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Introduction

Technology is changing the way we communicate. Just as the printing press revolutionized writing by allowing text to be produced and distributed in large numbers, so has digital technology changed the way we communicate today. Beyond relatively new mediums such as blogs and wikis, technology has gone one step further with the convergence of social media and mobile phone applications.

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as "a group of Internet-based applications […] that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content". It goes beyond the individual, extending to communities and organizations. Concomitant with the rise of mobile computing, social media has evolved to take advantage of "fourth screen" technology (Digital Trends Staff, 2014), with applications specially programmed to work on mobile devices like smartphones and tablets.

One such application is Snapchat, where users send and receive pictures to one another. This paper aims to first explain how Snapchat works, including its usage around the world, then examine its linguistic properties. Lastly, this paper will examine how the linguistic properties affect the language used when communicating with Snapchat.

What is Snapchat?

Introduced in September 2011, Snapchat is a mobile phone application that allows users to send pictures and videos to one another. It distinguishes itself from other photo-sharing applications with its ephemeral or "self-destruct" nature – after a period of time defined by the sender, the content will be deleted and the receiver will no longer be able to retrieve it. With only one chance of viewing, the receiver has a maximum of 10 seconds to view the message.

First, the sender will compose his message by either taking a picture or a video. Following that, he has the option to draw on it, add text, or both. These optional elements, which

are widely used, give the sender much room for creativity to craft the message as well as an added dimension to communicating with the receiver. Lastly, the sender will set a time limit between 1 to 10 seconds that the message can be viewed before sending it.

The message – from hereon called a 'Snap' – is stored on the receiver's end until he chooses to read it. The Snap is opened by holding onto the screen with a finger. It will remain open for the period of time defined by the sender, or until the receiver lifts his finger.

Figure 1: Two examples of Snapchat messages

In May 2014, Snapchat reported that 700 million photos and videos are sent a day. According to the Wall Street Journal, it has 100 million monthly users (Macmillan and Rusli, 2014). It appeals to the young with 50% of its users aged 13-17 (Kerstetter, 2014), with the next highest demographic of users aged 18-24 (31%). The remaining 19% are for those aged above 24, indicating that Snapchat appeals to the younger generation.

Properties of Snapchat

The linguistic properties of Snapchat will be examined following Crystal's framework used to compare linguistic differences between speech and writing. The table below is an overview:

Speech-like	Text-like
Time-bound	*Space-bound*
Spontaneous	Contrived
Face-to-face	Visually decontextualized
Loosely structured	Elaborately structured
Socially interactive	Factually communicative
Immediately revisable	Repeatedly revisable
Prosodically rich	*Graphically rich*

Table 1: Linguistic properties of Snapchat

At a glance, Snapchat can almost be said to be like speech. However, there are exceptions differentiating it from speech within a few categories. In two cases, it embodies properties of both speech and text, elaborated below.

Snapchat's defining feature, the self-destructing message, makes it time-bound like a conversation. For every Snap, the sender has to keep his messages to a maximum of 10 seconds. This means that the message has to be successfully communicated and understood by the receiver within that time – and the Snap might not last 10 seconds.

While time-bound, Snapchat messages are also space-bound. The character limit for the optional text is 31 characters, beating Twitter which has a limit of 130 characters per 'Tweet'. While some find it difficult to 'tweet' within 130 characters, Snapchat poses a further challenge for the sender to encapsulate his ideas. This affects communication in Snapchat which will be examined in the next section.

Taking a Snap is like filming a television show; if not to the satisfaction of the producer, he can have as many retakes as necessary. In Snapchat, if the sender is not happy with his Snap, he can retake it until satisfied. For this reason, it is said to be contrived as it allows the sender to prepare the message, including the angle of the photo, what is filmed in the video, and to redraw

until satisfied. Furthermore, the boundaries are very clear – if the receiver does not finish viewing the Snap within the time limit, the opportunity is lost. Unlike writing, which is also considered contrived, viewers do not have the luxury of rereading the message.

One of the appeals of Snapchat is that it gives the receiver a snapshot of the moment when the sender sent it, as if the receiver were there himself. The receiver can see the sender and his surroundings, even hear him if the Snap was taken as a video. Like making a video call, Snapchat messages are considered face-to-face, with the receiver able to receive verbal (for video) and non-verbal (for video and image) cues of the sender. However, one key difference between Snapchat and a face-to-face conversation is that there is no immediate feedback, leading to asynchronous communication (Herring, 2007).

With the space and time limitations of the Snap, it does not give headroom for complex messages. Furthermore, Snaps can only be sent between friends – both parties must have one another in their contact lists. As a result, Snapchat messages are casual in nature and loosely structured. Usage of colloquial language is common, typical of an ordinary conversation between friends. Message contractions are also frequent, if only to keep the text to the character limitation that Snapchat affords. On this note, the limitations do not make Snapchat a suitable medium for communicating facts or discoursing information. Instead, its design elements make it appropriate for social interaction between friends.

One property of Snapchat that stands out is that it is neither immediately nor repeatedly revisable, once the message is sent. This is due to its ephemeral and asynchronous nature. Receivers of Snapchat messages are not able to provide feedback while viewing it. Since the message self-destructs after sending, senders are also not able to retrieve it for revisions or edits. Unlike speech, Snapchat is not communicated in real time. Unlike text, it is not recorded.

With the option to send a picture or a video, a Snap is graphically rich, with the potential to be rich in prosody as well. As a picture, the visuals are core to understanding the message. While not offering the same level of depth as a table of information like in text, the graphics play a different role in that they provide the context of the message. It can be further enhanced with the optional drawing, used perhaps to direct the reader's attention to a portion of the picture or to simply add colour to the message. In fact, the drawing sometimes forms the bulk of the message, explained in the next section. As a video, the sender adds a dimension that reflects the rhythm,

stress and intonation of speech. This makes Snapchat video messages rich in prosody, making them 'natural'.

Snapchat's Effects on Communication

With the unique blend of image, video, text, and an in-built self-destruct timer, Snapchat has affected the way language is used to communicate with it.

With 10 seconds before the message is destroyed, senders are forced to keep their ideas simple and poignant. First, they have to decide between capturing an image or a video – a still image limits the depth of the message, while a video requires the sender to compose the whole message within a maximum of 10 seconds. In addition, including a caption is equally difficult to keep within 31 characters. Put together, this leads to brevity in message. Herring (2007) refers to this limit as the "message buffer". As a result, messages could lack a caption or include a simple one of not more than 5 words (assuming 1 word is made up of 6 characters). This is consistent with findings from Condon and Cech (2001), who found that smaller message buffers lead to shorter messages, and Anis (2007) who concluded that small buffers increases the likelihood of structural abbreviation.

Because Snapchat's essence is photos, the messages are primarily visual. Communication on this platform shifts to a visual one where facial expressions, gestures, and even art play a larger role. Thus, senders rely on the graphically and prosodically rich potential to convey their messages. In fact, this potential has led to a rise in "Snapchat art", where people draw on Snaps artistically and creatively. Shaun McBride is a professional 'Snapchatter', informally known as "The Michelangelo of Snapchat". In his works, he lets the art tell the story. With a small message buffer, text that is included (if any at all) serves to complement the visual message.
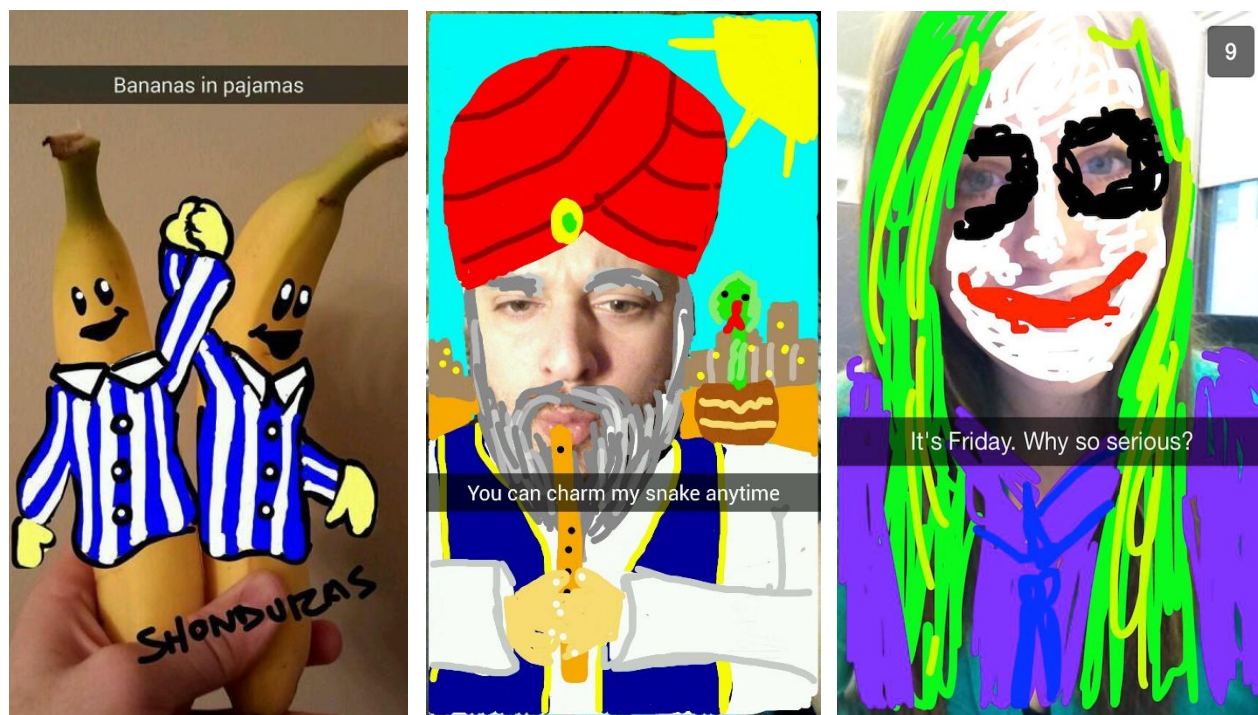
Figure 2: Examples of Snapchat art. The left picture is one of McBride's works.

Lastly, Snapchat messages are phatic in nature. Besides the casual tone and shortened language discussed earlier under linguistic properties, Snapchat messages have a phatic function: to confirm that communication can take place. Malinowski 1949 (cited in Vetere, Smith & Gibbs, 2009) defines phatic communication as "a type of speech in which the ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words". Jakobson 1981 (cited in Vetere, Smith & Gibbs, 2009) extended this idea that phatic communication does not inform, but maintains or builds upon social relationships. Thus, phatic exchanges like "good day" and "nice weather" do not tell the receiver anything constructive, but open the channel for communication and thus, maintains the relationship between sender and receiver. Commonly, this is known as "small-talk" (Vetere, Smith & Gibbs, 2009). While the theories by Malinowski and Jakobson were introduced at a time when social media did not exist, their ideas still apply in modern day communication technologies. With a phatic function, it is no surprise that communication on Snapchat is short, is used to establish rapport between persons, and is not used as a key communication tool.

Conclusion

Snapchat is a new social media tool that lets senders incorporate textual, video and visual elements into a message that is destroyed after it is opened for a short amount of time. Due to its linguistic properties, it is similar to speech with a few exceptions. These defining properties affect the communication on Snapchat by keeping messages concise, primarily visual, and phatic in nature.

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