

Discuss some of the
ways in which new
technology



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Technology has been one of the important factors which causes language to change; it is not something which we should think of in terms of occurring in the last 100 years or so but as a concomitant factor with language development. Technology means, in general terms, new vocabulary, words and phrases; new written forms, new genres. These are the most obvious changes and the last really huge technological change for language was the invention of the printing press - resulting in new written forms and the standardisation of English.

There have been tremendous technological changes since the middle of the 19th century with the advent of the telegraph; the radio; the television; the telephone; the film and video industry; the expansion of news and advertising and, over the last 15 years, the rise of the computer and Internet. I am going to focus on four of these technological areas to see in what ways they have initiated changes in the forms and uses of English: the production of news; television and radio commentary; advertising and computers and the Internet.

In considering the growth of the daily newspapers it is important to realise that they have come to define the nature of modern news, that they have developed their own discourse structure and learnt to embed texts from a wide range of sources to produce a story. News stories have also developed a time structure which is different to traditional narratives. The technology which appears to have encouraged these forms is the mid 19th century telegraph which enabled news to be transmitted quickly and sowed the seeds of the news industry's primary value: the scoop, almost live' news.

The industry's obsession with speed has led to many changes in form compared to other narrative structures. William Brewer, a cognitive psychologist, talks about the way people understand stories; event and discourse structures: the order in which events actually happened and the way they are told in a story. Apparently, the chronological order is the natural way because it matches the discourse structure to the event structure. News stories are very rarely told in chronological order, possessing a quite complex time structure.

The reason would seem to be that news stories are not concerned necessarily with immediate ease of understanding but with suspense, interesting and holding the reader's attention, titillating and gossiping - being tangential for effect. William Labov's analysis of the structure of personal narratives is helpful in highlighting these differences. He gives six elements of a personal narrative: abstract; orientation; complicating action; evaluation; resolution and a coda - occurring in this order in a personal narrative in chapter

I of the course reader, Allen Bell observes that with the news, ; order is everything but chronology /is nothing', [p. 10], It is sufficient to say that news stories are deviant to Labov's elements in many ways: order and omission. They have their own order and reasons for fulfilling and not fulfilling certain elements. For example, the lead sentence in a news story might not set the scene or begin chronologically and, at the same time, it might evaluate events because the function of the lead is not merely to summarise the main action but to focus the story in a particular direction.

There are other features worth noting like lack of cohesion [use of words like then, therefore;, however, and] there are false ending in stories - often to allow editorial chopping to reduce length without affecting the sense. One of the most noticeable features must surely be the inclusion of texts from elsewhere in the composition of a story. News is produced against the clock; it is not a solo performance but a composite - what Mikhail Bakhtin [1981] calls heteroglossia: the mixing of many voices. This can be in the form of interviews; conferences; speeches; documents; press releases; earlier stories etc.

There are a couple of effects on the use of English that are worth noting from the development of news reporting over the years. Bell describes its production as, becoming, " A serial, along the lines of a fictional television forms like soap operas or situation comedies. It is shifting from recapitulating the day' s events to continuous updating, with television adopting the practice of hourly bulletins that has long been used on radio. [p. 25] The second effect has its origins in the speed with which news could be relayed and put in print. James W.

Carey describes the effect of the wire services as having, " stripped language of the local, the regional and colloquial. They demanded something closer to a scientific language, one of strict denotation where the connative features of utterance were under / control, one of fact. " [Reading C, p. 25].

This was really said about American news but it perhaps is true to a large extent of British as well -although television broadcasting has popularised the regional over the last twenty years, moving away from the formality of

BBC received pronunciation.

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To conclude my discussion of news influence on language's use and form I have included a short article from the Independent, September 8th; we can see some of the deviant features mentioned earlier: the title expresses no relation to time; the title also does not fulfil Labov's abstract element, it does not tell us what the story is about. The lead sentence is evaluative but is not chronological accurate: the article is about divorce. There is no resolution, the article concludes on a point about Mrs Wildenstein's lack of access to the kitchen. There is no clue as to what the next 'event' in the proceedings is likely to be.

Closely allied to news-making is television and radio's use of commentary for recorded and live events. In reading D, Stephanie Marriot talks of the new contexts different to the standard grammatical ones in which English originally evolved. Previous to these contexts written responses and public utterances were considered and measured before being read or heard. Marriott emphasises the use of deictic expressions in TV commentary - I, you, this, that, here, there, now, then, today, yesterday and tomorrow - terms used by speakers who share a spatio-temporal context.

Sometimes the speaker is describing live action; sometimes the action is recorded and the commentary is added afterwards - the audience is usually aware which is which. Very usually, the commentator is not seen as in snooker, " And I think Steve is just checking if that top red will go into the right-hand comer pocket. " Reading D [p. 33]. Marriott explains the new form in language: that of mixing tenses in describing a context which may well be a known past event.

The commentator describes the action in the present, moves to the past, and perhaps concludes with the future – all in one sentence, Gascoigne dribbles wide of the Moldavian defender... shoots he missed the all-important shot.

He will get some ribbing for that one... [Rob Owen, Wembley] ,.

Commentators reflect the mood of the sport – hushed, reverential in snooker, wildly hysterical in football and hyperbolically fantastical in Welsh rugby. In an interview Stephanie Marriott uses a nature programme, Bird in the nest, to illustrate further these differences; with regard to intonation she says that the commentary sounds like spoken language – lots of ands and thens to produce a lively effect.

If it is a prescribed commentary then there tends to be a tight narrative structure with the use of the simple past. There is often the use of captions to complement the commentary. In a live commentary, she observes the uses of different tenses and the use of direct address to the audience to add a bit of intimacy, “ I’d expect you’d like to know... ” or “ As you can see... “: occasionally we get to see the commentator which adds to the illusion of a ‘ real’ conversation taking place. In chapter 2 of the course reader, Sharon Goodman discusses visual English and literacy and how important these two aspects are in late 20th century society.

Texts in English are becoming multi-modal – using a range of devices to communicate simultaneously different things to different audiences. “ In the modern media... the visual dominates; the verbal augments. Print is not dead yet... nor will it ever be, but, nevertheless, our language-dominated culture has moved perceptibly toward the iconic. [Dondis, 1973, p7] [ch2, p.

42] In a consumer-driven society the pressure is on private enterprise to
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persuade people to buy and text and spoken English is combined with still and moving pictures both to inform, entertain but, ultimately, to persuade.

In reading A, The semiotic construction of a wine label, many of the of aforementioned points can be seen. David Graddol initially emphasises the ephemeral nature of many of the texts and also how the range of semiotic devices goes beyond the verbal and visual to include the tactile and olfactory. Labelling is multi-modal - addressing different audiences: retailer and consumer, communicating a range of messages. Technology has enabled a huge range of fonts to be created easily by designers - all of which communicate a mood or message.

On my bottle of Chilean red from Tesco's, rubbing the picture of the grape with my thumbnail enables me to smell the ripe blackcurrants, oak-aged, with their vanilla aroma bottled therein. I gaze at the name: Chilean Cabernet Sauvignon in 'Caslon 3' font which somehow communicates the mood of the South American new world with a touch of 'just achieved' sophistication. The label is red -again hinting at a warmth and softness of the wine; the logo and pattern on the label is subtle, a pattern which westerners associate with the Aztecs and Incas.

The remaining information is less romantic being concerned with region, date, name of company, importing firm, alcoholic strength and amount. The font is accordingly more business-like, probably a small Times Roman. At the moment we are in the field of graphosemantics, where we are concerned with not only what is written but at how it is written and the relationship between the two. The shape of letters - fonts -is, more accurately, the area

of typography. Several hundred years ago, scribes and clerics made handwriting an enormously individualistic affair.

After the invention of the printing press, typography became more limited in its scope and use. This century - particularly with the use of commercial and private desk top publishers- has seen a massive expansion in how lettering can be shown. My gaze is drawn to the back label and I am faced with a array of heteroglossia no less: there is the bar code for the retailer, the health warning in a clinical (sic) Helvetica font created in Switzerland in 1957, whose German realist origins seem so appropriate for this kind of text.

The 'Tojours' font is used to describe the wine for the interested wine buff- this Mediterranean font seems an appropriate choice for the grape grown in Chile. We can see both a range of genres and the relationship between visual and text in this wine label. Goodman goes on to discuss the use of visual alliteration and puns, the iconicity of the alphabet and the relationship between verbal and visual in other areas: newspapers, advertising and cartoons. On the following page I have included a Boddington's Gold advert. The original makes much use of gold colour and the shared consciousness and cultural understanding of the Midas narrative.

The advert itself reads like a poetry narrative, using an obvious alliteration and internal rhyme in the first line. It goes on to mimic a quiz genre as the rest of the narrative is set out in three main verses. The register is that of a 'bloke' talking to other 'blokes', with the use of . abbreviations 'haven't' and 'Boddies' and 'mates'. It uses a direct address in its appeal and will no doubt be one of many in a series of such adverts. In this sense, this type of

advert has almost adopted the genre of the short story or serial - people look out for the next episode with interest

The final new usage and form of the English language comes with the relatively recent upsurge of ownership of computers and links to the Internet. In some ways people are able to dabble quite easily and quickly in creating their own ' adverts' through desktop publishing. They do not directly but in a sense they do through the designing of their own web page where the product they are selling is themselves.

Like previously mentioned forms, new texts, new genres are being pursued in cyberspace. The whole process of writing has undergone a change, the author being able to include pictures and graphics easily and edit and rework texts at amazing speed. I rather like Simeon Yates' s inclusion of Bolter's observation, " Writing with a pen is no more natural, no less technological than writing at the computer screen. It is true that the computer is a more complicated and fragile device than a pen. But we cannot isolate ourselves from the technology by reverting to older forms of writing. The production of today' s pens and pa. per . also requires a sophisticated manufacture. "

[Bolter, 1991 , p. 37] [Ch. 3p. 119]

The language literacy involved in the use of this particular ' pen' is one which involves co-ordination; keyboard skills; icon recognition and mathematical logic. The British user is confronted with an English which is essentially dominated by American forms. We use ' program' regarding computers but still refer to TV ' programmes'. We save texts on an ASCII file often without realising the importance of the development of the American Standard

Committee for Information Exchange code as a standard method of instructing the computer. It is likely that the US domination of the computer world will ensure the global spread of American English.

Certainly, the characteristics of language on the Internet is different to more formal usages of standard English in print. Surveys tend to show that e-mail texts have features of spoken language'. It usually contains all the inaccuracies of spoken language too, as the originators do not have time to go back and correct 'utterances'. There is also the presence of embedded text in the author's creation - lots of information generated by the software or from previous texts. There is another useful comment from Bolter who describes the new relationship between writers and texts Each culture and each age has its own economy of writing.

There is a dynamic relationship between the materials and the techniques of writing and a less obvious but no less important relationship between materials and techniques on the one hand and the genres and usage of writing on the other. [Bolter, p. 37] [ch. 3. p. 120] Bolter goes on to discuss the distancing of the reader and writer from the text through the medium of the computer. This is interesting when considering Stephen Fry's experience in using the modem and Internet in his measured communication to friends and family.

He talks about the advantage of being able to communicate at speed but not in real time. The distancing was obviously useful for him, and I think for many people who do not possess personal charisma or rhetorical skills.

Communication on the net allows people to manipulate and experiment with

identity. Yates calls this whole process a destabilising of traditional power relationships where gender, race are no longer important - ironically typing speed is, for it decides who speaks first in a conference.