THE INFLUENCE OF MOBILE PHONE IN SHAPING THE IDENTITY OF RURAL TEENAGERS. CASE STUDY IN GALICIA

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INTRODUCTION

The isolation of rural communities has been a recurring topic throughout time (Copus 2001). Rural adolescents have never had the same ready access to means of communication as urban adolescents because the arrival and spread of innovation and technology to rural and outlying areas has always lagged behind (Cairncross 1997). Likewise, because of pure physical distance and low population density, face-to-face communication has also been greatly limited. That is why the habits of social relationships and communication have always been different in rural and urban areas (Cairncross 1997; Kalantaridis 2006). But now we are currently witnessing an entirely new social scene where rural adolescents participate fully in mobile communication and the possibilities of future economic development that this might mean will no longer depend on, nor will be determined by, inaccessibility and isolation (Friedman 2006). Conventional telephones were slow to arrive to Galician towns and villages, but our findings show that mobile telephone usage is quickly spreading and with it the possibility of overcoming the geographical and social isolation and inaccessibility inherent in rural areas.

In Gordo López (2006), the Internet is a channel of participation and expression for Spanish university students, the Messenger culture seen as an instantaneous culture readily accessible to young adults and adolescents. In the study herein, we observe that mobile telephones and text messages also constitute vital elements in the socialization process of secondary school students from rural Galicia. Interesting questions thus arise as to the extent this technology contributes to bridging the digital divide between rural and urban communities, how and for what purpose it is used, and its relationship to conventional off-line means of communication.

The present article offers the findings of research carried out on a group of secondary school students from the district of Santa Comba, an agricultural region found in the interior of A Coruña, Galicia. Our research methods include quantitative and qualitative techniques as well as participant observation in group work sessions held in the students' school. Our findings show that mobile communication is fully in place in this rural community, which raises questions regarding rural isolation and the future of communication. Our objective is to examine mobile telephone usage among rural adolescents and to determine if gender accounts for any significant difference in this usage, particularly in text messaging and the communicative purposes for which text messages are produced.

METHODOLOGY AND FIELD WORK

Our case study takes place in a secondary school in Santa Comba, a rural agricultural district in Galicia located 35 kilometers from Santiago de Compostela (see map 1). From a socioeconomic perspective, the regional surroundings of Santa Comba respond to rural patterns of low demographic density. It has a total population of some 10,500 inhabitants distributed throughout dozens of farms and villages. In the last four decades, it has clearly undergone pronounced rural flight and has become demographically recessive. Notwithstanding, Santa Comba boasts highly fertile land for cattle ranching and specializes in dairy cattle and milk production. This translates into a higher-than-average per capita income of other Galician districts and an equal, or even higher, income than some principal Galician cities (see IGE 2008).

We carried out our research in a public secondary school called Terra do Xallas. Our study was only possible thanks to the full cooperation of the administrative and teaching staff along with that of the adolescent participants themselves, whose ages ranged from 12 to 15. Given that all the participants were minors, we obtained their parents' consent (through the school's administration) prior to initiating our research. Participant observation and data collection took place in the classroom during four intense work sessions. Our qualitative research method was based on participant observation techniques typical of anthropography, with extremely close individual and group interaction among researchers and students alike. Communicating with young adolescents is no easy task for adults outside their social circle. In the light of this, we set out to establish an informal and thought-provoking working relationship. We communicated the details and objectives of our research openly and clearly, thus creating an atmosphere of mutual trust. Research and data collection took place in two consecutive and complementary phases. We divided the participants into two groups: older adolescents (aged 14 to15) with greater experience using mobile telephones but more apprehensive about publicly showing their text messages, and younger adolescents (under age 14) with less experience using mobile telephones but more willing to share their text messages.

In the first phase of data collection we realized focus groups to gather the opinions of 19 tenth-grade students (7 boys and 12 girls) all between the ages of 14 and 15. The topics debated included ownership of digital technologies, ability and experience using digital technologies, patterns of interaction and communication, expression of identity, invasion of privacy and control in mobile telephone usage, physical and emotional safety, and addictive behavior in the use of digital technologies.

During the debate, we systematically introduced general information about the topics to be discussed. From there, students gave their opinion on and subjective evaluation of that information. These opinions and evaluations would then serve to open group dialogs and orderly discussions. So as not to influence the participants' opinions, we limited our participation in these discussions to strict observation. However, we are uncertain to what extent our mere presence as researchers might have conditioned the results.

In the second phase of research, we collected, observed and analyzed the mobile text messages of 16 seventh-grade students: eight boys and eight girls aged 12 to 14. To do so, students were asked to complete an open survey in which they reproduced the text messages they had sent prior to completing the survey and that were saved in «sent messages» on their mobiles. The students themselves chose which messages to include and reproduced the text exactly as it had been sent. In addition, they also rewrote the text as it would appear in full form using formal rules of writing. We also collected data regarding their age (all were born between 1996 and 1997), sex, language of choice, and approximate time they spend sending text messages daily.

CONCLUSION AND FINAL REMARKS

For the rural adolescents in our sample, mobile phones have become an integral part of their daily life, which they use primarily to exchange text messages. They feel that having a mobile phone gives them greater independence from their parents and allows them to become socially integrated in their peer groups. Girls are more dependent on their mobiles than boys, and they value the intimacy this technology allows them to have in their social relationships more as well. They also place greater value on knowing their relatives can locate them at any time and the sense of security this gives them. Although both boys and girls express feeling a certain amount of anxiety if they are deprived of their mobiles, girls experience this anxiety to a greater degree.

When complex communicative exchanges are what adolescents seek, text messages serve to set up a time and place to meet or to redirect interaction to another channel of communication. But even though adolescents prefer other systems of communication (such as voice calls or Internet chat rooms), they are more inclined to use mobile text messaging because it is quick and affordable. And it is precisely these two features which adolescents take advantage of to be permanently connected to their peers. What is important for adolescents is to establish a mutual «being there» with their peers— to verify that their friends are «there» while confirming their own presence. This thus explains why their text messages have a predominantly appellative, phatic, or phatic-appellative function: to solicit interaction or to open or maintain a communicative exchange. As Carmen Galán (2004) affirms, «being informed in these new times is nothing more than constantly being online, that is, available to and locatable by everyone and for the most frivolous things. […] [W]e no longer have to 'tell things,' we have 'to be locatable,' which is the same as saying identified.»

Obtaining data from female participants was much easier than from male participants; girls seem to be more inclined than boys to use mobile text messaging, or at least are more willing and enthusiastic to share their experience. The reasons for this are unclear to us. One possibility contemplated and confirmed in this study is that boys and girls use text

messaging for different reasons; therefore, it is more interesting and effective for one group than for the other. What our data reveal is that girls take particular advantage of this form of communication for expressive and phatic functions.

Working with a corpus of text messages instead of with complete sequences of dialogs greatly limits our understanding of the messages and their true intentions. Only by having the sequence of turn-takings that comprise the complete communicative exchange can we begin to understand those messages whose intentions are ambiguous, analyze the presence of greetings and leave-takings, detect code-switching caused by external factors, and understand why so much punctuation has become superfluous in real communicative situations through written channels.

It is interesting to observe where the priorities of adolescents have taken language itself. The desire for monetary savings has lead to linguistic economy as well in the reduction of characters. Their ultimate objective is to send a message whose intention is perfectly clear at the lowest monetary and linguistic cost possible. Perhaps we are thus witnessing the conformation of an authentic jargon linked to language economy in which the pragmatic factors that surround a communicative act are crucial for the message to make sense.

In short, we can argue that traditional rural isolation can be overcome thanks to the mobile telephone. Our case study in Galicia has demonstrated that the rural adolescents in our sample fully embrace this technology to be permanently connected, thus getting around both the physical and social isolation inherent in rural communities. In the light of all these findings, and looking toward the future, we are left with interesting comparative research on urban adolescents.