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Augmented Communication

The Effect of Digital
Devices on Face-to-Face
Interactions

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CONTENTS

1	Introduction	1
2	History of Augmented Communication: Technology and Disability	21
3	Augmented Communication as a Modern Phenomenon in Ordinary Speech	29
4	Types of Augmented Communication	49
5	Stepping Back: Analysis and Discussion of ICT and Language Change	87
6	Conclusion	123
	Index	129

LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 1.1	From HONY Facebook page 16 September 2015	4
Fig. 3.1	Picture taken during my talk in Kyoto and live-Tweeted	34
Fig. 3.2	FaceJuggler	37
Fig. 3.3	My father and his friends use Google Maps to talk about a new house	44
Fig. 4.1	Augmenting in Buenos Aires	53
Fig. 4.2	Augmenting in Tokyo	54
Fig. 4.3	Lookalike	58
Fig. 4.4	Friends become ‘friends’	67
Fig. 4.5	Augmented participation	78
Fig. 5.1	Sumahobusu	107
Fig. 5.2	Japanese kindergarten—look with your own eyes	111
Fig. 5.3	Life or smartphone	112
Fig. 5.4	No Wifi as a selling point	113

ABSTRACT

There have been many studies and wider discourses surrounding the issues of technology influencing language. One of the most widely debated areas to arise recently is the idea that smartphones are having a detrimental effect on face-to-face communication. This book takes a markedly different approach in framing this phenomenon as augmented communication. People around the world are using handheld networked devices to enhance their face-to-face interactions. Utilising ethnographic and autoethnographic observation data, this book outlines how augmented communication is employed to enhance face-to-face communication. This book examines the way augmented communication alters face-to-face interactions by adding visual and multimodal input, by providing the speaker with access to online search engines, and by allowing the speaker to include others in the discussion from distant geographical locations, either synchronously or asynchronously. Using our phones, people draw on networked stores of information, which could be seen as a form of exomemory. Utilising skills and blended digital literacies to access and apply this is a new development in the way humans communicate. Augmented communication has arisen as a natural by-product of having access to such technology, a by-product of our polymediated age, and something yet to be explored in-depth from a sociolinguistic perspective. This book presents research data spanning several years of observation whilst indicating the possible consequences of such technology-enhanced interactions, and explores some of the benefits of augmented communication, whilst indicating the possible negative impacts

of such technology-dependent forms of discourse. In particular, the false dichotomy of online vs offline life is discussed. As such, this book aims to provide a starting point for discussion on this topic as well as highlighting a research agenda.

Keywords Digital communication · Face-to-face interactions · Technology · Language · Applied linguistics · Sociolinguistics



CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Abstract This chapter introduces the topic of augmented communication and sets it in context, providing a brief definition and then explaining the aims and purposes of the book. It also presents the research methodology and an overview of each chapter.

Keywords Digital communication · Face-to-face interactions · Technology · Language · Applied linguistics · Sociolinguistics

It is a truism to say that technology has changed the way we communicate, rather like stating that the earth is still round. It is an observation which is often made and then explained with a few clichéd examples, such as the internet making communication quicker, things being ‘a click away’ or the coining of new vocabulary like the well-known ‘to google’ verb. New words have always been coined, but never at the rate they are currently being added (Michel et al. 2011). Some attribute technology’s influence to the accelerated pace of these changes whereas others, such as Van Dijk (2012), claim that rather than causing these changes, technology merely amplifies them.

This book looks at the immense changes in human behaviour and the possible impact on society and our minds that advances in information communication technology (ICT) are bringing about *as we speak*. Viewing the issue of online communication vs offline communication as a ‘false dichotomy’ (Tagg 2015, 81), I examine the way these two

realms are blurring in face-to-face communication and thus having a profound impact on language and the way we speak to one another in person. One of the phenomena that is most easily observed is *augmented communication*.

Many claims have been levelled at technology destroying face-to-face conversations. One study claims the mere presence of a mobile phone can reduce the quality of conversations and closeness (Przybylski and Weinstein 2013). Another study asserted that, despite their awareness that phones can impair the quality of conversations, 62% of individuals were observed using mobiles in the presence of others (Drago 2015). People find it rude to be ignored in favour of a smartphone, which is why such people who do so are sometimes called *cellfish*. Sherry Turkle, once a great proponent of the digital self, now equates our over-reliance on technology with a withdrawal from personal and meaningful relationships (2012), and even warns that digital devices could lead to a decrease in our capacity for empathy (2015).

Whilst aspects of these arguments are certainly valid, they do not present the whole picture. Although there are bad practices, phones are also used not just to facilitate, but also to enhance face-to-face communication. This book is about the fact that we now often rely on our phones and other networked devices to make conversation, even when we are talking face-to-face with people in real time.

1.1 BRIEF DEFINITION OF AUGMENTED COMMUNICATION

In its original sense, augmented communication refers to speakers with a disability utilising technology in order to facilitate conversation (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association 2017). World-renowned British physicist Stephen Hawking's voice box is a very clear example of this. When Jean-Dominique Bauby was paralysed after a stroke and could only blink his left eyelid, augmented communication allowed him and his speech therapist to produce the book *The Diving Bell and The Butterfly* (1997).

However, my observations suggest that now augmented communication is adopted by people with ordinary speech as a way to further enhance their face-to-face conversations. Such observations have been made in various parts of the developed world on a daily basis as people communicate in societies with high technological permeation. People do not simply talk about their children or their cats doing something cute,

they show a photo of it or even a video on their phones whilst describing the action. Furthermore, it is equally likely that people would be talking about a video featuring a cat that isn't even their own, or some other viral video. The extent of augmented communication is clearly visible when we look around us at how people's talk incorporates networked media.

There are examples of augmented communication in many of the photos on the *Humans of New York* (HONY) photoblog. A post from 16 September 2015 featured a young couple in the background, holding their phone in focus to provide a visual cue for the story they are describing (see Fig. 1.1). As the accompanying story makes clear, the couple show a picture on their phone which captures the moment they first met and interacted. The man talks about how he was so nervous that his body language showed his discomfort, which we can simultaneously see in the picture. In this way, the image provides what I shall refer to as *immediate authenticity*, by heightening the veracity of the story through the addition of visual media, as well as extending on the verbal descriptions. In using this image to augment their conversation with the HONY photographer, Brandon Stanton, the couple in the picture are utilising *exomemory*, which is a repository of stored information that exists outside the mind and yet is accessible to us through digital handheld devices. In the Pixar movie *Inside Out*, during a Skype conversation Meg shows her phone to Riley to describe a new hockey teammate, which is an interesting example of digital to analogue and back to digital (all done through computer graphics). I have observed instances of augmented communication in popular US series such as *Mr. Robot* and *Rick and Morty*. Within the popular media there are frequent examples of phones being used for augmented communication, and countless other cultural examples which suggest the widespread permeation of this phenomenon in developed affluent societies with high smartphone permeation. I have also witnessed augmented communication on Japanese panel shows and Argentinian news, as well as having made ethnographic field observations in Asia, America and Europe.

The most common form of augmented communication is the use of phones to show pictures or other digital media, which I refer to as **multi-modal augmenting**. In this way, people are augmenting their communication and employing ICT to heighten the visual impact or *immediate authenticity* of our conversations. Other examples of augmented communication involve the use of search engines to expand



Fig. 1.1 From HONY Facebook page 16 September 2015

on existing knowledge, or to make up for a knowledge deficit, which I refer to as **augmented cognition** and which relies upon the use of

exomemory. In other cases, augmented communication is used not only to visually enhance and add impact to the conversation, but may also become the talking point itself. An example might be someone showing a new app on his or her phone. This type of augmented communication is referred to as **meta-augmenting**. The final type is when people add others into a conversation, overstepping the geophysical and temporal boundaries of the present face-to-face conversation and blurring online and offline interactions into one. This final type is referred to as **augmented participation**.

With each category of augmented communication, the use of mobile networked digital devices becomes an ad hoc part of discourse, and thus relies on a range of modern day social skills. Lankshear and Knobel (2008) recognise the plurality of such skills, and make a case for digital literacies as an important psychosocial competency or life skill. These new literacies are now an integral part of participatory culture and the heightened power of consumers-as-producers with more influence in determining how things are disseminated, which is referred to as *spreadable media* (Jenkins et al. 2013). Not only do people need to possess a digital communication device and know how to use it (implying a certain level of social capital), they also need to be able to multitask and engage in the conversation whilst simultaneously finding what they need from the device. This could lead to a ‘potentially fruitful interplay [between] local face-to-face communication [and] online mediated communication’ (Van Dijk 2012, 5). It has been long established that the tools and technologies we adopt have a profound effect on shaping our society, our interactions, and even our very nature as humans (Clark 2003). This makes the possibly widespread practice of augmented communication something of great significance for future research.

1.2 KEY CONCEPTS

The following is a brief literature review and list of key concepts underpinning the analytical framework for this inquiry. As the process of conducting and writing about ethnographies is one which emphasises various levels of analysis, it is not easy or even desirable to demarcate between data and analysis, and thus this book is not structured in the standard way of the literature review, methods, data analysis, etc. Rather, this book presents the study as a narrative of coming to a better understanding of the central phenomenon. As such, data and analysis are