



## Homo mobilis

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### As language goes, so does thought

SHERRY TURKLE, the psychologist at MIT who studies the nexus between people and gadgets, believes that the tools of mobility are leading to "the emergence of a new type of person". In the distant, landline-dominated past, she says, people thought: "I have a feeling so I want to make a call." Young people today, including Ms Turkle's teenage daughter, seem to be thinking instead: "I want to have a feeling, so I need to make a call." What she means is that there is something inorganic, derivative and inauthentic about a lot of mobile communication. As a species, Ms Turkle thinks, we run the risk of letting the permanent wireless social clouds that surround us steal part of our nature.

Is that a bit rich? Certainly, tools have always played a big part in defining human nature. *Homo habilis*, "handy man", is considered the first species in our genus, surviving until about 1.6m years ago, because he used primitive tools made from stone or bone. *Homo erectus*, "upright man", got his name from his stature, but his crucial innovation was to tame fire for his use. And whether or not *Homo sapiens*, "wise man", entirely lives up to his name, he has achieved astonishing breakthroughs both in hardware (eg, the wheel) and software (eg, language).

If researchers in ivory towers now debate the arrival of *Homo mobilis*, their tongue is only partially in their cheek. Once again the biggest shift seems to involve language, and by implication thought and feeling. That major linguistic change is afoot is clear to anybody who has been around young people almost anywhere in the world. Entire subcultures now define themselves primarily or exclusively through their chosen text-messaging or instant-messaging argot.

Richard Ling, for instance, has studied a teenage fad in Norway that had kids substituting the letter "z" for "s" in Norwegian words, yielding spellings such as "koz" or "klemz", both meaning "hug". This substitution defined, as Mr Ling puts it, "middle-class teenyboppers"—until a rap band ridiculed the trend, thus killing it off. The teens immediately took to writing their text messages and e-mails in pidgin Swedish. Among this group of Norwegians, a Swedish word such as "kramar" (again, hugs) became "krämmar". Both the "z" endings and the pidgin Swedish showed up only in electronic media, never in spoken language.

So far, that suggests nothing more than a new variant of traditional in-group markers such as tattoos or Ivy-League class rings. But Naomi Baron, a linguist at American University in Washington, DC, and author of "Always On: Language in an Online and Mobile World", sees more worrying trends. Society's attitude towards language has changed, she thinks. For about 250 years, the consensus in Western societies has been that grammar, syntax and spelling matter, and that rules have to be observed. That consensus now appears to be at risk.

Illustration by Bell Mellor



In all electronic media, especially when typed on the small screens of mobile handsets, absolutely anything, linguistically speaking, seems to go. Apostrophes that once distinguished between "its" and "it's" seem quaint and arbitrary. Entire words and sentences now compose themselves with the ever-present "autofill" and spell-check features, which adolescents increasingly regard as a virtual Samuel Johnson or Konrad Duden.

The academically and politically correct response is to welcome this trend with open arms. Language, after all, appears only to be returning to its natural and healthy state of flux. When Geoffrey Chaucer was writing in the 14th century there were no set spelling rules, but he managed to compose interesting texts nonetheless. For all we know, today's digital and mobile world might be teeming with potential Chaucers.

Ms Baron will have none of it. Spelling is in decline today, she thinks, not because of the rich diversity of dialects, as in Chaucer's day, but because the dominant mindset of nomadic culture is that language does not matter. We are entering, as she puts it, an age of "linguistic whateverism". One reason is that people today are writing vastly larger amounts of text than ever before, and "the more we write online, the worse writers we become." In the eras of quills, pens or even manual typewriters it was hard to write a lot, so people took time and care in clarifying their thoughts. Many nomads today are convinced that they don't have the time to think and care, so they concentrate on speed alone.

Because language is the primary vehicle for thought, this has consequences. Already, Ms Baron detects a new and widespread intellectual torpor among her students. Young Americans used to cut corners before an exam on "Hamlet" by reading the CliffsNotes. Teachers hated them, but they were pedagogic wonders compared with today's method of Googling the passage in question, then using the computer's "find" function to get to the exact snippet. Ms Baron thinks that these days her students even think in snippets, which is to say incoherently. And that is how they write essays. Having internalised the new whateverism, they launch in and stumble through, with nary a thought for what they actually want to say.

Illustration by Bell Mellor



This criticism dovetails strikingly with what other sociologists and psychologists are observing in the interpersonal behaviour of some nomads. Older people use their mobile phones to "micro-co-ordinate" with partners during the day in order to run their errands more efficiently and perhaps to spend more time together as a result. But many younger people, who have never known paper diaries or an unconnected world, micro-co-ordinate in order to avoid committing themselves to any fixed meeting time, location or person at all. After all, a better opportunity might yet present itself.

The concern, therefore, is that young nomads not only write without thinking or leave home in the morning without planning but also enter relationships without tying themselves down. Large parts of human interaction, especially the awkward subjects of rowing and separating, can now be relegated to

virtual, as opposed to physical, interaction. A worrying trend in recent years has been adolescents' practice of dumping their lovers by text message or, worse, by changing the status of their Facebook profile from "in a relationship" to "single". This is efficient and instantaneous, but potentially traumatic.

## **Oh evolve!**

Much of this pessimism is probably overblown. *Homo sapiens* has been creating technological curses throughout history, and has so far managed to cope with every challenge thrown up. Only a few decades ago the prevailing worry was that television, the reigning medium at the time, was creating a generation of unimaginative couch potatoes, if not intellectual vegetables. That description is quite the opposite of what youth culture has in fact become in today's era of the internet and nomadism. Even if young people today read the Iliad and Shakespeare only in snippets, if at all, says Manuel Castells at the University of Southern California, they are also creating an artistic culture more vibrant and imaginative than arguably any that has preceded it. The common name for this genre is "mash-up culture", but that does not do it justice. Today's creative types do more than stitch together ("mash up") snippets. They forge new combinations almost as neurons form synapses to create new thoughts.

As for the things that can come between people, technology is certainly one of them. So it has been since a spear missed the mammoth and hit a tribesman. Every technology has created new excess and silliness. In time, each silliness has produced its own backlash and subsequent adjustment. At the simplest level, it is reasonable to assume that *Homo sapiens*, having invented the "on" button, will discover the "off" button as well.