

Jonathan Donner

What Can Be Said with a Missed Call? Beeping via Mobile Phones in Sub-Saharan Africa

Abstract

This paper explores the widespread practice of "beeping" between mobile phone users in Sub-Saharan Africa (and beyond). Beeping involves calling a number and hanging up before the mobile's owner can pick up the call. The mobile's call log and address book functions signal who called, and when.

Most beeps are requests to the mobile owner to call back immediately, but beeps can also send a pre-negotiated instrumental message such as "pick me up now", or send a relational signal, such as "I'm thinking of you".

Based on interviews with small business owners and university students in Rwanda, the paper identifies the "rules of beeping" and assesses the linguistic significance of the practice, using Bernstein's (1971) concept of elaborated versus restricted codes. In addition, the paper contrasts beeping with SMS/text messaging (particularly the 'grooming' messages identified by Ling), and suggests paths for future research.

Bio

Jonathan Donner is a Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Earth Institute at Columbia University. His research focuses on the role information and communication technologies play in economic development. He is especially interested in the use of mobile communication technologies by two groups: public health practitioners and small business owners. Prior to joining the Earth Institute, Jonathan worked with the OTF Group, an economic development consultancy in Boston, MA. Jonathan holds a doctorate in Communication Theory and Research from Stanford University. E-Mail: jd2210@columbia.edu