keypadshorthand

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Mobile phone texting can handle only very short messages. This constraint, combined with the imagination of young minds, quickly gave rise to a new form of language. **David Crystal** looks at its evolution

Question: What is the factor most likely to have a revolutionary impact on language?

Answer: A new medium of communication.

A new medium doesn't turn up very often. There was speech, in the beginning, of course – nobody knows just when, but probably between 30,000 and 100,000 years ago. Then there was writing – again, nobody knows just when, but maybe around 10,000 years ago. And we mustn't forget signing, as a full system of communication used by the deaf, whose recorded history is just a few hundred years.

New mediums are also related to new media, in the sense of mass communication, with their associated technology. The arrival of print in Europe in the 15th century introduced a huge range of new linguistic conventions and styles to language. The arrival of broadcasting in the 1920s did exactly the same thing for the spoken language. We now take for granted such varieties as news reading, weather reports, and sports commentary. The main result of all this, from a linguistic point of view, was to turn spoken and written language into institutions. Technology has that sort of effect on language.

In the past decade we have begun to see the linguistic effects of the latest communication technology. Most obviously, we have the Internet, encountered in its several different contexts – email, chat groups, game sites, and the world wide web. We have interactive television. And we have mobile phones, with their steadily growing range of functions. Each of these is going to have an effect on the future of all languages that have access to the technologies. English, certainly, is going to change as it is adapted to meet the new demands being placed upon it. That's the thing about language: people make it work to suit their needs.

An example. During the 1990s, the mobile phone industry developed its short message service (SMS), often referred to as texting or text messaging. This has seen a remarkable growth, with some eight billion messages sent worldwide in August 2000, and a steady lowering of the age of phone users: 10 to 11-year-olds are the fastest growing market. It is a cheaper medium than conventional voice calling, and a more private medium in that users can communicate without aurally disturbing other people they happen to be with.

A Mori/Lycos UK survey published in September 2000 showed that 81 per cent of mobile phone users between ages 15 and 24 were using their phone for sending text messages, typically to coordinate their social lives, to engage in language play, to flirt, or just to send a 'thinking of you' message. Apparently, 37 per cent of all messagers have used the service to tell someone they love them, or to dump them. At the same time, reports suggest that the service is being used for other purposes, such as sexual harassment, school bullying, political rumour-mongering, and interaction between drug dealers and clients.

The challenge of the small screen-size and its limited 160-character space has motivated the evolution of an even more abbreviated language than is found in emails and chat groups. Some of the same abbreviations appear, either because of their 'obvious' rebus-like potential (eg. NE1, 2day, B4, and C U l8r [= later]) or because the generally youthful population of users were familiar with these other situations (eg. Msg [= message], BRB [= be right back]). A few smileys such as :) and :(to express basic attitudes are also used, though not as commonly as newspaper reports have suggested.

But the medium has motivated its own range of direct-address items, such as F2T [free to talk?], Mob [mobile], PCM [please call me], MMYT [mail me your thoughts], and RUOK [are you OK?]. Multi-word sentences and

sequences of response utterances, especially of a stereotyped kind, can be reduced to a sequence of initial letters: SWDYT [so what do you think?], BCBC [beggars can't be choosers], BTDT [been there, done that], YYSSWE [yeah, yeah, sure, sure, whatever], HHOJ [ha, ha, only joking].

Users seem to be aware of the information value of consonants as opposed to vowels, judging by such vowel-less items as XLNT [excellent]. And there is economic value in abbreviation, too, given that the number of key strokes saved bears a direct relationship to the eventual size of one's telephone bill. In a creation such as ru2cnmel8r [are you two seeing me later?], less than half the key strokes of the full form of the sentence are used. Even more ingenious coded abbreviations have been devised, especially among those for whom argot is a desirable safeguard against unwelcome surveillance.

What is not clear is just how limiting this technology is as a text messaging system. There must be a serious limit to the amount of information which can be conveyed using abbreviation, and a real risk of ambiguity as soon as people try to go beyond a stock set of social phrases. These constraints will become increasingly apparent as people try to adapt the technology to grander designs, such as Internet access. While it is possible in principle to download Internet pages onto our mobile phone screen or the display of our personal digital assistant, what do we lose, informationally speaking, when a graphically elaborate text is reduced to such a scale? What kind of linguistic 'translation' needs to take place in order to ensure that the sentence structures used on the small screen are manageable and intelligible? It seems inevitable that sentence length will tend to be short, and that certain types of complex sentence structure will be avoided.

It will be interesting to see how this language evolves. Very little material has so far been collected. So, keep some records of it. And then, in a year or so, you'll be able to judge how much it has changed.

This is the first of a series of four articles on the effects on new technology on the English language.

Professor David Crystal has written many books on language, and lectures at Bangor University, North Wales.
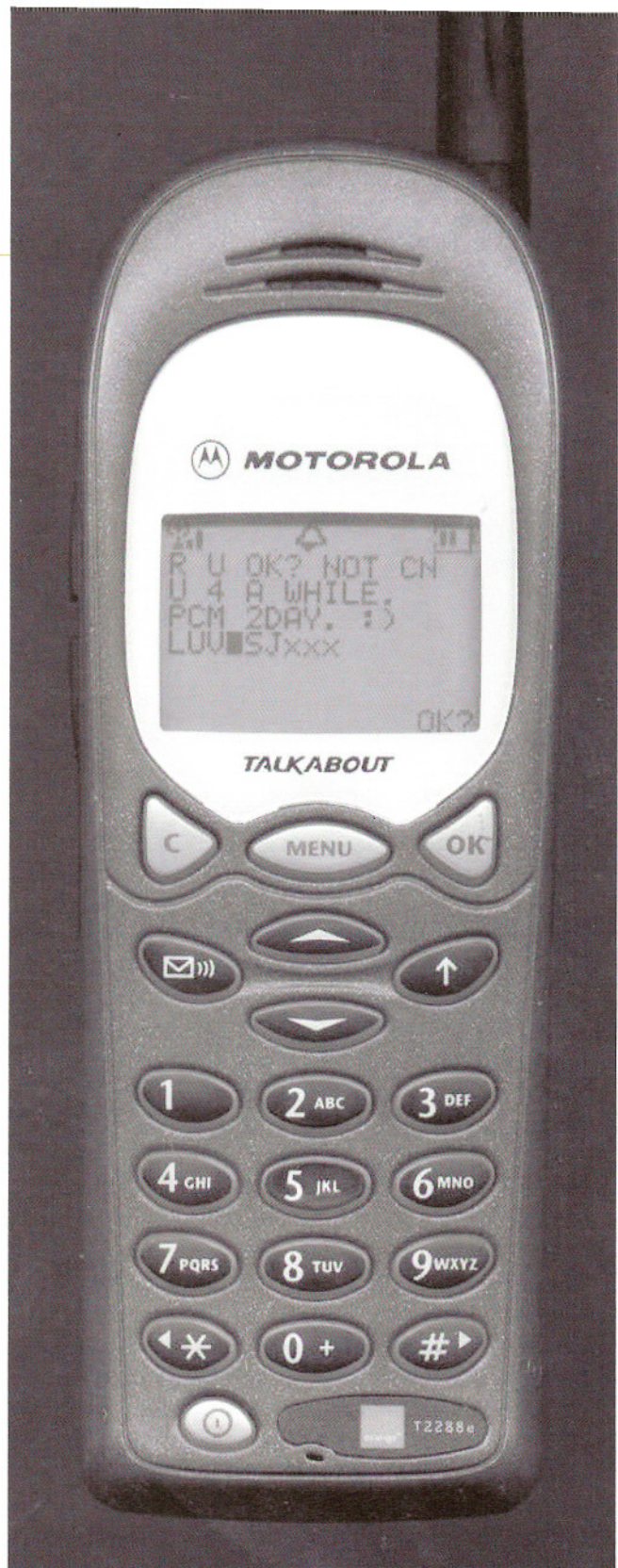
The text message above can have the following terms applied:

U = Letter homophone
4 = number homophone
LUV = Phonetic spelling
RU = Key binding, an initialism of the letter homophones used in a common phrase