

HG2052: Language, Technology & the Internet

Assignment 1 - Analysis of a medium of communication

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With the emergence of more new media platforms today, people are able to communicate via increasing various types of mediums of communication. This ultimately affects the language usage of people due to the different platforms of communication available. Furthermore, in today's context, people are constantly on their phones or respective gadgets, connected to the web almost at all times. With technological advancements in iPhone, Android, Windows phone and so on, it presents new media on a whole new level where there exists a vast number of mobile applications created for these devices or platforms, which are easily accessible and can be downloaded by tech-savvy individuals everywhere and at anytime.

One popular medium of communication today is the social messaging application known as, WhatsApp. It was founded by two ex-Yahoo Inc. employees, Jan Koum and Brian Acton (WhatsApp, 2014) but was then bought over by Facebook in February 2014 for a lump sum of \$19 billion ("Facebook buys WhatsApp: Mark Zuckerberg explains why", 2014). WhatsApp was created with the aim of "building a better SMS alternative" (WhatsApp, 2014). It provides unlimited messaging which only requires the user's mobile data plan and Wi-Fi. WhatsApp is now used as a multiplatform not only for a casual conversation amongst two friends but also has been adopted for work matters such as business engagement. It is made available to iPhone, Android, Blackberry, Nokia and even Windows phone users. The availability of the app to a variety of technological gadgets suggests the widespread use of WhatsApp amongst smartphone users.

To date, WhatsApp has a substantial number of approximately 6 million active users (Olson, 2014). Below is the official statement made by WhatsApp's co-founder regarding the success that the messaging app has garnered so far.

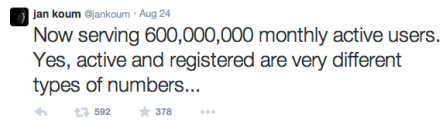


Figure 1: WhatsApp CEO and Co-founder's tweet<sup>1</sup>

In addition, it was reported that approximately 19% of the world online population uses WhatsApp, making it the third biggest social app, outdoing Facebook (McNaughton, 2014). Comparing all of the social messaging apps, on the other hand, WhatsApp is claimed to be the leader in the service (Oleg, 2013).

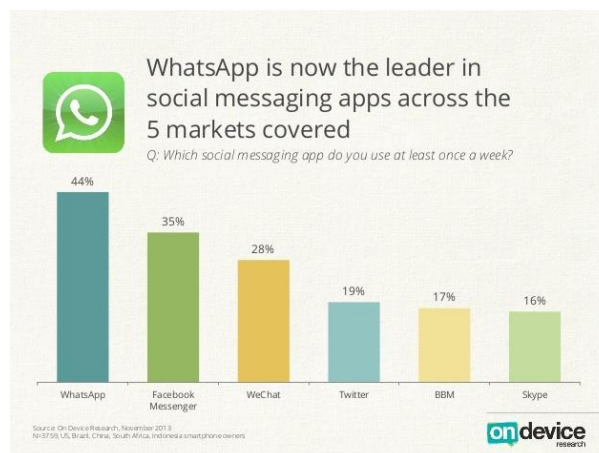


Figure 2: Statistics on social messaging apps; indicating WhatsApp as the leader in the market

This clearly illustrates the widely use of Whatsapp as a reliable and most preferred social messaging app.

In Herring's work (Herring, 2007), she mentioned with detailed analysis of how there was a need to come up with a new model to classify the emerging media platforms present today. Initially, such mediums were simply categorized

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<sup>1</sup> <https://twitter.com/jankoum>

as computer-mediated discourse (CMD). However, technological experts found that CMD was too generic and required a more intricate model in order to distinguish various new emerging mediums with more consideration. Hence in recent years, two researchers, Jucker and Dürscheid, came up with a new classification and created a new term called keyboard-to-screen communication or otherwise known as KSC, referring to communication arising from keyboard to screen interaction (Jucker & Dürscheid, 2012). This includes chats, text messaging and even social networking site (SNS) interaction, as long as there is the presence of a physical keyboard. According to the paper, specifically on WhatsApp, one of its features included being synchronous and informal. These two features are considered to be significant since it has an extended effect on language and communication amongst individuals. The research concluded by mentioning how KSC was initially applied on only single-tool platforms but with today's increasing advancements in technology, the existence of multi-tool platforms enables the integration of all communication practices to take place (Jucker & Dürscheid, 2012).

Developments in new media platforms like WhatsApp may impose changes on the communication of people today. To detect these changes, there is a need to understand the various properties of WhatsApp and the technological and social changes that may have or is taking place. There are two approaches to analyze this matter. Firstly, according to Herring, two basic types of influences may facilitate linguistic effects on users are mainly the medium and situation (Herring, 2007). The medium here refers to the media platform, which may affect way of communication, and situation, on the other hand, molds communication. Secondly, we can look at David Crystal's book titled; "Language and the Internet", where he introduced the seven features of how to distinguish speech and writing in order to analyze the properties of WhatsApp and then classify it as a more specific medium of communication. In this essay, the latter method is preferred so as to garner a more systematic and hence, clearer analysis regarding the influences and changes that WhatsApp have on individuals' language use.

Table 1 below is the framework, as found in Crystal's study (Crystal, 2006), which lays out the seven features of what makes the medium either speech like or text like.

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

Table 1: The seven features according to Crystal (Crystal, 2006)

Following the classification as shown in the table above, WhatsApp can be said to be speech like since it is considered as time bound for it requires a participant and also an addressee (or more) to be present in order for the communication to take place. Additionally, WhatsApp too is space bound as a conversation reply can only be contained within a speech bubble, which makes it similar as writing. However, WhatsApp does not have a character limit, which means an individual may write as much as he wants to. Nevertheless, like a text, the replies are often permanent and the reader of the text may be unknown.

WhatsApp also fulfills the criteria of being spontaneous. The social messaging app largely allows for casual, simultaneous and immediate conversations as mentioned in several studies (Church & Oliveira, 2013; Jucker & Dürscheid, 2012). Within a conversation, especially in a group chat, simultaneous replies can be sent, which may provide a continuous conversation resulting in the communication being a spontaneous one. Not only that, an informal conversation in WhatsApp may also bring about the spontaneous effect similar to speech. Despite that, WhatsApp can also be contrived, to a certain

extent, since there exist a time lag between production and reception plus, the conversation can be reread and the participant may choose to organize the structure of the message depending on the formality or intention of the conversation. Thus, WhatsApp can also be said to be text like.

In terms of face-to-face communication, it is slightly difficult to characterize WhatsApp as being a face-to-face medium because the conversation is done when the recipient may not be present physically at the same location however, video recordings can be sent which includes facial gestures and interaction. This may then classify WhatsApp as being speech like.

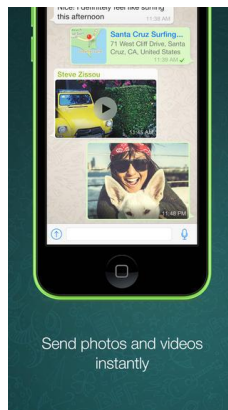


Figure 3: A screenshot of a WhatsApp conversation<sup>2</sup>

WhatsApp too can be visually decontextualized since participants are not able to rely on deictic expressions through mere text and also due to the case of when there may be a lack of immediate feedback when the recipient is offline.

There is also an opportunity for users to use loosely structured way of conversing on WhatsApp making it speech like. For example, nonsense words, obscenity and slang may be used in WhatsApp conversations more specifically text messaging abbreviations.

A more significant feature would be the socially interactive nature of WhatsApp. Being a social messaging app, it highly encourages and provides a multiplatform of social interactions which varies from just text, sharing of

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<sup>2</sup> <https://itunes.apple.com/sg/app/whatsapp-messenger/id310633997?mt=8>

pictures and videos, voice messages and even new characteristics like sharing a location, archiving a conversation and even creating a broadcast list (Whatsapp, 2014). A conversation on WhatsApp may be involving just another person or even a group of people with a maximum number of 50 users in one chat group. This brings interaction to a whole new level where conversations can be exchanged within a social circle and simultaneously a few people may converse at the same time making it more conversational in nature (Church & Oliveira, 2013). Furthermore, prosody can also be expressed via voice or video messages, which can be sent instantly creating what seems like a normal spontaneous conversation. Other features which makes WhatsApp socially interactive is the fact that users may include statuses or even personal information on the medium such as having a profile picture, the ability to block a certain user and even having a mute button which enables an individual to stop receiving notifications from a particular chat group. Thus, this proves how WhatsApp is after all a bulk of multifunctional social messaging app.

Factual communication too may occur in WhatsApp where the communication of ideas may take place especially within a group chat, which has the intention of discussing work related matters. This can be supported by the fact that nowadays, it is increasingly common now for business engagements to be held in a WhatsApp conversation (Prantik, 2013; Valsan, 2014).

WhatsApp can also be considered as immediately revisable since the participant may think of a reply while the recipient is 'typing...' making it somewhat speech like. Furthermore, errors made cannot be undone however, interruptions can only be in the form of in a chat where one is typing a reply but another recipient may have replied first.

Lastly, WhatsApp can be said to be prosodically rich due to its feature of sending voice messages or even videos instantly. A conversation may even be solely voice messages making it like a typical conversation but just not face-to-face. WhatsApp is also graphically rich since it is similar to writing as capitalization and punctuations can be included in a conversation.

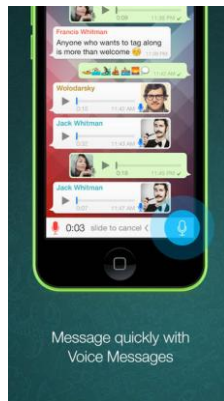


Figure 4: A screenshot of voice messages in a WhatsApp conversation<sup>3</sup>

To sum up, WhatsApp seem to have created a revolutionized way or form of communication and as seen above, it largely comprises a mixture of both speech and text properties due to its multifunctional tools of communication ranging from text, photos, videos, voice messages and so on. New kinds of communication have also developed from this social messaging app, which includes group conversations, broadcast list, sharing of location, voice chats and such, may indicate certain influences on social factors. Undoubtedly, communication on mediums such as WhatsApp today makes conversation more immediate and situation based, as it is highly dependent on the context of conversation, thus making communication to be more speech like. Thus, this may have effects on the way society communicates especially amongst youths who is deemed to be the major age group actively on WhatsApp (Olson, 2013). To conclude, after analyzing WhatsApp as a medium of communication, it suggests that further changes in the way people communicate may occur due to more of future advancements in new media today.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://itunes.apple.com/sg/app/whatsapp-messenger/id310633997?mt=8>

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