DISCURSIVE MOBILE PHONE PRACTICES AND INFORMAL RULES

CLARE LLOYD
University of Newcastle
University Drive, Callaghan NSW, Australia

Abstract. This paper uses Discourse Analysis (DA) to investigate the socially constructed discursive practices of mobile phone use; specifically it examines the informal rules of mobile phone use. It qualitatively investigates mobile phone use within an Australian cultural context. „Discourse theory begins with the assumption that all objects and actions are meaningful, and that their meaning is a product of historically specific systems of rules' (Howarth 2000, p. 8). Evidence of socially constructed textual meanings related to mobile phone use is found in the informal rules created (and practiced); those that in some way govern the use of mobile phones. The research reveals that there are divergences and inconsistencies within the discourse of mobile phone use, and illustrates that individuals make differing personal choices in similar social contexts.

1.   Introduction

This paper investigates how informal rules within the discourse of mobile phone use are being normalised into a code or etiquette, through social negotiation. Mobile phones have only been present in Australia for approximately 20 years (AAP 2007a para. 4); with the first mobile phone call being made February 23, 1987. From 1987, the proportion of Australians using mobile telephony in Australia went from only 1.1% in 1990 (International Telecommunications Union (2003) in Madden, Coble-Neal, Schipp & Dalzell 2004, p1), to 81% in 2004-05 (Allen Consulting Group (ACG) 2005, p. vii). Evidently the use of mobile phones in the past 20 years has expanded to the point where they are now used by the majority of Australians. Hence it is only relatively recently that informal rules have appeared for mobile phone use in Australia. Who is making the decisions that create and implement these informally recognised rules? In many cases the formation of informal rules is still in progress, they are being worked out via everyday negotiations.

2.   Relevant Literature

The past decade has seen a number of researchers publish on mobile phones and their uses across a wide range of disciplines. Research is now available from Business Studies

(Yusuf & Naseri, 2003), Information Systems (Carroll, Howard, Vetere, Peck & Murphy, 2001), Psychology (Cumiskey, 2005; Walsh, White & Young, 2007), and Media, Cultural, and Communication Studies (Gillard, Wale & Bow 1994; Goggin, 2006; Hjorth, 2005; Horstmanshof & Power, 2005; Lloyd, 2006, 2007a, 2007b). Nevertheless there is only a small number of this work that has used a discursive theoretical or methodological approach. Of particular interest to this article is work that has examined the discursive formation of informal rules. One such publication is Caron and Caronia's (2007) book *Moving Cultures: Mobile communication in everyday life*. In this text the researchers investigate the social and cultural aspects of mobile technology in everyday life. The authors examine questions of identity in ordinary activities; they consider how the positioning and understanding of mobile phone use is discursive. Caron and Caronia maintain that ‚communication and information technologies are not merely material objects but also discursive objects' (Caron & Caronia 2007, p. 46), and argue that,

> our encounter with technology, the experience that we construct with a techno-object, is no different from any other experience: it is mediated by language, by the subtle framework of discourse that determines the meaning of things, by the words (said and heard) that confer value on objects and that link them to us and to our daily practices (Caron & Caronia 2007, p. 47).

The book is the result of a group of empirical studies undertaken by Caron and Caronia over an eight-year period. Although the authors have predominantly focused on youth and teenagers their work complements and informs this research. For example, in chapter ten, ‚Mobile Communication as social performance: New Ethics, Now Politeness, New Aesthetics' they provide a brief analyses of mobile phone politeness rules. They reveal that the adolescents are ‚theorizing about the need for shared norms for a collectively regulated practice' (2007, p. 229). However, Caron and Caronia are not explicit in defining what they mean by the term ‚discourse', nor do they claim to be conducting ‚Discourse Analysis', instead, the authors discuss mobile technology and social discourses in general. They argue in non-specific terms how the ‚social discourse surrounding technologies' (Caron & Caronia 2007, p. 48) forms a part of the technology use and the meanings attributed to it. Subsequently, the authors claim that ‚it is through a subtle weave of everyday practices and discourses, of activities and words, that individuals confer meaning, value, roles, and functions on technologies' (Caron & Caronia 2007, p. 46). The empirical work is used to provide an understanding of the complex processes by which meanings are formed by young Canadians. It is interesting because it reveals that the teenagers perceive that ‚the most criticized form of behaviour is trying to "look cool"' (2007, p. 230). Furthermore, the researchers argue ‚the skills needed to communicate using a mobile phone are not limited to mastery of a particular grammar or lexicon. They also cover social aspects and norms that govern use of phones in public spaces' (2007, p. 230).

Another four articles that are of significance to this research make up Part Three of the book *Wireless world: social and interactional aspects of the mobile age* (Brown, Green & Harper 2002). These are early pieces of research that illustrate the broad and complex range of mobile phone communication practices. The authors used an ethnomethodological approach to study mobile telecommunication use on trains

(Murtagh 2002); the use of mobiles by teenagers in public spaces (Weilenmann & Larsson 2002); the micro-coordination uses of mobile technology in mobile work (Sherry & Salvador 2002); and the affects of mobile technologies on the boundary line between personal and professional life (Gant & Kiesler 2002). Although it is not explicitly stated in the articles these studies deal with discursive elements of mobile communication, such as the rules that govern mobile phone use on train carriages, or the sharing of mobile phones by teenagers, as well as the blurring of lines between work and personal life. Because none of these articles use Discourse Analysis they remain at a descriptive level.

3.   Method and Material

This paper draws on a larger study in which a central idea examined was that there is a newly forming discourse of mobile phone use and that mobile phone communication is having an impact on the formation of identity for young Australians. Using Discourse Analysis (DA) a broad theoretical framework, both the design of the research and the specific methods used were informed by DA. Multiple sources of evidence were triangulated, the three distinct methods of data collection employed were: semi-structured interviews, a Research Journal (RJ) of observations, informal talk and experience of mobile phone use kept by the researcher for over two years (Lloyd 2009), and the collection of cultural artefacts referencing mobile phones (advertisements, radio broadcasts, Podcasts, laws, online forums etc.). Pseudonyms have been used for participants in the analysis. Participants in this study were aged 18 to 35 year olds and lived in the Hunter region of New South Wales, Australia. DA was used to analyse the social processes of the construction of meaning (Phillips & Hardy, 2002) around mobile phones and their use. It was applied in the ‚search for meaning behind the social construction of words, sounds and images that remains at the heart of modern discourse analysis’ (Smith & Bell 2008, p. 80).

     Discourse may be used to explain the dynamic processes of social construction that involve communicative activities (Phillips and Hardy 2002, Yell 2005). For Foucault, discourse is a system of meaning making that concerns both language and practice, accordingly ‚all social practices entail meaning, and meaning shapes and influences what we do – our conduct – all practices have a discursive aspect’ (Hall & Gieben 1992, p. 291). Discourses shape *practices*. Practices include language terms, behaviours, rules, power structures, expectations, values, and the ways particular objects, signs and texts are used, reappropriated and understood (Gee 2005; Phillips & Hardy 2002; Renkema 2004).

     Discourses offer ways to understand the processes in which structures influence individuals within their daily lives. They are ‚concerned with understanding and interpreting socially produced meanings’ (Howarth 2000, p. 128). In this research discourse is used as a way to understand how specific cultural and historical perceptions structure and affect daily communication practices and influence the collection of utterances that are performed within a specific context (Mills 1997, p. 11). Discourse theory is therefore utilised as a means to discover the ways in which ideas and objects are constructed and produced socially, and to ascertain how they continue to be

formulated and circulated (Phillips & Hardy 2002, p. 6). As Phillips and Hardy clearly indicate Discourse Analysis is a useful research tool to ‚unpack the production of social reality' (Phillips & Hardy 2002, p. 82) because,

> it provides a sympathetic epistemology and a set of methods which are useful for empirically exploring social construction. Introducing the idea of a discourse, in addition to text and context, provides the critical dimension that allows social construction to be understood. It is not individual texts that produce reality, but structured bodies of texts of various kinds – discourses – that constitute social phenomena. By examining the nature of discourse, including the methods of textual production, dissemination, and reception that surround it, we can understand how the concepts that make social reality meaningful are created (Phillips & Hardy 2002, p. 82).

4. Analysis and Findings

4.1. INFORMAL RULES

There are many informal constraints operating within the discourse of mobile phone use, which this research identifies. Informal rules are the rules that have not been put into an official form but are still well known and are often adhered to. Informal rules tend to be less pervasive but more fluid than a formal rule, and they are usually practised in a less formalised way. An obvious example of informal rules within the discourse of mobile phone use would be the social rules which are broadly considered as mobile phone etiquette. There is a view that having a clear and consistent consensus on *what is* and *is not* appropriate behaviour and use with a mobile phone is important for both social and discursive cohesion. Books such as *In a Cell Phone Minute* (Reiser 2005), *Letticia Cellbridge's Official Guide To Cell Phone Etiquette* (Fitzpatrick 2001), *The Jerk with the Cell Phone: A Survival Guide for the Rest of Us* (Pachter & Magee 2004), *The Joy of Text: Mating, Dating, and Techno-Relating* (Grish 2006) or the Australian Mobile Telecommunications Association (AMTA) (AMTA 2007) ‚mobile manners' webpage, all demonstrate this. Informal rules may also include the conditions of use that individuals impose on themselves such as, who can call and when, and when to (or not to) use the silent function of the phone. These conditions of use are personal choices that become regular practice. Informal rules are a form of regulation within a discourse. Although not often formally recorded or written down, they are practices which through time and repetitive enactment have become known and normalised (Mills 1997). Or in Foucault's words, a discourse is ‚a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements' (Foucault 1972, p. 80). Just as other elements in a discourse are dependent on and change with contexts (), so too are informal rules within a discourse. That is, an informal rule will be influenced by both the *social* and *physical* context of the mobile phone owner.

4.2. CONTROLLING INTERRUPTIONS IN CINEMAS AND FAMILY SETTINGS

One possible *physical* context is the movie theatre. However, even within a cinema, individual understandings of what constitutes acceptable mobile phone use are different.

When in the context of attending a movie there is already a discursive framework that movie goers are assumed to be maintaining and are constrained by. For example, those attending are expected to be quiet, to not interrupt and to be attentive to the film being shown. However, this research demonstrates that that there are very different perceptions as to what constitutes an ‚interruption'. Some individuals do not appreciate or tolerate any mobile phone use within a cinema. This is illustrated in the newspaper article by Maddox, ‚Yeah, I'm at the movies' (2006). In this article he describes an online forum that was conducted after the proposal was announced to trial electronic jamming of mobile phones in movie theatres was suggested. He states, ‚Alex fired back that he'd been interrupted by phone calls or texting three or four times during every recent movie and found the bright light from active mobiles as distracting in a darkened cinema, as a ring or message beep' (Maddox 2006, p. 12). Richard, a participant in this study, felt likewise;

> the [movie] theatre, I remember I turned it off then because I didn't want to be, like even on silent, I didn't want to be disturbed by someone texting me while we were watching the show (Richard).

Although, Richard's comment suggests that he is more concerned about interrupting his viewing experience rather than that of others.

Melissa who has worked ‚behind the scenes' in a cinema said she would also turn her phone off; in fact she said that the ‚only time' she would turn off her mobile phone was when in a cinema or theatre.

> Only in the theatre and cinema, because … I've worked in theatre behind the scenes, so I know that incoming mobile phone signals can interfere with, make that stupid noise over the [audio system], even if it's on silent. So I'm very aware of that. But that's usually the only time I turn it off (Melissa).

However, another participant, Alison, was willing to be available to all possible connections ‚all the time'. When asked whether she would answer her mobile in the movies, she responded by saying that it depended on the circumstances of *who* was calling but that she would still not answer it in the theatre.

> If it's someone that doesn't usually call me, and it's obviously urgent, then yes I would pick it up, or if they call me more than once. If I let it ring out, then I'll go outside and answer it. But I wouldn't answer it in the theatre; it pisses me off no end when people do that… you don't use it in the middle of the movies (Alison).

Alison was willing to negotiate other discursive rules (professional and entertainment discourses) to ensure that she is available anywhere, anytime.

However, in contrast to these comments some participants said they did use their mobile phone in the cinema. Melinda said she ‚probably would' answer her ringing mobile phone and tell the caller, ‚look I'm in a movie session, can I call you back?' (Melinda). Melinda would also text;

> If it was on silent yeah I would text and I'd receive a text yeah, ‚cause it's on silent I have no problem with doing that and if someone was in the movie theatre with me and they had a message and it was on silent and they were texting back I wouldn't have a [problem] with that either (Melinda).

Warwick said it was acceptable to have his mobile phone switched to silent even if it would possibly interrupt other viewing experiences,

> I've put it on silent when I've been in like a theatre, watching theatre; I haven't turned it off I've just put it on silent, if it interrupts with their gear, well I'm [not] sorry (Warwick).

During the fieldwork for this project the researcher also noted such interruptions,

> Two rows back from me and twenty or thirty minutes into the show a young woman had her phone ring (RJ, 01 September 2006).

However, over the course of the research a note in the RJ identified that this rule was possibly changing from an informal rule to a more formalised limitation. It was observed that in some cinemas in the Hunter region there were instructions on a pre-screening message to ,turn your mobile phone off' whilst in the cinema in consideration of fellow moviegoers.

> I was at the movies to see *Happyfeet* and before the film there was a new song with singing frog to announce not to use mobile phones and other social etiquettes (RJ, 26 December 2006).

This short film instructing the audience on the expected social etiquette in a movie theatre suggests that the management had considered that they needed to formalise this otherwise informal understanding of appropriate and inappropriate use of the mobile phone in a cinema.

The research data revealed that there were other times that individuals were aware that it is possible (if not likely), that their mobile phone may interrupt them and others. Commonly, when participants were asked ,How often do you turn your mobile phone off? Where would you turn your mobile phone off? Where wouldn't you? And when was the last time that you did? And why?' Their responses indicated that both the physical and the social context affected their behaviour. That is, certain contexts naturalised the choice to turn their phones off (or on to silent mode). When asked where she felt she shouldn't use her mobile phone, Kathy answered,

> At uni and at work, and when you're out at dinner and things like that, shouldn't use it, it's impolite (Kathy).

Another participant, Melinda said that she felt the need to put her phone on silent during mealtimes because it was necessary for social courtesy.

> If I was eating dinner I would put it on silent (Melinda).

And likewise for Amy, who clearly articulates the reasons for her mobile phone use and the behaviour of others which she found offensive;

> Not to use them in restaurants, not to use them in church, not to use them if you've got offensive ringtones, and I find anything that's too loud offensive, but yeah I think it's just in a public place where it disturbs the peace… I get really annoyed if I'm having a nice meal or something in a restaurant and it goes off, also in a test at uni. Some people will have their phones go off and they don't care and it just really breaks your train of thought (Amy).

Amy described the way that the conventions of her family life shape her mobile phone use. In the presence of her family, specifically her „Nan', she would not use her mobile phone because she has been asked not to;

> I'm on a strict no mobile rule at Nan's and if I do go to church which I haven't been for a while, I won't use it there… my Mum's asked me not to at Nannas'. „Cause Nana doesn't understand mobile. Oh she does but, she doesn't understand like she gets scared if a ringtone comes, she freaks out. So I won't use it at Nan's just „cause I think it might be a bit rude, she normally has the whole cup-o-tea sit around and chat thing and it might just interrupt it (Amy).

In the RJ the researcher recorded a similar experience with her own family,

> My parents requested that I don't use my mobile phone as much when at their house (the family home), wanting my attention to be with them when I am visiting (RJ, 09 April 2006).

In this instance the researcher's mother said it would be nice for her not to have her phone on (or at least switch it to silent) when she visited them for lunch; „we don't have that much time with you and we would prefer it if you gave us your full attention'. At a later stage her family commented that her phone had not rung, and the researcher replied „well I have turned it to silent'.

However for some, use within the family home is allowed, but not during mealtimes.

> At home the rule is, you don't bring mobile phones to the table, you do not bring it to the kitchen table, and you don't bring it to the dining room table. That's just what my family has always done, they usually prefer it that we don't answer mobile phone calls during dinner (Alison).

Alison commented further that she might answer her phone during a mealtime under some circumstances;

> if it was a business call maybe, or if it was someone calling from overseas maybe, but someone calling from down the street saying can I call over for dinner, as we have had done before, when we were half way though a meal. Then no I am sorry, I am not answering that phone call… Sometimes yes and sometimes no, it sort of depends…if it was a friend that I don't usually hear from via mobile or someone that I haven't heard from in a long time yes I'll answer it. Quite often I will also say „I am in the middle of dinner, can I call you back later?' And they are usually fine with that (Alison).

In social situations another solution was to leave mobile phones on silent with the vibrate mode on;

> I have it on silent because it doesn't spoil the mood or what's going on, the noise of getting a text, and so if you don't want to check it and just leave it and continue with the moment until it's gone, and then you can check it (Richard).

Kathy construed her own choices to be for reasons of politeness;

> I leave my messages on silent, I kind of think it's more, it's polite. „Cause then it's not going off really loud all the time when I get messages, „cause I do get quite a few messages (laughs)… „cause I still know when I get a message cause it's on vibrate, but everybody else doesn't, (Kathy).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

These examples illustrate the ways in which mobile phones are defined socially; these informal rules constitute a major component of the discourse (Foucault 1972, 1979; Macdonnell 1986; Mills 1997). These examples collectively illuminate that the discourse of mobile phone use manifests in society's perceptions and practices. By discursively analysing the material collected via three different methods, this discussion has drawn together the informal rules with other research and original empirical evidence to illustrate the divergences and inconsistencies in the discourse of mobile phone use. This paper has elucidated some of the ambiguities and contradictions that currently exist within this discourse in the Hunter region of Australia. It reveals that an individual's understanding of their mobile communication practices is influenced by different *physical* and *social* contexts and that this in turn effects the socially constructed expectations of mobile phone use. The analysis exposes the underlying tensions between the autonomy individuals may have and the discursive framework they work within when communicating with a mobile phone, and demonstrates how informal rules are often seen as flexible when a person makes choices and constructs meaning in their daily lives. It reveals how these meaning-making processes are culturally and contextually embedded but also variable.

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