Foreword

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SMS is a genre in which the ideational, identifying, and ludic functions of language combine in a climate of rapid technological change. As such, it presents linguists with a special challenge. One begins a research project, confident that one is at the cutting-edge of language study, and concludes it a couple of years later only to find that actually what one has been doing is historical linguistics! Those who began to study Twitter between 2006 and 2009 know exactly what I mean. When Twitter changed its prompt (from 'What are you doing?' to 'What's happening?'), the change of orientation from an inward-looking to an outward-looking perspective resulted in a significant shift both in linguistic content and linguistic form. Messages that previously focussed solely on 'I', 'me', and 'we' were now presenting narratives that prioritized 'it', 'he', and 'she'. Generalizations about Twitterspeak in its first three years no longer applied to its next three. And who knows what will happen in the three years after that?

Linguists therefore have to get their act together, otherwise they will miss the opportunity to analyse the properties of a new medium of communication in its earliest stages of evolution, and this is why the present volume is timely. There are no precedents here: linguists weren't around when speech, writing, and signing developed. But here is electronically mediated communication, in its various technological outputs, displaying a veritable explosion of linguistic innovation, and offering exciting opportunities for description and analysis. It is a field where it is virtually impossible to do anything other than original research. With some fields (Shakespeare comes to mind), investigators can struggle to find a new angle, simply because of the amount of study that has already been carried out. That is not the case here. Every language, dialect, and social group develops its own brand of electronic communication, and very few of these varieties have had their linguistic character analysed — or even recorded.

Several of the papers in this volume acknowledge this lack of research. SMS has suffered especially from the mythology which surrounded its arrival in the early 2000s. Linguists who were concerned to establish the properties of this new genre found that much of their energy was channelled into corrective presentations.

I have lost track of the number of hours I spent trying to counter the bizarre characterizations of SMS that appeared in the media, or the hysterical haranguings that emanated from radio and newspaper journalists. I would far rather have devoted that energy to the kind of research that we see presented in these pages. Specifically linguistic initiatives were also sidelined by the way popular debate focused on the imagined consequences of SMS for children in school, especially in relation to spelling. It proved far easier to get a grant to explore educational outcomes than to provide linguistic descriptions.

We need these descriptions, and their associated analyses, and nowhere more urgently than in relation to SMS, for this is a genre whose future is unclear. Although the increase in mobile communication is one of the major trends at present, especially in parts of the world where Internet access via conventional terminals is limited by poor wired connections, we are also encountering another trend, in which the proportion of oral/aural to graphic electronic communication is steadily rising, and a world where speech-to-text software is high quality and routine is just around the corner. What will happen to SMS then?

Looking back at the papers in this volume in ten year's time, I think they will be of value because they present a synchronic snapshot of the kinds of things that were happening during the early days of a new genre. Some of the features they describe are likely to be transient, in the sense that they will either be replaced by features reflecting new technology or be dropped because they are no longer of interest to users. I remember going into secondary schools in Britain in the early 2000s and finding that all the children were experimenting with what they felt to be exciting nonstandard abbreviatory conventions. Continued visits through the decade and into 2012 saw many changes. In a recent visit to one school, the students had collected text messages from each grade, and found that, the younger the students, the more they used abbreviated forms. The abbreviations had largely disappeared from older children's texts. 'We used to do that when we were younger', said one 17-year-old. 'Textisms are naff [i.e. unfashionable]', said another. 'I stopped using them when my parents started to', said a third.

A decade is a short time in linguistics.