

Mobile Phones

By Takashima Hatsuhisa

The following story was told to me by a professor at a university in Tokyo.

“Until about two or three years ago, whenever I started to lecture, students here and there in the classroom would start chatting. They would commence with whispered exchanges, but would gradually escalate to louder voices and some of them begin to carry on regular conversations. This would continue as if the lecture itself were a kind of background music. But recently this sort of private conversation has virtually disappeared, and the classroom is rather quiet. That does not mean, however, that students have begun to devote more attention to the class. Instead of private conversation during lectures, students have taken hold of a new method of communication called ‘mobile phones.’”

At the United Nations Information Center, where I work, several undergraduates and graduate students volunteer everyday to help out. According to them, a similar situation exists even at those elite schools that are on par with American Ivy League universities, and the situation at the majority of universities is extremely serious.

The “private conversations” have decreased, but students are no more intent on their classes. Instead, they are concentrating on the displays of their mobile phones. It is now possible to transmit electronic mail easily from almost anywhere. Even while they are in the classroom, students can communicate with friends in other places, making dates and deciding on places to eat, and enjoy conversation without speaking a single word.

In many universities before starting their classes professors remind students to turn off their mobile phones, but to



A total of 67-million mobile phones have been produced since 1987

no avail. Most students turn off the audio signal function, of course, switching to the vibration mode, so disruptions are fewer in number. However, the problem has not been entirely eliminated. According to a student at one of Tokyo’s well-known women’s universities, most students who switch the incoming signal to the vibration function place the phones on the desk because they are not able to notice the vibration signal if they put them in their shoulder bag or handbag. As a result, when the mobile phone on one student’s desk suddenly begins to vibrate and dance across the desktop, all the students nearby in a panic grab for their own phones. Surely the person who named this vibration function “manner mode” in Japanese did not anticipate such a situation. This same student commented further, “With students around me busily pushing the keys on their phones to chat by electronic mail, it is so irritating that it’s hard to concentrate on the lecture.”

Last year the number of mobile phones outstripped the number of fixed phones reaching a total of 67 million.

This figure amounts to more than one out of every two Japanese, counting everyone from infants to the elderly. The increase has been particularly dramatic since the introduction of the “i-mode” service which connects directly to the Internet. Japan’s “mobile-phone culture” would seem to be evolving in unique ways, and it is influencing society in various ways.

Within the National Diet it has become a matter of course for parliamentarians to be caught up in conversations by mobile phone, and the resulting disorder thereby has been sufficient for the Diet steering committee to issue a formal directive to desist from such behavior. There would appear to be no representatives amusing themselves with games, of course, but sending and receiving e-mail and searching for information on the Internet is a routine matter. Among the younger Diet members, some have responded to the call for self-discipline by saying, “At least it’s better than falling asleep.”

It is not unusual for junior high school, high school and university students to run up mobile-phone charges of between ¥10,000 and ¥20,000 per month. To pay for their phone bills, more and more young people are taking part-time work at fast-food shops, and some even get involved in crime. With phone charges draining a major portion of younger people’s allowances, they are not buying commodities. Some people are seriously arguing that the mobile phone is one of the greatest causes of Japan’s recession.

How did it come about that mobile-phone use – especially sending/receiving e-mail and searching on the Internet – has such wide diffusion in Japan? Two years ago, when the message transmis-

sion service had been operating in Japan for just over two years, two researchers from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology came to Tokyo to investigate the actual situation of Japan's mobile-phone boom. Although in America and Europe at that time mobile phones were almost exclusively used as phones, they were interested in the fact that use in Japan was quite different. On the streets of Tokyo, their attention was drawn to young people, especially young women, who were operating the keypads of their phones with astounding speed with their thumbs. The average number of Japanese characters pushed was fifty per minute, but they were surprised to find out that there were some working at a pace of over one hundred per minute with a single thumb!

From this came the theory that Japanese were so proficient at operating the buttons of the keypad with the thumb because they had from childhood skillfully manipulated chopsticks. However, the custom of using chopsticks is common to all of East Asia, and furthermore people in the West are certainly not less adept with their hands, as witnessed by the production of extremely delicate lacework and fishing flies. It is a fact that the capability of sending messages by mobile phone spread around the world in an extremely short time. This April, *Newsweek* magazine noted a worldwide trend of e-messages replacing face-to-face conversation. The explosion in sending messages by phone is of global proportions, rising to more than 200 billion messages in the past year, and there are a surprising number of new businesses as a result of this boom.

What will result from this new product of civilization? What is already striking about the phenomenon is that accompanying the diffusion of the mobile phone has been the creation of a new vocabulary. The Japanese are quite talented when it comes to shortening words and creating acronyms, and they have also done this with the new phones. "Mail address" (*meeru adoresu* in Japanese) has been reduced to *meado*. *Merutomo* (mail friend, *meeru*

tomodachi in Japanese) refers to a friend that one communicates with by electronic messages, as does *meru-fure* (mail friend). The Japanese word *okama* is slang for a male who impersonates a female, and the new version of this is *me-kama*, an unpleasant male who impersonates a woman and sends messages in trying to make friends with other males. Since young people use symbols in addition to abbreviated forms, it is virtually impossible for someone like myself to comprehend what they are saying to one another. In the above mentioned *Newsweek*, it was also reported that such reduction of words is common in the United Kingdom and Italy as well; one simply punches in "CUL8R" to communicate, "See you later."

Brevity of vocabulary is one thing, but it seems even more problematic that although they can "chat" using electronic messages there are an increasing number of young people who are unable to carry on a conversation face to face. When talking with them, despite considerable brusqueness in the way they speak, they seem to be able to carry on short exchanges. However, when they have to express themselves with a certain chain of reasoning in bringing their thoughts to a conclusion, they frequently break down. There is an advertisement which says that its phones can handle a message of up to 3,000 characters at one time, but in fact most messages are composed of a mixture of short words, abbreviations and symbols. As a result, although one can respond instantly to the message another person sends, it seems that the process of thinking over what someone has said and then organizing one's own response with care no longer takes place.

The Japanese are quite unskilled when it comes to debating issues. On an all-night discussion TV program, there are very few guests who are able to maintain the fundamental rule of debate: Wait until the other person finishes speaking and then logically present his/her own considered response. There are many occasions during the second half of the program where the members merely give vent to their

emotions, yelling at one another, and discussion completely breaks down. Even in a small seminar with a debate format for upper-class university students, students often become emotional, and not only are they unable to engage in debate, but they gradually begin to develop bad feelings and even hatred toward one another. One widely accepted theory is that because Japanese are not skilled at debate they are poor in negotiating. And with today's young people saying that it is easier to "chat" via electronic messages rather than actually carrying on conversations even with their colleagues, it seems that the potential for improving Japan's negotiating ability is far from possible.

Moreover, according to a recent nationwide public opinion survey, 81.7% responded that they are bothered by the use of mobile phones on trains and buses, and this is being taken as an indication that mobile phones are having an adverse effect on society as a whole. There are many issues to be considered, from the problem of irritating mobile-phone use in the Diet and classrooms to the confusion in the Japanese language caused by mobile-phone language and the decline in conversational ability.

Since the very first mobile phone in Japan made its appearance in April 1987, unprecedented rapid growth has produced a total of 67 million phones over a short period of 14 years. This trend seems, however, to have calmed down, and now is an excellent opportunity to give careful thought to these various issues. This is all the more necessary because the mobile phone now constantly links individuals everywhere through worldwide information network, and while it is clear that the mobile phone has become an integral part of contemporary human life, it is also highly likely to remain such for the future. JTI

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