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Informal cellphone users say goodbye to hello



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IT GOES without saying that technology is responsible for the development of much new vocabulary and for changes in cultural scripts, along with the adaptation and abbreviation of existing words.

It appears that cellphones (mobies or cellies) are changing the way we greet and farewell each other in a manner which Alexander Graham Bell would never have expected.

We are accustomed to "okay, bye" and being accosted on the evening train by our fellow commuter inquiring what will be for dinner at his (usually) or her place. While travelling on several London train lines recently I was interested to hear, without exception, young adult males closing their cellphone

conversations with "Cheers, mate".

It was Thomas Edison who used and popularised the "hello" greeting form, disliking the "ahoy hoy" used by Bell.

A recent survey by the British Post Office has revealed that "hello" is now on the way out as a telephone greeting amongst the general population, and is actually already out among young people.

Phone-answering is increasingly so casual that such responses as "567 4422", and "Sam speaking" are as passe as "hello". The British survey shows that a third of 18-year-olds to 24-year-olds answer their cellphones with "hi", "yo", or

"wassup".

That sounds friendly and personal but, surprisingly, 7 per cent of all British adults surveyed don't actually answer landline calls, preferring the impersonal habit of screening all calls with a voice-answering or answer-phone message.

Interestingly, Britons are three times more likely to give an informal greeting when they answer their cellphone than when they answer a landline.

Threats to security have also left their mark. People have stopped identifying themselves or giving their numbers as they answer their phones. Caller identification has also meant that impersonal greetings have been replaced with personal ones, when callers are known before the receiver answers a call.

"Call waiting" gives us preferences for whom we want to talk to, but while such technology allows us to be bothered only when we want to be bothered with communication and communion, other forms encourage expectations of instant feedback.

There is no doubt that a New Zealand survey would produce similar results. The cellphone seems to expose a considerable amount of "me firstness" among some users. The connection to trivia in some lives comes before the comfort of others, with films, plays, church services, funerals, concerts and lectures still being interrupted by this connection.

For many users, "I'll ring you back", like "hello", is obviously on the way out.

The permanent influence of texting on our communication culture has yet to be seen. The clipped form of "best" as a complete close in e-mails makes little sense, but is

obviously acceptable enough to become almost standard usage.

Newspaper family notices, or birth and death columns, are a particular domain of written language that clearly demonstrates increasing informality and changing cultural scripts, without a direct influence from technology. In New Zealand newspapers of the 1800s, new mothers, for example, were identified in birth notices, simply as "wife of Mr ...".

Birth and death notices were formulaic in structure and content. A new baby's name and its weight was not "for the press".

Formulaic presentation in birth and death columns has long gone. There is no "one size fits all" and the stamp of individual personality is often significant.

Now we can address the dead, imploring them to "Keep on catching the big ones", "Enjoy the pokies in heaven" and "Have one for us, Bro" (all from the *New Zealand Herald*). An increasing number of death notices include references to pets of the deceased.

This informal sense of individual personality is also seen in obituary notices. Our citations at the Dictionary Centre include "He was a real No 8-wired man", and "For years he worked with the Sallies and helped the streeties".

And now we can leave intensely personal tributes online to the deceased, and their families and friends.

Who knows how we will greet or farewell the living and the dead in years to come?

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