

When the object and the cultural meet to shape the SMS. Incorporating and ex-corporating a media of communication

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The study of the discourses which characterize the youngsters' culture, pinpointing the way they elaborate certain strategies to overcome the restraints imposed by the objective limitations of the technical object and the analysis of the way in which the young users construct their self image through the text message are indispensable for understanding the relation between the subject (the individual) and the object (the SMS). I discuss apparently contradictory realities, inscribed within the paradigm of the teenage praxis; the implicit rules of the usage of the message by teenagers (the collective norm) are opposite, in practice, to the differentiation strategies between individuals (individual practices).

Starting from an individual level... Between adults' fear and the norm of integration within the group

In the phase of adopting the SMS to a collective level, I talked about two contradictory attitudes appeared once with the cell phone: idealization and fear. The first paradox is the adoption „in silence” of cell phone to teenagers. Confronted with really negative and even aggressive representations from parents, teachers and media channels, they continued their „work” on cell phone, adopting this form of communication. I found the explanation by retracing the individual line of adopting it: the logic of being integrated. It seems that the tyranny of majority is stronger than any warning.

Besides the logics of use described so far in the sociological literature (meaning utility, autonomy, integration), I think there is another logic of adoption which could be the most important to teenagers and that reinforces the use of SMS. We talk about the the logic of entertainment and playfulness. This value is not determined by the emergency of a new language, but it constitutes a youth attitude that, in this case, is expressed specifically within the textual communication (Machado Pais, 1993, Yaguello, 1993). What is therefore the reason for which the SMS is being perceived as amusing? It allows make the time passes; being in classes, during breaks or in the bus, teens send text messages and initiate a communication or simply establish a contact with another person who is available. “Even it is something important and I have to answer immediately, or the class is not so interesting, we cannot help ourselves not to text as it is a way to talk to someone else; you can send a stupid thing like are you free Friday night?, we can say that, but, as we get bored to a class, we feel like doing that in that specific moment”, says a girl.

Passing to a group level...

Another reality instituted by the SMS is a paradoxical one: teenagers have declared they use

messages for delicate matters which cannot be discussed in a direct communication – the graphic space and synchronic nature of the SMS offer them the emotional protection they need to “go further”, to make declarations, to say tender words, under the implicit cover of the semi-frivolous text message. The next message may be a relevant example for this attitude: "si te iubesc d nu mai pot simt k dau pe afara... si e patu asta aj d mic... si c mumos neam inghesui noi in el...sa ma incolacesc in jurul tau...baiat mumos c am!". "It's common knowledge that the SMS isn't that serious and that we allow ourselves to say I love you in one, then take it back the next day" says Carolina, 19 years old, student at the University of Bologna. The frivolity and lack of seriousness of the SMS come from its ludical character and that is why Ohana prefers to use tender words moderately: "you can't know if the other is truthful, so I don't want to take any chances". These risks, though, are part of the game of love. For Carolina, the frivolous character of the SMS is one of the unwritten and unsaid rules shared by the users of the text message. When she broke it off with an ex boyfriend, he sent her an email with all her previous love messages. This gesture reveals the difference of perception on the use of tenderness in SMS-es. While she had a rather ludical perception on the affective message, her boyfriend considered that taking it seriously and respecting one's feelings is more important than playing games.

Arriving to a cultural level...

Teenage sociability, as I showed previously, is governed by certain well established principles. Juvenile social networks have a special configuration: they are extended and, at the same time, tight on the age. Forming and maintaining friendships require precise contexts and group identities. Cl. Bidart defined the teenage networks as "gigogne", "less engaged by personal links than by habits of frequentation and progressive recognition by others habited people". Friendships appear and dissolve during school. Outside school, social links are established in contexts such as the block, the neighbourhood, holidays, common leisure time. Thus, teenagers cultivate at the same time a large number of weak connections and a small number of strong ones. Like I have already showed, gender is a factor of ruling inside the social practices. If boys privilege more weak links, girls establish strong ones.

Both genders, though, are faced with what D. Pasquier calls in her book high-school culture: "(...) in high school space, it is really difficult to escape from others' judgement with whom it is maintained weak links but who are not less present in daily life. It's the famous difference between pals – dynamic group of individuals with whom relations are very weakly invested and who comprises also pals of pals, situation which can lead to groups of relations finally very big – and friends – with whom relations can be more intimate. Any teenager is capable to operate between these distinctions and a such grading within its frequentations, as long as he it capable to understand that at high school social life means to maintain by all means these two modes of relation".

The implicit rules which function as prohibitive in high-school culture are heavier on the weak links than on the strong ones. This is yet another paradox that defines teenage culture. These restraints refer to declaring and showing off cultural preferences. In the network of weak connections, there is a very high pressure on imposing conformity and low tolerance to the expression of the different. Groups dictate codes while the ridicule and the marginalization are the social stigmata of the teenage culture.

The same logic of conformity and of following the rules may be noticed in the case of the use of SMS. The use comes from a continuous negotiation between the user and the object used. This negotiation has led to rules concerning usage in the case of the SMS and other technological objects and socio-technological networks. These rules stabilize and become a frame of communication for different teenage groups.

Conclusions: Moving from group usages to collective and even cultural ones is reflected in the process of incorporating the object. At this time, the mobile phone is becoming a “total” object, meaning that it takes technical features from other instruments, but it improves them and adds new ones. GSM is, now, an aesthetic sign, practically incorporated within the social body of teenagers, and the SMS becomes a common and normal practice, so that the user is perfectly comfortable in using it. Still the process of incorporation is a reciprocal process; teenagers also build relations with the electronic objects. These relations establish a generational profile which explains the appearance of the SMS and its success at teenager of all spaces (Romania or Belgium).

Notes:

1. Translation: And I really love you. I feel that I will burst... and this bed is so small... and how nice would be to be together... you're such a nice boy!
2. Fragment of an interview realized with an Italian student came with Erasmus scholarship To Free University of Brussels. Our field, realized from a comparative manner, was completed by discussions with foreign students came in Belgium with mobilities scholarships. This example seemed to me representative for the described practice and that's why I gave it as example.
3. Interview extract.
4. Gigogne = noun. fem., it is used in the popular expression "C'est une mère Gigogne", a woman with many children, alluding to a character in the doll theater who was reresented surrounded by many kids. In analogy, « Table gigogne » means furniture composed of several tables coming out from one another (source : Petit Robert).
5. Quoted., p. 219; Approx. translation
6. D. Pasquier, Cultures lycéennes. La tyrannie de la majorité, Editions Autrement, Collections Mutations, Paris, 2005.
7. Idem, p. 60; Approx. translation