

Antique Instagrams or Snapchats? Multimodal Composition of Early Twentieth Century British Postcards

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Figure 1 Card 2033 sent in 1903 to Miss M E Evans in Camberwell, London.

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Abstract

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the picture postcard was the key social networking tool of the day. Through the innovative opportunity to combine with an image, written messages could be exchanged within a few hours, giving rise to a sense of near-synchronous multimodal communication. Untrammelled by the etiquette of letter writing, people traded privacy for a new informality and spontaneity.

This paper argues that the key endeavour of the Literacy Studies perspective, to deepen our understanding of writing and reading practices through fuller understandings of sociocultural context, can be achieved through the application of historical methods. With a dataset of 56 cards I investigate material and discursive dimensions of the texts against a background of historical evidence. A fuller version of this paper will appear as Gillen (in press).

Background and purposes

At the turn of the late nineteenth into the early twentieth century, the picture postcard was the key social networking tool of the day. It was an extremely popular new technology, sweeping Britain and Europe into a frenzy of exchanging rapid, attractive and cheap communications (Gillen and Hall 2010a). With several deliveries a day, messages could be exchanged within a few hours, giving rise to a sense of close to synchronous written communications. Untrammelled by the etiquette of letter writing, people embraced the new technology, finding the combination of image and short message appealing. The Manchester Weekly Times predicted in 1890 (June 4th), 'The work of correspondence will be reduced to a minimum when one has only to carry a pack of postcards in one's pocket, write one's thought in pencil as soon as it occurs, and despatch it through the first messenger or the first receiving box one comes across.'

The so-called "Golden Age" of the postcard lasted until the advent of the First World War, when a combination of factors led to the demise of the multiple deliveries and cheapness. Not until the digital revolution of the 1990s onwards could a cheap, near synchronous and highly accessible technologies for the exchange of written or multimodal messages, arise again.

This paper takes as its object a set of 56 postcards of the turn of the century format, that is when regulations determined that the whole of one side of the card took the address, and the other side included an image and a very small area for a message. From 1902 onwards the divided back format was permitted whereby a larger space was made available for messages; however a few people persisted with the old format. This dataset of the earlier format, relatively rare to obtain these days, is part of a collection of 3000 postcards of both formats, written and posted between 1901 and 1910 in Britain. See figure 1 for an illustrative example that demonstrates features of comparison with today's social media. All the cards in the collection have been transcribed and where possible additional historical information has been obtained.

Research questions:

1. What meaning-making practices were involved in selecting, authoring and sending these texts, combining images with pictures?
2. What cultural resources do people appear to be drawing on, in their writing practices?
3. How does additional historical evidence enrich our understanding of these multimodal communications practices, both in general and in specific cases?

Theoretical framework

My research aims to establish: 'a means of examining communicative practice so as to uncover signs of social identities, institutions and norms as well as the means by which these social formations are established, negotiated, enacted, and changed through communicative practice.' (Bazerman and Prior 2004: 3).

Green and Cormack (2015) argue that challenges to conducting ethnographic fieldwork have led to a neglect of historical topics in Literacy Studies. Embracing a historical approach is vital to getting beyond a focus merely on text analysis; endeavouring to approach more holistic understandings of literacy practices is vital (Heath 1983; Street 1984; Durston 2008). Yet this involves challenges to established Literacy Studies methodologies beyond the already severe obstacles of distanced space and time. Following Barton and Hall (1999) I propose that historical evidence can be deployed creatively within a Literacy Studies approach to enrich our understandings of epistolary multimodal texts of over a century ago (Gillen and Hall 2010b; Gillen 2013; Gillen in press).

While my purpose is not to make a direct empirical comparison with current popular services for the exchange of multimodal communications such as Snapchat and Instagram, I make some observations especially in terms of affordances.

Methods

Each card is transcribed and its image described according to topic (topographic scene; building; celebrity; humour; cute figure etc). Material features of how the regulated space of the card is used are identified, as well as writing implements employed. Discourse analysis takes account both of explicit and implied relationships between text and image. The performance of the sender's identity, their construction of the addressee's and construal of the relationship between them is studied. The place of the postcard within users' communicative repertoires is considered. Features of register are examined, for example as drawing from available written discourses and the repertoires of spoken language.

Each card is investigated through the census and where possible narratives concerning the circumstances of the addressee and if possible the sender are constructed. If other information pertaining to the topics of the cards (image and texts) is available then this is used to deepen understandings where possible.

Information from the wider collection of three thousand cards and external evidence on postcard writing and sending practices is adduced where salient.



Figure 2

Card 1212/1902

This card was sent to Miss S.V.L. Morgan aged about 14 years' old, having been born in Hull in 1887. She lives with her mother and aunt in a house called "The Mount", Westbourne Park in Scarborough.

Results and conclusions

Postcard writers demonstrate a confident use of literacy, writing fluently to accomplish their diverse purposes.

Postcard senders choose a variety of images to send to their correspondents and orient to these in various ways including the suggestion that the card is a gift, often designed for the addressee's collection (See Figure 2). Other ways of orienting to images include elements of entertaining the other (for example by sharing cute or celebrity images).

Postcard senders often present themselves as mobile, busy people. Figure 1 was sent by David Evans, an undergraduate student in Oxford and a Methodist preacher to his 25-year-old sister, Mary, who still lived at home. Many of David's messages are as short as this one and introduce her to elements of his environment in Oxford and his journeys too and from their family home in Camberwell, South London.

Postcard texts frequently make explicit reference to other elements of the contemporary communications repertoire including the letter, with which cards have a symbiotic relation, parcels and other media.

The register of postcard writing often borrows features from letterwriting, especially in openings, closing and enquiries about health. However, it also draws heavily on more conversational strategies, prototypically associated with spoken dialogue such as a rapid fire of consecutive questions.

Owing to the availability of the 1901 and 1911 censuses, as well as other historical records allow the possibility of constructing mini biographies of addressees, and more rarely senders.



Figure 3 Card 2607, sent in 1903 to Miss J. Carmichael in Lockerbie

There is no additional information besides this pencilled text on the card and the address on the other side: Miss J.S. Carmichael, c/o Mr Laidlaw, Victoria Square, Lockerbie, postmarked Lockerbie Sept. 28 1903. Nevertheless I have been able to establish from the collection and census information that the recipient was Janet Carmichael, then aged 16 years' old. She was the daughter of a Scottish surgeon who died when she was 3 years' old. Subsequently Janet and her mother went to live in Buxton, where they claimed to be to the census taker that they were "living on their own means" although contemporary commercial directory reveals them to be letting out rooms. Janet maintained a lively correspondence both when she was at

home and away, as this example reveals, since Mr Laidlaw was the permanent resident of the house she was a guest in. The message confirms the capacity of the Post Office to deliver cards within a few hours.

Cards such as those in Figure 1 and Figure 3 are revelatory of the highly mobile, self-consciously modern ethos prevalent in the era with its “culture of speed” (Keep 2001). Evidence confirms media discourses of the time, that postcard culture was a much remarked upon craze, percolating through almost all society’s strata. Figure 2, with its references to postcard collecting practices and other elements of culture, within a household “living on its own means” according to the census, exemplifies the enthusiasm attached to the phenomenon, also evidenced in media discourse. “In ten years Europe will be buried beneath picture postcards,” worried the Glasgow Evening News in October 1903 (cited by Carline 1971:9).

When compared with contemporary digital communication technologies focussed on the exchange of multimodal communications, centred on pictures, several points of comparison as to affordances can be made. Each are situated on the private/public continuum: digital platforms often have more scope, but the distinction is not absolute. The picture postcard permits a greater freedom of layout and choice of extent of text than many contemporary technologies. In the speed of delivery, cheapness and multimodality nothing like these early postcards existed between the First World War and the digital revolution with the onset of SMS, email and subsequently social media platforms.

Scholarly significance of the study

This study makes two key contributions to the study of writing and literacies. First, as a study of near-synchronous, multimodal short messages, enriched by contextualised understandings, it is valuable itself. It is revelatory of the social networking practices of over a hundred years’ ago, as a newly near-universally literate population took up this new technology with alacrity. Second, in the digital era it is understandable that many claims are made as to the innovatory characteristics of multimodal, digital media and of course many of these are valid. But some contemporary discussion is essentially ahistorical and a comparison with a hitherto overlooked phenomenon has the potential to be illuminating. Every platform has affordances that another may lack and can be generative of creative vernacular multimodal practices.

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