd ed., Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001, p. 73.

[9] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, London: Methuen, 1982.

[10] Robin Dunbar, *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996; see also Dunbar, "Are There Cognitive Constraints on an E-World?", in Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *Mobile Communication*, pp. 71–82.

initially, language had the same role in bonding groups and coalitions for humans as grooming does for primates. Based on the anthropological changes in hominids, Mithen assumes that language emerged from social intelligence, which in the primate's brain is responsible for dealing with social situations.[11] Worden argues that the internal representations of language meanings derive from primates' representations of social situations,[12] while Donald considered increasing demands for communication to be the driving force behind both major cognitive transitions (the shift from episodic to mimetic culture, and the shift from mimetic to mythic culture) which brought forth speech,[13] and logically, communicational needs are inseparable from living in a community. The study of current language functionality also supports the primacy of the social function in language use. Language can be applied reasonably well to communicate simple information, but it is less ready to handle descriptions concerning spatiality, senses, and emotions. However, it is highly suitable for building and maintaining social contacts (through "chatting") and influencing others (through making an impression, expressing our opinion of others, and telling stories).[14] Due to these properties, language plays a decisive role in gaining and retaining power, for its abstract nature allows us to deceive others and lie.

Initially, literacy served to record, communicate, and transfer information, carrying with it great authority, since only the chosen few could become literati. When religious scripts appeared, the sacralization of written texts gave additional authority to the text itself. Phonetic writings, which bind the reader through assigning a sound value to each letter, gave an opportunity for the languages of written text and speech to diverge. In European-type cultures, value was also associated with the discrepancies between spoken and written texts: given the authority of literacy deriving from multiple sources, the language used in writing was interpreted as "good", as opposed to the "spoiled" spoken language. The rise of philology and the development of textual traditions strengthened the feeling that language might deteriorate. Written text is tangible, graspable, visible, and interpretable, so it can become a standard, and the literature of great forebears may serve as an example to follow. The durability of writ-

[11] Steven Mithen, *The Prehistory of the Mind: The Cognitive Origins of Art, Religion and Science*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1996.

[12] Robert Worden, "The Evolution of Language from Social Intelligence", in James Hurford, Michael Studdert-Kennedy and Chris Knight (eds.), *Approaches to the Evolution of Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 148–166.

[13] Merlin Donald, *Origins of Modern Mind: Three Stages in the Evolution of Culture and Cognition*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991.

[14] Jean Aitchison, *The Seeds of Speech*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

ten text implies that writing is an authentic, i.e., ideal, incarnation of language, while speech is only a meagre shadow of the same. Today, this Platonic tradition of thinking still lives with us: one of the shared myths of European and American cultures is that the text used in writing can be considered the true form of language, while speech is a bad version.[15] This is present in the common idea of "correct" or standard language use,[16] in school practices, and it also determined research in twentieth-century linguistics, which is reflected in Saussure's dichotomy of *langue* and *parole*[17] as well as Chomsky's proposition of the "ideal speaker-hearer".[18] The diffusion of printing gave impetus to the power of literacy, increasing the asymmetry of the linguistic situation. Printing shops initiated the reasonable, practical demand that spelling should be codified – however, due to the perspective developed earlier, they began to interpret the rules of orthography as rules applicable to speech as well. This situation was finalized by general schooling, where increasingly wider social strata were taught that speech is defective compared to writing, hence, when speaking, they should avoid forms characteristic of speech.

This exclusive authority of literacy collapses in the age of secondary orality. Data are recorded and information is disseminated via technological devices which can reproduce speech; on the other hand, our networked status allows us to write and distribute much more effortlessly than just two decades ago. Texts written on computers can be modified easily, we do not have to wait months until new information is published in print, and errors can be corrected immediately. The spread of audio texts as a tendency is accompanied by the inexpensiveness and simplicity of producing written texts and its consequence that contact-maintaining written texts which are mediated by the new information technologies belong to the domain of orality rather than literacy. The texts of e-mail and SMS messages, and especially forums, chats, and instant messages are spoken texts in a written form – a feature which makes them suitable for maintaining and expressing very close human relationships.

At this point, we can raise the question of why we like the mobile phone as much as we do. If we consider this question from a linguistic point

[15] Lars-Gunnar Andersson and Peter Trudgill, *Bad Language*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990.

[16] Dennis R. Preston and Nancy A. Niedzielski, *Folk Linguistics*, Berlin – New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2000, pp. 18 f.

[17] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, ed. by C. Bally and A. Sechehaye, Lausanne and Paris: Payot, 1916.

[18] Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1965.

of view, then first of all we should emphasize the personal nature and security that are characteristic of mobile communication.

The personal character of language use in mobile communication derives from the fact that, unlike the fixed-line telephone, the mobile phone is an "accessory" which belongs to a person rather than a place. Mobile users can turn their phones into a completely personal device which stores their contacts, calendars, agendas, and allows them to assign distinct ring tones to various caller groups or individual callers, have customized background images or logos on the display, create a personal log through organizing messages sent and received, store their favourite photos or audio and video recordings in different folders, and even carry entire books with them at all times. With a mobile phone, we can move out of earshot of other people, and there is little risk that strangers can overhear our conversations, listen to our voice messages, or read SMS messages sent to us. Most mobile-owners always take their phones with them and switch them off very rarely or never; wherever it would be bothersome or inconvenient to receive a call, they simply turn the silent mode on. This leaves a channel of communication open to silent activities: texting, reading e-mails, news, WAP magazines or weather forecasts, checking transportation timetables, and, with a headset, it is even possible to listen to voice messages or radio programmes, and watch TV channels through WAP. It is a natural offspring of this personal character that the mobile phone as a channel is more closely associated with more informal styles and thus it is more capable of mediating intimacy than any other non-personal channel: mobile communication is almost as personal as – in certain cases, it is even more personal than – face-to-face conversations.

The possibility of asking for help and giving information in urgent matters evidently provides a sense of security for mobile users. The mobile may become a protective shield when we do not wish to talk to others.[19] We can also use a book, a magazine, or a Discman for this purpose; however, the mobile not only raises a wall between its user and the physical environment, but at the same time it offers the opportunity to contact people who are emotionally important.

[19] Lone females often use the mobile as a symbolic bodyguard in bars and cafés in order to protect themselves from "predatory males" (see Fox, *op. cit.*). A research study revealed that one-third of American students had already pretended a mobile conversation in order to avoid a personal encounter – i.e., in such cases the mobile served as a mechanism similar to crossing the street. See Naomi Baron, "Adjusting the Volume: Technology and Multitasking in Discourse Control", in James E. Katz (ed.), *Mobile Communication and Social Change in a Global Context*, MIT Press, in press; the manuscript can be downloaded as http://www.american.edu/tesol/Baron-Final%20Version-Adjusting%20the%20Volume.pdf.

This feature basically turns the mobile phone into a virtual lifeline of emotions. According to the findings of evolutionary psychology, today's human brain and mind still have the same properties which evolved in response to the circumstances our ancestors lived in at the dawn of humankind. Dunbar argues that the human brain is "wired" for engaging in social relationships within groups of not much larger than 150 people, and humans feel socially comfortable in smaller groups of about 30–40 people, while they are in really close relationships with only 10–15 people at a time. These mental conditions determine human behavioural patterns even today. We are biologically designed for living in small, close-knit social networks, even though most people cannot live in such networks in modern urban societies. This leads to greater variability in individual language use, which can, however, also indicate an increase in linguistic insecurity.[20] Therefore, it is true in linguistic terms as well as social, psychological, and biological terms, that modern industrial society is not a pleasant environment for humans.

In an urban setting, modern technology allows us to satisfy our community needs more effectively than previously, and we can again construct the close-knit social networks which provide security, without geographical barriers. The ability to make contacts freely, without restrictions in space or time, allows us to immediately inform the members of our community not only about "prioritized" affairs but regarding matters which are really important, the minute events and moods, and share the details of our lives with them. Mostly, the shared knowledge of such trivia or "little nothings" establishes a common background against which close social bonds can be built. The related messages and the answers with which we react to them are emotional "photos": they create the experience of co-presence, i.e., that "we are there" if needed, both at the best and worst moments, even if only virtually – as if we still lived in small groups where we could almost always see each other, know about things that happen to others, how they feel, what they are pondering, and how they relate to other people at that moment. Therefore, new-generation technologies, such as the internet and particularly mobile telephony, can be very effective antidotes to the senses of alienation, loneliness, and isolation, and they can help prevent mental illness.[21]

---

[20] Lesley Milroy, *Language and Social Networks*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1980.

[21] For details, see Klára Sándor, "Mental Safety in Your Pocket", in Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *A Sense of Place*. Other researchers have reached the same conclusion. For example, Joshua Meyrowitz sees people networked through technology as "global nomads in the

Let us now return to the linguistic features of mobile communication. These features particularly reinforce the personal character and sense of security, because each variant of style represents as well as constructs the relations between factors of the communicational situation, including the degree of relational proximity between speech partners. Informal style may be a sign of a close relationship, but such style itself can also induce speech partners to deem their relationship to be close. The preferred topics of mobile communication, the characteristics of the code and channel-related properties all point to the informal end of the style scale. As most genres which are characteristic of mobile communication can be associated with informality, they imply that communicating partners are in a close relationship with each other. So the mobile telephone not only satisfies our desire for maintaining contact with others whom we consider important, but it also influences communication in a way which makes us feel closer to people with whom we happen to be communicating. Therefore, mobile telephony reinforces our primary human relationships through assuming a personal character and providing permanent availability as well as creating a particular language use.

digital veldt", and points to the fact that non-geographically based, virtual groups act together for economic, social, and political purposes – just like small tribes did in ancient days. See "Global Nomads in the Digital Veldt", in Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *Mobile Democracy*, pp. 91–102. Following Dunbar's above-mentioned work, Fox argues that "gossiping" is crucial to forging social bonds within a community, and she considers the mobile phone to be "the new garden fence", i.e., the medium of transferring gossip. See Fox, *op. cit.*