HG2052 Language, Technology and the Internet Assignment 1

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Describe one medium of communication not discussed in class and compare it to both speech and text.

WhatsApp messenger is an internet based multi-platform messaging system for certain smartphone. It not only sends messages in real time but also has the options of sending images, videos, voice recordings, contact information and even location through GPS via google maps. Created in 2009 (Reventós, 2014) with over 600 million users as of August 2014, it has now become so widespread that Facebook, the leading social media platform has moved to acquire it (Dailydigestnews.com, 2014). Compared to speech and text, WhatsApp can potentially be more or less efficient based on different situations and needs. Adding to the fact that WhatsApp is growing faster than other applications such as Facebook, Gmail or even Twitter (Figure 1) and has managed to spread its influence over the globe (Figure 2), it will definitely have an impact on language and society. Multiple studies have been carried out recently about the impact of WhatsApp on different groups of people. Some have shown that WhatsApp can have positive effects such as enhancing the performance of students (Yeboah & Ewur, 2014) while others suggests that instant messaging damages personal relationships.

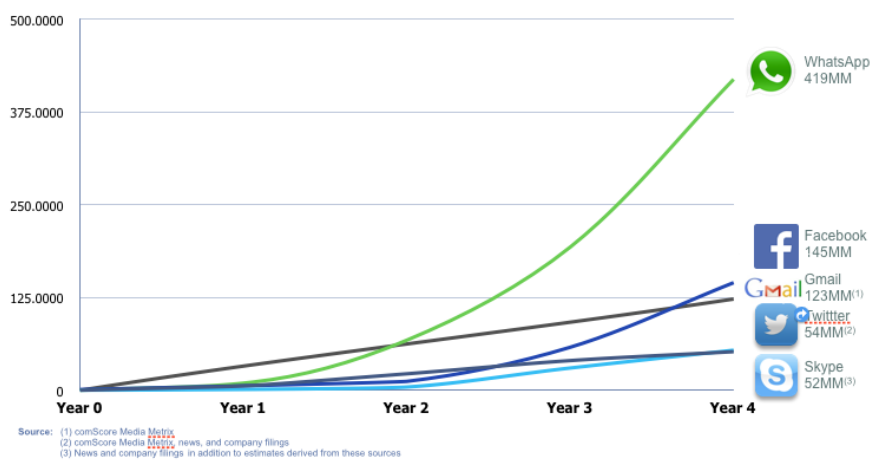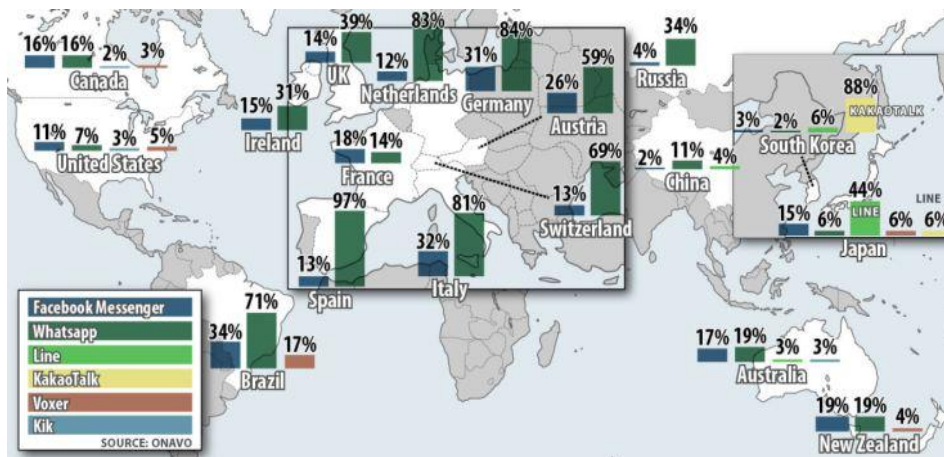Figure 1: Growth rate for first four years for five social services (Forbes, 2014

Figure 2: Reach of Messaging Apps in Different Countries (Cutler, 2014)

Due to the fact that WhatsApp is instant and people want to get their messages across fast, the language used is often shortened or abbreviated. With over one billion messages sent per day (Olanoff, 2011) the texting format and language is evolving each day. As the keypad on phones are usually small, it is harder to pass messages as compared to speaking or writing. Thus abbreviated forms of long words are created to allow shorter response time to messages as there are less keys to press. Examples are the shortening of words such as tomorrow and tonight to "2moro" and "2nite". This new shortened language bears a striking resemblance to net speak and text messaging language as most of them are either brought over or have changes from words from these other platforms. However, with slightly different functions, the methods of passing messages is diverging from that of the other mediums. Also, with functions and add-ons such as auto-correct on most smart-phones today, the language skills of the younger generation are affected. The spelling abilities of the younger generation have already started to decline due to overdependence on spell-checking programs (ScienceDaily, 2014).

Aside from abbreviations, WhatsApp also has a stock list of emoticons and emojis to portray a wide variety of emotions and situations. The use of these symbols or pictures to convey messages has developed to such an extent that a certain set structure has been established and words may not even need to be used to convey complicated messages (Figure 3). These non-verbal cues can add an additional layer of context or set the tone of the message and play an important role in most online chats today (Gajadhar & Green, 2005). A new method of communication can be said to have formed, with variations in how these emoticons are formed and used based on the native language of the region. For

example, western countries such as the USA has a style of emoticons that usually requires rotation to see the symbolic representation of different emotions like while eastern countries such as Japan has a different style where the emoticons are more direct (Figure 3). Some cultures even incorporate their native language into the emoticons. In Korea, their Hangul letters are merged into the emoticons to form a set of emoticons such as "ㅇㅂㅇ" and "^ㅈ^" that are unique to their language and culture.
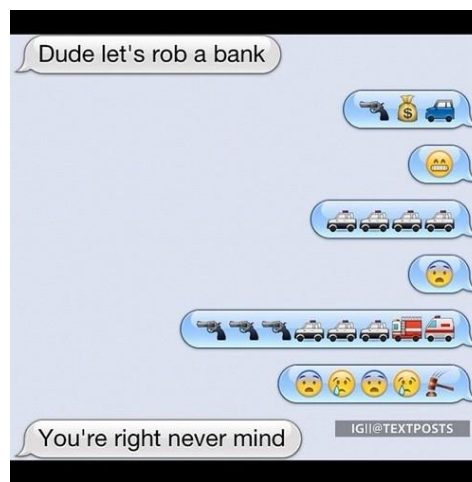
Figure 3: Emoji conversation

Figure 4: Differences in Emoticons (Opdenakker, 2006)

Meaning of emoticons in USA/Europe:		Meaning of emoticons in Japan:	
:-)	normal laugh	(^_^)	normal laugh
:-(	saddened	(^o^;>)	pardon!
;-)	wink	(^ ^;)	cold sweat
:-))	very happy	(^o^)	happy
:-o	wow!	(*^o^*)	excited
:-|	strict	(_o_)	I am sorry
:-||	angry	(^ . ^)	girls laugh
8-)	laugh with spectacles	(*^_^*;)	sorry

As WhatsApp is a messaging application that allows almost instant transfer of information as long as it is connected to the internet, in face-to-face situations, speech would be more effective as it adds a more personal touch and more information can be exchanges as talking is more often than not faster as compared to typing on a phone. In cases where there are three or more people in conversation, using WhatsApp may be more efficient as too many people speaking at once can be confusing. This form of communication is also not as time-bound as speech or space-bound like texts. Though it is

partially time-bound in that the messages can be sent and received instantly, it is possible for the recipients to slowly read through the messages before replying, especially in the case where there are multiple participants in the chat. It is not as space-bound as texts as though the chat logs can be saved, the data is not permanent and can be altered or deleted.

WhatsApp is similar to speech in the aspect that it is spontaneous, with the message being sent instantly and even time-stamped for the convenience of the participants of the conversation. There is even a function that indicates if the recipient has read the sent message. With these features there is often a social pressure to respond promptly as the other will know if one has read and ignored the message and this reduces the time to think and leads to looser sentence constructions and smaller chunks of information. Though depending on the situation, it is also possible to take time to formulate a reply, such as when a complex question is asked. As the conversation windows are sorted into specific groups, it is also possible to just jump back and communicate with someone after a period of silence and this makes sentence boundaries unclear unlike text which is more orderly and contrived. As compared to text which has a large time lag between production and reception, and speech which often has little to no time before a response is required, WhatsApp is a much more efficient and suitable as a normal everyday form of communication.

WhatsApp can be either socially interactive or factually communicative. Besides using it to communicate and maintain relationships with friends and family, WhatsApp can also be used for businesses with features such as sending contacts useful for passing business information and google maps to guide people to meeting locations. The group chat feature is useful for discussion amongst multiple parties and an increasing number of entrepreneurs have been using it to expand their businesses (The Economic Times, 2014). Another way WhatsApp can be factually communicative is when it is used to supplement and improve teaching methods (Admin, 2013). Though the common stereotype is that the younger generation are more likely to be using WhatsApp and thus it will be hard to incorporate and use it for businesses, this is not true. Studies have shown that WhatsApp users has a median age of 36 and that there are a large number of middle-aged users (Figure 5). In addition, chat logs can be used to keep a written record of what has been discussed or to revise a long business proposal or plan at the user's pace.

Figure 5: Age range of WhatsApp Users (Fetto, 2014)
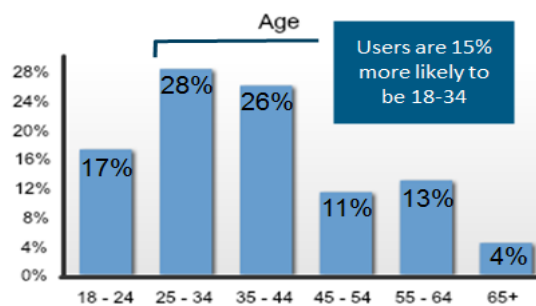
Unlike text where any spelling or grammatical errors can be corrected before the recipients know anything is wrong, WhatsApp is more like speech in the aspect where errors, once typed or spoken, is hard to take back. Once you hit the send button, the message will be sent all recipients and immediately saved in their chat logs. WhatsApp does not have the function of retrieving messages or deleting them after a set period of time like other applications such as Telegram or TigerText, thus the sender has to live with the consequences of the message, if any. The best method would be to either apologize or correct the mistake in the following messages immediately.

WhatsApp conversations tend to lack certain unique features of speech such as intonation and loudness and is more similar to text where a more graphical method is used to portray these features. As mentioned, there are a large range of emoji and emoticons that can be used to portray emotions and tone. Pictures, videos, voice messages and even pictures of a location can convey a large amount of information and context to more accurately get a message across. Though WhatsApp lacks unique features of written text such as paragraphs and pages, it has its own adaptation of these features in the form of abbreviations that is more convenient for and suits the smartphone medium.

In conclusion, WhatsApp is a versatile medium that allows information to be communicated in a wide variety of formats. With options to send either text, images, videos, voice recordings and many more almost instantly to convey a message, it thus shares many features with both speech and written text. Similar to speech, WhatsApp is partially time-bound, spontaneous, loosely structured, socially interactive and immediately revisable and

it shares features with text such as being visually decontextualized, graphically rich and factually communicative. Though using WhatsApp seems to be more similar to text in that written or typed words are used instead of sounds to convey a message, in actual fact it shares more features with and is more similar to speech.

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