

**Increasing the quality of written communication for university students:  
Lessons learnt from the SMS language mode**

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In an article of the New York Times published on 7 January 2007, entitled *Retronym*, William SAFIRE popularized the notion of *retronymy*, introduced by Frank Mankiewicz in the 1980's. *Retronymy* consists in re-qualifying objects by taking their evolution into account. The common example to illustrate retronymy is the word "guitar", *retronymized* by the word "acoustic guitar" when the "electric" guitar appeared.

The question we seek to develop in this paper is based on the idea of "retro" (return) applied to the production of writing, in its process rather than in its object by examining the paradox of the empowering effects of restricted choice. Following the call for papers, this work falls into educational technology and applied linguistics themes.

**1- The screen-media and the functions of language**

Today, students born in the 1990's have grown up with the screen-media. They use their own screen-media every day: their mobile phones, their *Netbooks* and their laptops. The screen-media have influenced their habits in the writing process. To use the screen-media, they have had to innovate ways to write quickly and efficiently, such as the "SMS language". The consequence of this is that the writing process is thought as an immediate process. The message written is aimed at being received immediately in a near synchronous mode of communication. The immediate reception implies that the addressee will send back a response rapidly. Classroom experience has shown that, for example, when students send a teacher files attached in an email, they often request an answer, even if they use the "read receipt function" of *Outlook*.

If we refer to JAKOBSON's linguistic theory, this means that the user develops *at the same time* the conative and the phatic (feedback) functions of the language. The user of the screen-media, seeks immediacy by needing to act on the addressee as proof of an action affecting the addressee beyond the "simple" issue of reception (phatic function). Alain Derycke, a research in ICT and education, refers to this coexistence by citing examples of

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teenagers waking up in the middle of the night to take a look on the latest messages on their mobile telephones.

But what happens when the conative and the phatic (feedback) functions are separated in time ? What happens when a student has to construct a conative strategy without any immediate acknowledgment of the reception of the message sent?

## **2- Increasing communicative quality and the formal context : a paradox**

As a tutor in communication skills in French to French undergraduate students, I am in charge of teaching students how to prepare themselves for the job market. This includes how to contact companies, in particular how to find an apprenticeship contract to enter a School of engineering or for a job. This means that students have to write job application letters. This letter is a document that needs to highlight the conative function of language use without having the results of their action. Considering that the result will not be immediate, mobile telephone-experienced students, today, have particular difficulties in communicating in an asynchronous conative way. The consequence is this is that their letters are reduced to simple factual declarations. Instead of developing an argumentative strategy, they transmit facts and requests. The letters can be summarily be described as: "I'm a student and I'm going to obtain my degree. My degree will allow me to integrate your School of engineering. I hope you this is interest to you because I would like to enroll into your school. Best regards."

These difficulties are interesting because students seem unable to write effectively even when they know what they want to do and are undoubtedly motivated. The gap between their abilities and the result means that students do not consider the job application letter as an efficient piece of writing because written communication is efficient only if there is some form of immediate feedback (phatic function). Writing and posting a *real* paper (we need here to use a retronym) has become a formal ritual and this has a detrimental effect on the quality of the message. For students, the job application letter is not an efficient piece of writing where in reality the letter needs to be highly for the reader, in this case the future employer of head of studies of a School of Engineering.

If we try to make sense of these difficulties, we can find a paradox: when the formal context is restrictive (only 160 characters for a SMS for example), the ability to communicate is high. But when the formal context is more or less open (explain your reasons for applying for the job, tell me more about yourself), the ability to communicate is relatively low. It would not have been unreasonable to assume that with less restriction, the student would feel more liberated and more creative in what is written and how to express ideas. It would appear, however, that in a *hyper-formalized context*, the content appears efficient because the content is the most important parameter, whereas in a *hypo-formalized context*, the content is less efficient because the more formal character becomes more important parameter.

## **3- Teaching with... Jean Racine**

Through this paradox, an important question remains: how can we inject communicative quality in a hypo-formal context ? If we borrow the notion of *retronymy*, we can use it for the writing process by introducing the notion of *retro-writing*. The method of the *retro-writing* consists in re-qualifying the traditional writing process of a job application letter based on the screen media writing process. We hypothesize that communicative quality can be evaluated through observable effects. Therefore, when students can conceive and anticipate the effect of their writing (when they can pre-observe it) they become more empowered of developing an efficient strategy in drawing up a job application letter. The feedback, applied to situations of evaluating students' written work "*in vivo*", has shown that taking into account

the effects first (more than the objective that is already known by the student) narrows choices in a rational way and increases the quality of the content.

But nothing is new about this: it was already Racine's point of view when he declared: "Ma tragédie est faite, je n'ai plus qu'à l'écrire" (My tragedy is done, I now have but to write it").

## **References**

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