The Linguistic Creativity of Asynchronous Discourse in the New Media Age

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Email – SMS – MMS

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1 Introduction

1.1 The Topic: A General Survey

Whereas nowadays private letters, messages and notes are often type-written, there was a time when personal letters were never typed but always handwritten because “type-written communication was reserved for and associated with business correspondence” (Meyers 1994: 4). It used to be much more personal to write them by hand as “a note received in your own handwriting seems to convey your feelings much more personally than one that is written on a word processor or typewriter” (Meyers 1994: 4). With the advent of email¹ and text messages (SMS), however, private letters and messages are no longer exclusively handwritten but also typed. Thereby, and not only from the nostalgic point of view of traditionalists, it is often regretted that these letters and messages have lost a certain personality and individuality, which, of course, cannot be denied: whereas the appearance and legibility of a handwritten letter as well as its writing paper make a non-electronic letter personal, these cues are not to the same extent present in emails,

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¹ Even though Jansen’s NetLingo Internet Dictionary postulates the hyphenised spelling of the word email, i.e. “e-mail”, arguing that email is short for “electronic mail”, it will be spelt without a hyphen in this volume for the simple reason that the language of CMC tends to be reduced, so hyphens do not fit in the concept of shortenings. Also, it can be recognised that people tend to spell it unhyphenated when examining the corpora of this study: of the 208 instances of the lexeme email throughout the corpora, 189, i.e. 91%, are spelt without a hyphen whereas only 19 are hyphenated.
text messages or multimedia messages (MMS). It is therefore necessary to incorporate linguistic features in these messages to make up for this loss. Furthermore, even though email, SMS and MMS are asynchronous media that make direct interaction impossible, they have the potential to approximate synchronicity and enable near-real-time written conversation to such an extent as it has never been known before. Therefore, and since less information can be conveyed in the same amount of time by writing than by speech, the language has to be adapted to the new media to make written conversation more efficient, less time-consuming and nevertheless comprehensible so as to keep misunderstandings at a minimum. And the language has indeed changed: with the increasing use of email, SMS and MMS, new registers have developed, namely hybrid registers that mix the features of the spoken language with those of the written language which often results in a cryptic, encoded and hieroglyphic language of the following type (1):

(1) hey babe soz bout earlier phne cut out n cnt find d charger.Txtnu frm [name] nw.speak2u2mz hope u have a nice sleep widout ne interuptions2nite coz i cnt tak it wenur crnky cz u dnt gt enuf slp.Love u ur bf xxx<3

The aim of this book is to characterise these new registers and to show that they are, while being composed in a written medium, gradually shifting towards (or even beyond) the spoken language. Being in midst of this process, however, the rules and conventions of these registers are still evolving; there are neither rights nor wrongs when composing messages in these media. Hence, the data will not provide a definitive characterisation of the text types of email, SMS and MMS, which, in any case, would be impossible: as long as “computer networks and computers

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2 In this study, the term “spoken language” only refers to unplanned discourse such as face-to-face or telephone conversation. Planned discourse (e.g. written or educated speeches or interviews) is explicitly excluded.

3 When using the term text type in this context, I do not refer to emails, SMS or MMS in general but specifically to the text type of private emails, SMS or MMS which are written among students between 17 and 27 years of age. Within this category, I do not further differentiate between any subcategories such as greeting messages or goodnight messages, but subsume them under the same category or text type, respectively: private messages among students.
themselves become even more powerful” (Yates 1996a: 82), the language of emails and SMS will continue to change. Rather, I will point out certain tendencies that can be established when examining electronically composed messages. The book will first look at previous research in this field and describe the underlying methodology of this study. After a broad overview of the register of emails and text messages, it will offer a close analysis of these text types, their historical background and characteristic linguistic features as well as a comparison and more accurate placement of email and SMS along and beyond the written/spoken continuum. Koch and Oesterreicher’s model (1985, 1994) will offer a good means to better understand the linguistics of email and text messages. It will further be shown in what way the model has to be extended to actually fit the new communicative conditions. Email and text messages will then be compared to letter mail and telephone conversation, while a close comparison of SMS and telegrams will show to what extent it is legitimate to speak of a renaissance of telegrams when it comes to text messaging. Subsequently, attention is turned to multimedia messaging and photo messaging respectively. Since it was impossible to collect an adequate corpus in the United Kingdom, examples from the German and Swiss-German corpora will be consulted. In contrast to emails and SMS, the focal point will not be on the hybrid register. Instead, questions concerning the proportion of image to text, picture categories as well as MMS dialogues will be examined in this section.

Since there have been numerous complaints from various sides claiming that texting is leading to the deterioration of language, I shall also comment on the linguistic changes and their implications, which then leads to another complaint, namely one within the German language, concerning the increasing use of Anglicisms. To see whether and to what degree electronically composed messages indeed foster the use of Anglicisms, the German and Swiss-German email and text message corpora will be analysed in terms of Anglicisms. Finally, I shall draw some preliminary conclusions and speculate about possible future tendencies.