

Wireless telephony and rebuilding of interpersonal communication

Formative effects on communication structures

This article derives from a broader study, which deals with the rebuilding of communication, movement, and information practices due to the integration of the wireless telephony in the daily life. The present work focuses only on the constitution of the mobile communication structure in terms of content, communicative actions, and interactions with other communication and information forms.



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Is mobile communication really special?

In the recent years, the need for mobile access to communication and to data services has become increasingly important and digital cellular telephony has seen rapid acceptance and growth. It seems that the ultimate goal of the current wireless telephony – people to be able to communicate with anyone, and access information from everywhere at any time – points towards a general reorganization of communication, information, and movement structures.

Focusing on the mobile communication structure, this comprises of exchanged contents, purposes, communicative actions/situations, partners and their interaction. Each of them is specific, different from the ones of the concurrent media because it is influenced by the possibility of changing places while communicating and by other internal structural facilities and constraints of the technology. If a short characterization of content and expression is needed, communication carried over the mobile phone is mainly verbal, short, coordinative and assertive, avoiding explanations and long clarifications (Cornita 2001). From this perspective, it may result that mobile communication is “poorer” than face-to-face conversation, which simultaneously uses verbal means, paralanguage, and non-verbal means (gestures, mimic, body position, physical contact, extra-corporal objects, and proximity), has higher redundancy, and it is usually emotionally

charged. However, mechanization processes have enhanced its complexity, enriching its forms of expression. In mobile telephony, the written SMS is gradually catching up with the spoken communication. Recently, new features like photo transmission and multimedia messages stay at the basis of a promising “iconic” communication, which transmits information about the surrounding context together with visual cues about partners.

An explorative online survey, conducted in Germany between 2001-2002 on 151 users and non-users of mobile phones focused on the impact of mobile telephony usage on communication practices, mobility, and spatial and temporal perceptions (Mitrea 2005). Some of its results are useful to define the specificity of the mobile communication content, actions and relations with other concurrent structures.

In particular, respondents were asked about their issues when talking on the mobile phone and sending SMS. Verbal mobile conversation proved to be mainly oriented toward spatial-temporal coordination of partners (50% of responses). This category includes appointments, changes in the daily agenda, indication of meeting places, description of the calling place, etc. A kind of ad-hoc coordination, as Geser called it, allows mobile phone users to adapt to “unpredictable short-term changes in circumstances, opportunities, or subjective preferences and moods” (Geser 2003). A quarter of answers (25% of responses) represented requirements to solve a problem or practical information. Social talk accounted for another 25% of mentioned themes. The SMS communication content includes both coordinative issues and “playful” themes useful for the strengthening of social ties. The most frequent SMS topics concerned the maintenance of sociability through love/friendship messages, greetings and congratulations, jokes, unidirectional messages (40% of answers), the spatial-temporal synchronization of communicators (37% of

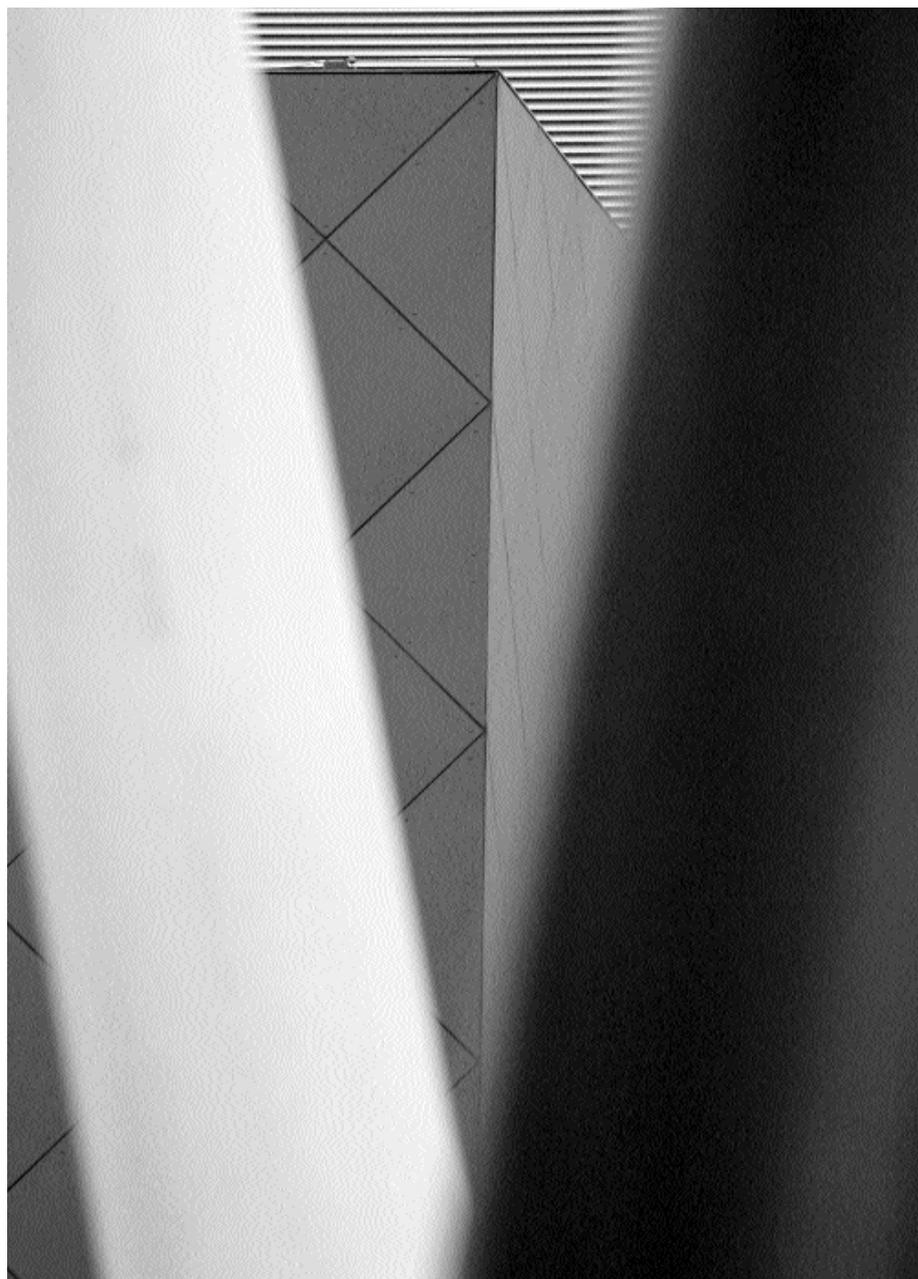
responses), and task coordination (16% of answers).

These results prove that mobile communication is indeed distinctive. Between users who can move while pursuing communication, a sort of mental communication "room" constitutes. The communication intent and its assumed effects are the main factors underlying this construction. If the communication goal, and, therefore, the effect of communication on the receiver, is the reciprocal harmonization of the daily agenda, the content serves to regulate mobility, navigation in the physical space, and temporal synchronization. If the communication is targeted to the maintenance of sociability, the physical space with its temporal coordinates is quasi-ignored, the "mobile communication room" turning into a frame for social conversation. The mobile communication structure is also versatile and unstable because communicators may very easily switch from navigation-related contents to chatting and vice-versa. Not only does this versatility come from communication purposes, but it also derives from the mobility of the communicators in the physical space, which leads to a strong fragmentation of viewpoints and experiences: one should flexibly react to various problems occurring in ever-changing contexts.

A comparative approach

Mobile communication structure has constituted not only as result of wireless technology usage, but also in interaction with the usage and perception of other concurrent or complementary structures. To investigate this issue, the empirical study includes a comparative section in which respondents, both users and non-users of cell phones, were asked to judge the suitability of face-to-face communication, the telephone conversation, mobile phone dialogue, SMS, and the e-mail on the Internet for several statements defining social/entertaining conversation, coordinative/instrumental communication, reassurance/risk decreasing, commercial communication, and transmission of short information.

Overall, perceptions of the communicative actions for each medium were consistent with the previous conclusions in the content section. While for both users and non-users face-to-face conversation was strongly associated with sociability and driven by the appetite to communicate (75% user mentions, 81% non-user mentions), the mobile,



string phone conversation, the SMS, and the e-mail enjoyed different perceptions in the field of communicative actions.

As in the content section, mobile users attributed to the mobile phone a strong coordinative function (synchronization of the daily agenda, risk management), on the background of a rather poor "chatty" potential. On the contrary, non-users generally failed to recognize the mobile telephony power to organize spatial movement and temporal agenda of communicators, but they better observed its poorly "conversational" character. Communicative activities where differences between user and non-user assessments occurred were: the management of emergency situations (87% of users, 35% of non-users), the reassuring of family while traveling (73% of

users, 28% of non-users), making appointments (64% of users, 20% of non-users), and canceling or changing schedules (74% of users, 26% of non-users). Only 22% of users and 12% of non-users believed that wireless conversation was conducted out of pleasure/impulse to communicate. Moreover, only 8% of users and 1% of non-users considered mobile conversation suitable for discussing about music, films, books, etc. In users' opinion, SMS proved to be particularly appropriate for communicating short information (64% of users compared to 19% of non-users).

Both users and non-users regarded the telephone conversation as a balanced sociable-coordinative communication. However, non-user assessments were more pronounced in some cases. Communicative

actions considered specific for telephone communication were: canceling/changing appointments (51% of users, 81% of non-users), solving emergency situations (58% of users, 81% of non-users); respectively keep in touch with friends (63% of users, 74% of non-users), making invitations (54% of users, 68% of non-users), making excuses (46% of users, 53% of non-users), and communicating good news (58% of users, 62% of non-users).

The e-mail on the Internet was perceived as reasonably informative, comprehensive, coordinative and particularly appropriate for commercial and professional information exchange. Specific actions for the e-mail were: communicating short information (55% of users, 81% of non-users), making invitations (46% of users, 63% of non-users), communicating good news (46% of users, 63% of non-users), pre-buying actions (56% of users, 60% of non-users), requiring information about pro-

ducts (46% of users, 63% of non-users), greeting/congratulating (39% of users, 58% of non-users), and planning a trip (46% of users, 64% of non-users). Thus, the main differences between user and non-user evaluations regarded mainly coordinative actions such as: making or canceling/changing appointments, reassuring the family while traveling, solving emergency situations (for mobile and fixed telephony), and communicating short information (for SMS). It is not surprising that mobile telephony usage affects the construction of its own communication structure, either verbal or written. Interesting is the fact that this also interacts with the perceptive field of other communication media and forms. After using wireless telephony, respondents change their perception of the communicative and information potential of other media and even reevaluate some communicative purposes of face-to-face communication. For

instance, in Figure 1, with wireless technology usage, the suitability of the fixed telephony for canceling appointments, calling in emergency, and reassuring the family is partly transferred to mobile telephony. In the same manner, the appropriateness of the e-mail on the Internet for asking what's new and communicating short information is relocated to SMS (Figure 2). These results indicate that verbal and written mobile communication constitutes partly through absorption of communicative potential mainly from fixed telephony and the e-mail. Note that these "donor" structures are not rendered poorer than before, but they may succeed in adapting to the concurrence by abandoning some functions and searching another undisputed potential.

Conclusion

The analysis shows that the usage of wireless telephony produces a distinct type of communication structure in terms of purposes, content, and communicative actions. In addition, findings highlight the fact that mobile communication and the majority of the coexisting communication forms are players in a cooperative game: every player can win something from the readjustment process, because the programs of communication technologies are unlimited, reflecting the infinite creativity of users and engineers. The current landscape of communication, information and entertainment media represents a wide network of active technologies, which are tightly connected in terms of purposes, actions, perceptions and programs. This is a broad meta-construction, in which every mutation of structures and programs of one technology induces movements in the other, until a certain balanced state is reached. Communication technologies with programs and structures are reliable and open, in resonance with social and cultural frames survive and prosper, while others with obsolete programs and contradictory frames tend to be excluded.

References

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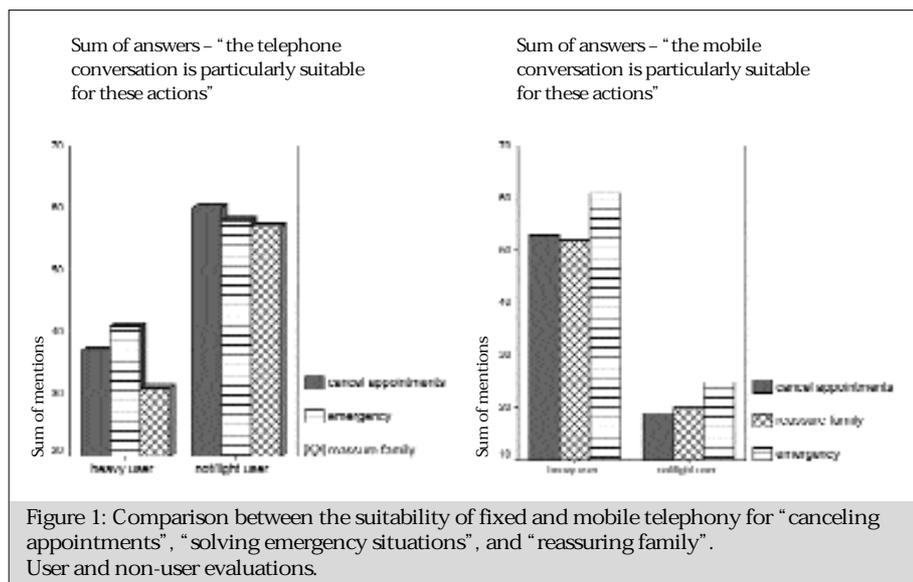


Figure 1: Comparison between the suitability of fixed and mobile telephony for "canceling appointments", "solving emergency situations", and "reassuring family". User and non-user evaluations.



Figure 2: Comparison between the suitability of the e-mail and SMS "asking about news" and "communicating short information". User and non-user evaluations.