

READING: “Communicating Technology”

Human life in the modern era is constantly being changed by technology, and the pace of this change has greatly accelerated in recent decades. Because of this rapid and constant change, this means that the way we talk about technology – how we “communicate technology” – is always changing, too.

Technology is also global. While culture and how people from various cultures adopt as well as adapt to new technology may differ, the technology itself does not change from culture to culture; the science and engineering behind it are the same. Therefore, in some ways, it is relatively easy to talk about technology interculturally because background knowledge of the other culture is not necessary. So, “communicating technology” is both easier and harder than traditional intercultural communication. To understand how to communicate technology most efficiently, it is beneficial to look at new words and concepts and see how technology communication has changed recently.

New technology does not usually just appear out of nowhere, like magic; instead, it is created by building upon previous technology. This is also the case for the words, phrases, and metaphors we use to describe and discuss technology. The appearance of new technology in our lives requires new terminology for talking about it. Most of this terminology is not completely new; it is “recycled” from older, already existing words, images, etc.

Let’s look at a few words about technology currently used in English to see how they developed, and to understand how technology can be rearranged for new words and ideas. The first word we will look at is “podcast”. This term is a portmanteau of “iPod” and “broadcast”. Broadcast is an older word that meant to throw and spread seeds. With the invention of television and radio, broadcast meant to figuratively “throw the data” to everyone and those who want to can pick it up. Words like “newscast” and “telecast” took the “-cast” from broadcast to mean that it is free and not targeted at a particular audience. Podcast meant that this media content was thrown out to portable media players (the most common one at the time – the mid-2000s – was the Apple iPod) and was free for everyone.

Another example is “emoji”. This is a Japanese word for the little pictures that can be sent along with text. Emoji became integrated into the English language without people even realizing the word is Japanese (by the way “karaoke” is another example of this). This is because, in English, the predecessor to emoji is “emoticon”, short for “emotion icon”. These are the smiley faces that are made with letters and punctuation. For example “:-)” (colon-dash-close parentheses) represents a person smiling, and “XD” represents a person who is laughing very hard.

“Cloud” is another repurposed word that changes how we think about saving information. Think about a cloud. It is up above us, in the sky, and we can see it. But we cannot touch it. If we fly into a cloud, we cannot grab onto it. Clouds are visible moisture in the air, but we cannot actually grab a piece of a cloud. This is how the term “cloud” was applied to a new technology that formed a “web” of storage, so no data was ever in one place. It was spread over many machines, so if one machine failed, the data would still be accessible elsewhere.

Similarly, “selfie” is a self-portrait picture – that is, a picture a person takes of themselves. People have been taking pictures of themselves since cameras were invented. Before that, people drew self-portraits of themselves. “Selfie” as a word didn’t need to be invented. But with the invention of cell phone cameras, taking a picture of yourself became much easier, and people started doing it more. The word was needed not because the idea was invented, but because the idea became popular thanks to technology.

The easiest way to communicate an unknown technology is to compare it with older technology that is already familiar to people. Such comparisons may not always be 100% accurate, technically speaking, but they help bridge the gap between old and new – between the already known and the unknown. For example, “e-mail” is a short version of the phrase “electronic mail”, because, as in the original idea of “mail” – that is, writing a letter on paper and sending it to be delivered to someone – you write the information electronically, on your computer or phone, and then send it through the internet to a person who receives it. The word “car” is another example of shortening an older term to use with new technology. In this case, “car” was short for “horseless carriage” because it looked like a carriage without a horse to pull it. Describing new technology is naming something similar and building off that. This works not only with terminology, but with ideas, concepts, and perceptions.

One last aspect of “communicating technology” we should consider is to look at patterns. Patterns from the past are great clues for how concepts will develop in the future. Take the previous example of using “-cast” to express the image of “throwing data out to everyone for free”; how could the “-cast” concept be used in new technology that has yet to be invented? What other data – or even things – might people be able to -cast in the future? There are hidden patterns everywhere in communication and studying them can help make sense of future technological communication.

Communicating technology is not just about learning new terminology – it is about adding new ideas to discussions about how technology changes our lifestyles and environment. Communicating technology very often involves talking about things that didn’t exist before. This is quite different from, for example, “communicating” culture, where there is always an expert to ask and help explain things to us. There is always someone who has studied culture before, and terminology for discussing culture already exists, and has existed for a long time. With communicating technology, however, no one is more “expert” than anyone else. We all become “experts” – and phrase-makers – in real time, as we encounter new technology and it becomes part of our lives, environments, and culture. The words, phrases, and metaphors we create to talk about technology today will probably become standard terminology for such discussions in the future.