# 8 Literacy and the new media

*Vita brevis, lingua brevis*

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## Introduction

In 2000, for the first time ever, the tradition of Valentine's cards came under serious threat. Short text messages (known as SMS, originally coined from 'short message service') in telegraph style on mobile phones – 'I LUV U' – have, reportedly, outnumbered twenty-three million hand-written traditional Valentine's cards (VirginMobile 2000). While phone companies rejoiced at the news and declared a new age of virtual romance to have begun, conservative forces saw culture and literacy at bay. One question to be pursued in this chapter is whether these new means of communication really harm literacy and the development of communicative competence or whether media like email and SMS trigger or foster new ways of communication.

The first SMS was sent from a personal computer to a mobile phone on the Vodafone Network in 1992. Within less than a decade the new medium experienced such an increase that the number of SMS in the GSM (Global System for Mobile Communications) network reached one billion per month in April 1999 and has amounted to about thirty billion in December 2001 (Figure 8.1).

Although there has always been a dialectic or symbiotic relationship between economic and media development, the introduction of new media uses has always been a cause of concern for the public and the self-styled guardians of language and tradition (see Milroy and Milroy 1999; Baron 2000: 44–5; Thimm 2000: 9–10). Despite their wide usage, new message types like SMS and emails still appear unnatural or odd at least to parts of the public. Email has been frequently accused of ruining letter-style writing and grammar in particular, while short messaging is sometimes portrayed as a prime menace to communicative skills. Not only does it ruin the linguistic abilities of its mostly underage users, but it hinders the development of communicative competence in general: 'It could restrict people's ability to communicate. The quantity is increasing but the quality is rapidly decreasing' (Ken Lodge, cited in Allison 2001).

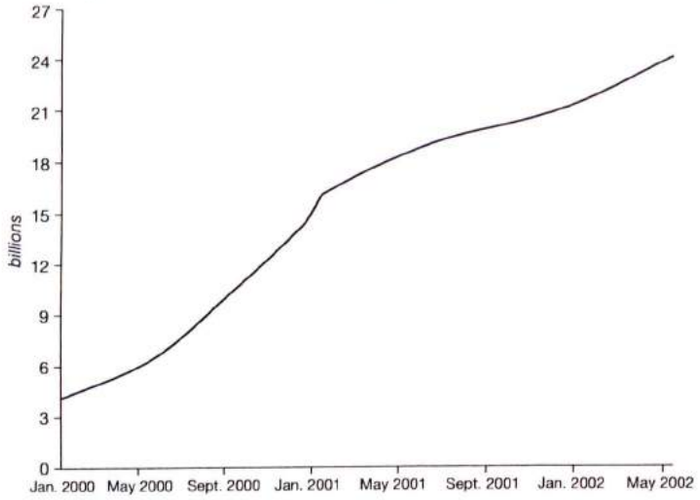


*Figure 8.1* Increase in SMS traffic, 2000–2 (source: GSM Association, 2002).

In order to assess the advantages and disadvantages of the new media, one particularly marked genre has been selected: love letters.[1] What makes these a marked genre is their prototypical content. Speaking about love and romance or wooing a partner implicitly forbids brevity, clarity and directness. On the contrary, it should call for 'beautiful words' and metaphorical language, in short: an elaborate style. Working on the assumption of *vita brevis, lingua brevis*, the modern media should have profound effects on this particular type of text. Thus, it is a key question whether modern means of communication have changed the content and quality of love letters. The medium may not only be the message, it may also determine its shape.

## Love letters as a genre

The genre 'letter' is not new to sociolinguistic research and has been subject to frequent discussions from a text-type theoretical, sociopsychological and technical perspective (e.g. Nickisch 1991; Barton and Hall 2000). 'Love letters', however, despite their huge popularity, have rarely surfaced in such research. This may be due to two facts. First, the topic is somewhat delicate and research material is difficult to obtain. Who would want to submit their personal, most intimate letters to (socio-) linguistic research? Second, research in love letters as such does not have the same practical applicability as that in business letters or job applications. However, there is no reason to assume that love letters do



not constitute a sub-genre that is of equal linguistic interest to any other type of letter. They constitute both '[A] *message type that recurs regularly in a community* (in terms of semantic content, participants, occasions of use . . .)' (Ferguson 1994: 21; emphasis original) and 'a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes' (Swales 1990: 58). Their purpose is, quite simply, to express amorous feelings and woo a partner. The question, however, remains, if, and in what ways, their identifying genre internal structure has changed over time.

Despite the fact that many people prefer not to talk about them, most have probably written or received love letters in their lives. Moreover, there seems to be a common perennial idea of what love letters should look like and how they should be composed. As regards materiality, the prototypical love letter (in most European societies) is hand-written on high-quality paper and may be decorated with certain attachments like sealing wax or ribbons, perfume, etc. As regards language, it should be written in a careful, elevated style; erotic maybe, but not overtly loaded with blunt sexuality. The imagery is conventionally limited; nevertheless writers should try to be as original as possible. Orthography, grammar, etc. should be flawless; corrections should be kept to a minimum. As regards content, it should flatter the recipient and describe the desire or longing of the author to be with the addressee. All these images and ideas seem to stem from a somewhat romanticized ideal depicted in literature and the cinema (e.g. Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac*). Collections like those by Lovric (1991) further promote this widespread prototype.

But does this prototype correspond to reality, present or past? As it turns out, this romantic, idealized notion is largely misconceived. Most of the (historical) love letters available today were written by important public figures. There are Ovid's love letters, one of Henry VIII to Anne Boleyn, the letters of Napoleon to Josephine and those of Simon de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, to name only a few. The following excerpt illustrates this prototypical form:

> Take a little tender witchcraft of Love, and add it to the generous, the honourable sentiment of manly Friendship, and I know but one more delightful morsel, which few, few in rank ever taste. Such a composition is like adding cream to strawberries: it not only gives the fruit a more elegant richness, but has a peculiar deliciousness of its own.
>
> (Robert Burns to Agnes MacLehose, 21 December 1787)

The reason these letters were retained was their authors' renown – in some cases, the writers were even aware of this. Thus, the researcher faces the so-called observer's paradox, as described by Labov and others for present-day

sociolinguistics (see Wardaugh 1998: 17–18): people talk differently when they know they are being observed or recorded. Moreover, this type of love letter was composed by highly literate authors. Therefore, it may be argued that it does not reflect actual language use of common people. This, in turn, means that the present-day cliché is based on one particular type of letter which today rarely, if ever, occurs. The historical data available mostly captures the upper end of the stylistic 'literacy' spectrum, while statements about literacy today mostly refer to the lower end of the spectrum. What this leads to, eventually, is comparing apples and pears.

One of the few sources of private lower-class language available today is the nineteenth-century London Foundling Hospital letters. The Hospital was a refuge for so-called 'fallen girls':

> those daughters of the people who applied to the Foundling Hospital did possess notes and love letters, which they attached carefully to their admission forms by way of evidence. Snippets of sentimental conversation, fragments of vanquished exchanges, faint echoing half-phrases in overlapping male and female voices, are thus retrieved from the depths of time.
>
> (Barret-Ducrocq 1991: 114)

These documents probably show much more accurately what the 'average' historical love letter looked liked. These letters were written with emotion, at the spur of the moment, by people who surely did not think their writings would be kept for future use of any kind. One striking feature, for instance, as Barret-Ducrocq notes (ibid.), is that this 'rare and precious material' shows a 'variety of tone, content and cultural level'. Contrary to what may be commonly assumed, only very few of these documents are devoted exclusively to the expression of amorous sentiments. Most of them were written for everyday purposes like making, altering or cancelling appointments. Also, authors were forced by convention to circumscribe their physical desires. Many examples show somebody swearing eternal love in the first lines of the letter, followed by a description of a job they had to carry out. Hardly any letter matched the prototypical letters described above:

> You will think it very unkind of me for not writing to you before but you will not when I tell you the reason I have been to Hastings with my master for a week and I enjoyed it very much indeed I should very much like for you to have been there with me indeed as Hastings is a very nice place . . .
>
> I wish that you were living there with me . . . Your affectionate lover, John J.
> XXXXXXXXX
>
> My dearest Eliza, I just received your welcome letter and was verry pleased to Receive it i was rather Disappointed as i hurried home for you but i know it cant be helped at all times . . .
>
> I accept the kisses you sent in your note with pleasure and will return with interests on Friday night althou I would rather had them from your lips than your hands . . .

Frequently we find the graphic symbolization of kisses as X. Also, as will be shown in the following section, the use of images and metaphors is very much the same as those in present-day emails and SMS.



## Modern media: *vita brevis, lingua brevis*?

Globalization and medialization processes have led to an increase in communication efficiency and speed. The aim was to facilitate communication, to make it faster and less costly. Whereas most media were originally designed for business purposes only (i.e. to be used by a limited number of people for certain designated purposes), they have clearly lost that status by now. These technical means are used just as much, if not even more, for private communication. This may be called the exaptation of these means of communication, meaning that a medium originally designed for a specific purpose is transposed to another context (e.g. the private sphere). With the expansion of these new media, patterns of communication have also undergone great changes. An SMS dialogue like the following appears to be quite 'normal' today, at least among the younger generation:

| | |
|---|---|
| Hi How r u? | Hi! How are you? |
| Hi Gr8 thkz | Hi. Great. Thanks. |
| ILUVU Wubmv? ;-) | I love you. Would you be my Valentine? |
| ROFL | Rolling on the floor laughing. |
| :'-( | Crying |
| oxoxoLUWAM<3 >->- | Hugs and Kisses, I love you with all my heart. Roses. |
| IU2LUVUBIAON | I used to love you but it's all over now. |
| DROP 8-# | Drop dead. |

SMS are messages of up to 160 characters, including spaces, which are sent and received via mobile phones (and special services on the internet). Because of the limited number of characters available, SMS writers have started to use and conventionalize certain complex iconic and symbolic signs. Adolescents in particular have begun to use their computers and mobile phones very creatively. Thus, the medium (itself) has become an essential part of the message and determines its shape. However, from what has been said so far it appears as if mobile phones cannot be the ideal way of communicating sentimental and romantic feelings. Technical requirements force writers to use a rather plain and direct style. Nevertheless, it appears that many people do use SMS (and email) as a medium for their love messages. VirginMobile reported that half of Britain's mobile users, i.e. twelve million people in 1999, *expected* a Valentine's text message from their lovers. In 2001, about 25 per cent of all weekly SMS in the UK, i.e. seventy-one million, contained flirtatious or romantic text (Garcia-Robles 2001). Also, it can be observed that more and more people are willing to publish the results of their romantic creativity on internet websites. Why has a rapidly growing number of people started using email and SMS for communicating their intimate feelings? Why are very many of them eager to present their messages on the internet? And do these new means of communication displace the old love letter?

Interviews show that the specific qualities of SMS and email make up a major part of their attraction. First, many people appreciate the local and temporal distance, especially when transmitting intimate messages. Thus, most of them feel more comfortable speaking openly about feelings, desires and conflicts. 'It seems these new forms of communication have filled a gap, offering something that face to face conversation does not' (Gaines 2001). Second, both email and SMS offer very comfortable, quick and easy ways of sending messages without forcing authors to sit down with pen and paper and write a letter to their loved ones, which they then have to take to the post office and pay for. 'The fact that email and text messaging are both short and quick is a big part of the attraction. Many people find them more informal than making a phone call or writing a letter, and so simpler to use' (Gaines 2001). In addition, for some contributors, the public declaration on the internet seems to have a greater value or is somehow modern, frank and bold: 'will u please announce to the nation that susan loves peter. ta. ;@)' (SMS posted on a website). The results confirmed what sociopsychologists have suspected for a long time. Email, SMS and internet chat reduce the factor of 'embarrassment' and 'inhibitiveness' to a minimum (see Döring 1999, 2000). There are full communicative possibilities without the hassle of interpersonal eye-to-eye contact. The disappearance of former taboos



seems to have opened up the floor to something comparable to a kind of emotional exhibitionism.

Although users of email and SMS tend to use a more 'simple style', many love mails still contain the same images, metaphors and codes as the pen-and-paper love letters of the nineteenth century:

> It might frighten you and make you less inclined to kiss me. And although I wouldn't blame you, I don't want that to happen. Your kisses don't come very often as it is (even in your messages I'm rationed to only two X's!), and I certainly don't want to make them even less frequent.
>
> [email]

> To my angel . . . you are my dream come true. My life is my heaven now with you in it . . . you are my angel . . . I love you. I love you. I love you.
> :-)
> ~*~Joe~*~
>
> [email]

> If friendship could be bought or sold, as if it was stocks and shares. Those wise enough to invest in you, would all be Millionaires Luv Mel :o)
>
> [SMS]

> i love my lovely honey bunny very muchly shes the bestest
>
> [SMS]

> som1 tell sugarlips I LOVE HER!!! babychops ;-) xxxxxxx
>
> [SMS]

> dont luv sum1 like a flower —-;-<@ bcoz a flower dies in season. luv them like a river bcoz a river flows 4eva
>
> [SMS]

> Jon – u are the * in my life! I'll always be yours. <3 <3 <3 love Cath
>
> [SMS]

The metaphors and images still revolve around LOVE as a JOURNEY, as a UNITY, as INSANITY; the object of Love as (appetizing) food, as a valuable object or divine being; BEAUTY or LOVE as a (natural) FORCE, etc. (see Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 139–40; Kövecses 1988). We also note very few

differences in syntax and style, and these certainly do correspond to the differences in spoken and written language at around 1900 (as, for instance, the double superlative *bestest*, the overgeneralization of the adverb marker -ly, or the omission of various apostrophes), and so these are not particular to love letters. What can be seen, however, is the frequent use of creative iconicity (e.g. >->- 'Roses', <3 'Heart') and phonetic spellings (*bcoz*, *luv*). But, again, the latter is not unusual in comparison to earlier lower-class letters. There may be some differences, however, in the content of these messages. In older letters we rarely find sexual allusions, which is probably due to men's fear of paternity suits. Although the reduced space in SMS does not *necessarily* lead to more explicitness, it adds one possibility in this respect. While most SMS describe fairly harmless 'puppy love', as one person put it, 18 per cent of all users in the 1999 Nokia survey reported they also used SMS for naughty messaging of some kind (see Middleton 2000; SiemensMobile 2002).

So what has changed is that there is now another level on which users can toy around with language. On one level we still find old-fashioned writing, but on another there are short forms such as IU2LUVUBIAON ('I used to love you, but it's all over now'), PLZ4GVME ('please forgive me'), or emoticons such as ;-) ('wink') or :-& ('tongue tied'). There is no general tendency to use short forms, though. Most SMS resemble ordinary written language, despite colloquialisms such as 'U' ('you'), 'R' ('are'), '2' ('too'), which are frequent in informal writing (like postcards) anyway. Apart from that, SMS have surprisingly similar traits to common letter-writing in the nineteenth century. People use it mostly for giving short reports, making appointments, sending regards, but also for declaring their feelings.

## Conclusion

The results of this study are of four different kinds, two relating to historical letter-writing and two to modern media. First, it has been shown that the commonplace conception of traditional love letters is somewhat misguided. Second, we can see, also on the basis of these letters, that what is commonly described as normal letter-writing style is clearly more a myth than a fact (see Milroy 1998). Lower-class writers (at least) were no more literate than today. The letters from the London Foundling Hospital contain a wealth of shibboleths and 'mistakes' on all language levels. A third result relates to present-day data. Here it can be seen that emails and SMS do not necessarily lead to directness and frankness in expression (except in 'naughty messages'). Instead, we find recurring figures and metaphors across all centuries. Also, the employment of orthographic symbols and secret written codes seems to be a stable feature of love letters



across centuries and media: the 'X' in the nineteenth-century letter finds its equivalent in twentieth-century SMS 'X', the hand-written heart-shaped 'i-dot' has become the typed '<3'. This leads to a fourth, last and most important result. It seems that emails and short messaging today do not endanger literacy in their users by any means. Instead it may be argued that these media trigger and foster a hitherto unknown linguistic creativity in their users. Writers have always made the best of the graphic and linguistic means available; today, this is no different. Language users develop new means of communication *in addition to already existing ones*. It may be argued that the verbal play of SMS requires just as high and complex literary skills as letter-writing. The objection that SMS incur social isolation and loss of verbal skills can also be discarded. A diversification of communicative means, maybe in a Darwinian sense, can be diagnosed. As new communicative and linguistic skills develop, the emergence of a new kind of mass (media) literacy and creativity need not oust existing skills but may be extremely useful for the development of both old and new capacities in young people, always depending on what they want to do with the media at hand.

## Note

1 This chapter presents work in progress from a larger research project concerned with the evolution of late modern English text types, carried out at the Forschungszentrum für Kommunikation, Medien und Sprache, University of Düsseldorf.

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