Teaching Unit 20: Digital Communication – Walking by a fair few geese

Background

Anya, Georgia, Jade, Kate, and Misha are all in their early-to-mid-thirties and are all new mums who live in the same area. They have set up a WhatsApp group and this is the way they communicate most of the time. While they share some similarities in their social backgrounds, they are not part of the same friendship networks, which is reflected in the individual differences in the way they write. In this extract, they are taking their babies to a local park. They are typing their messages on their smartphones: Anya, Jade and Misha are en route while Georgia and Kate are still at home, preparing to leave. In this extract, they frequently update each other on their progress and current location and check the meeting place. They make references to landmarks and use deictic words as well as screenshots from their phones to help find each other in the park.

The unit can be used to reflect on the form that language and communication take within contemporary communication via social media. Students might discuss:

- The ways in which the language used in computer-mediated communication (CMC) differs from, or perhaps resembles, in form from other genres (e.g. chatting with friends face-to-face, speaking on the phone, writing emails, Facebook posts, sports commentary, recipes, headlines…)
- Why people have adapted their language use, given the distinctive functions of such communication
- Individual differences in CMC style
- People's attitudes to such language and whether it constitutes 'bad' grammar
- How changes in technology in the past similarly affected language use (e.g. printing presses, telephones, typewriters, computers)

Sample data and links to relevant Linguistics Research Digest articles are available at:
http://www.teachrealenglish.org/TU20

Discussion Points

Unconventional spelling

It is often assumed that people use a lot of nonstandard forms when communicating through social media and mobile messaging (text messaging, instant messaging, etc.), though in fact there is a great degree of variation in how much people use such forms. This nonstandard language has been termed *textese* or *Netspeak*, combining features of both spoken and written registers. Some of the features that studies have found in electronic communication include different types of abbreviations and creative use of language. Some of these are not exclusive to electronic communication, for example:
- **initialisms** (phrases shortened to the first letter of each word, for example, BBC and TV)
- **acronyms** (initialisms, which are pronounced as a single word, for example, NATO, LOL
- **clipping** (words formed by removing their beginning, end or middle, for example, tho for though)

Others are most likely to occur in written electronic communication, for example:

- **consonant writing** (words produced by removing all vowels, for example, *tht* for *that*, *txt* for *text*, *pls* for *please*, *spk* for *speak*, *nt* for *not*, or *cld* for *could*)
- **letter-number homophones** (words including numbers in the place of phonemes, 2morrow or b4 or numbers replacing words, for example, 2 for to)
- **unconventional punctuation** (for example, multiple question marks, missing full stops or capital letters)
- **the use of symbols instead of words** (for example, @ for *at*)
- **the use of emoticons and emojis** (for example :-))

Interestingly, in the sample extract, all the women generally spell out all words in full, apart from a single use of *u* for *you* by Kate in line 54. This can be linked to constantly improving technological affordances, especially the elaborate predictive texting software now offered by mobile devices. It is also often reported that *textese* has lost its appeal, at least to post-teenage users (this is reported, among other sources in Caroline Tagg's book *Discourse of Text Messaging*). The two instances of misspellings (lines 24 and 25) can be explained by the fact typing took places while Anya was in motion and pushing a pram.

Ellipsis
In the sample extract, there are a number of cases of situational ellipsis. This is where a word or words are omitted from speech or writing because they are superfluous or easily understood from the context. The process typically makes the tone of the message more casual than when the full version of the same phrase is used. Ellipses generally occur at the beginning of the clause and involve the omission of a pronoun in the subject position (*I, we*), auxiliary verb (*are, am, will*) and determiners (*the, a*). The ellipsis of *I* before *think* (in lines 7 and 43) is illustrative of the tendency of speakers to omit the subject pronouns before 'mental process verbs' such as *like*, *hope*, *think*, *guess*.

Electronic language allows for more freedom in which words can be elided. For example, in the extract, Jade writes *at moment*, which would not be acceptable in speech. This might be caused by the need to abbreviate due to the fact that they are typing while walking and pushing prams. It also helps to create informality and closeness through the use of features of spoken interactions.

In the sample text, students might identify the following instances of ellipsis:
- Sentence subject pronoun omission: lines 1, 3, 6, 7 (mental process verb *think*), 9, 17, 28, 36 (*it*), 43 (*think*), 44, 51, 52, 61, 66, 67 and 74
- Auxiliary verb omission – lines 1, 3, 6, 9, 28, 44, 51, 52, 61 and 67
- Indefinite article omission – lines 29 (*half hour*) and 39 (*in entrance*)
- Definite article omission – lines 10 (*car park*), 21 (*opposite post office*), 39 (*by shops*), 41 (*school*), 48-49 (*at moment*), 54-55 and 56 (*at post office*)

Deixis
The nature of this exchange means that the participants frequently use deictic words, which point to places or things easily identifiable by all interactants either because they are present at the time of speaking or because they have just been mentioned or are understood in the context. Deitic forms in language can only be understood with reference to the context of an interaction.

In the sample text, students might identify the following instances of deixis:
- *There* (line 11, 28, 33, 36) is used to refer to a pre-agreed meeting place in a local park, similarly to *that* in lines 2 and 44. However, *that* in line 74 refers to a photo sent in the previous turn and *this* in line 48 refers to the position on the map shared with the group in the previous turn. These are examples of **spatial deixis**.
- *Now* in line 28 and *today* in line 70 are examples of **temporal deixis**.

- **Person deixis** is realised through personal pronouns *I* (16), *you* (lines 33, 36, 51, and spelt as *u* in line 54), *him* (lines 28, 62 and 66), *we* (lines 34, 37, 38, 40, 43, 48, 50 and 56), and a possessive pronoun *our* (lines 37 and 51).

Just

Throughout the extract, the word *just* is used by Misha in lines 3, 6, 44 and 51 and by Anya in line 56 as they update the group on the progress of her journey. *Just* serves as a time expression meaning 'close to the time of speaking/writing'. In this meaning, it is usually accompanied by present progressive tense, as in lines 3, 6 44 and 56. In line 51, *just* occurs with subject and auxiliary verb ellipsis.

Proper nouns

A number of proper names referring to specific places, usually street names, are mentioned in the extract. They are either spelt with the correct capitalisation (line 15-16, 23-24, 30) or without capital letters (line 1-2, 7 17, 20, 21-22, 24-25, 31). Lack of capitalisation of proper nouns in electronic communication is often attributed to the need for speed of communication, as the use of capital letters typically required an extra few keystrokes to produce. With the introduction of more advanced predictive text software, proper nouns are often recognised and automatically capitalised. Other proper nouns in the extract are company or business names (lines 5 and 30-31) and first names of the people involved (line 36) and their babies (lines 7, 26, 45).

Punctuation

Despite the general belief that electronic language (especially in texting or instant messaging) does not follow punctuation rules, many sentences in this extract include sentence-initial capitalisation, and sentence-final punctuation (full stops in lines 7, 11, 16, 26, 28, 29, 33, 37, 42, 44, 49, 51; ellipsis in lines 2, 5, 53 and 61; question marks in lines 3, 19 and 55; and exclamation points in lines 62, 64, 67, 70 and 72). Note that most of the sentences with correct punctuation are message-internal. In the last sentence of each message, the use of punctuation is less strict and many of the messages end in no punctuation, especially if they are declarative sentences. In the interest of clarity, when Misha is asking a question in lines 18-19, she does use a question mark at the end, even though the question also completes her message. The same thing happens in Kate's question in lines 53-55. Overall, the use of punctuation in instant messaging is determined by the need for clarity and practicality – message-internal punctuation is generally present and message-final punctuation is used when needed to ensure understanding and demonstrate marked attitudes, as in the use of exclamation points in lines 62, 64, 67 and 70.

Students may wish to discuss whether the high level of punctuation in the extracts are typical in their own practices, or might relate to social details (age, gender, social role) of individuals in the sample extract.

References

Caroline Tagg. 2012. *Discourse of Text Messaging: Analysis of SMS Communication*. London: Continuum