

Abstract

This paper primarily looks at Skype's Video call feature and compares it against the features of speech and writing. The aim is to show how new modes of communication, particularly Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) has influenced our way of communicating with each other. Examples used in this paper also include overarching concepts of video calling explored by linguists such as David Crystal and Chafe, as well as personal examples which utilise conversation analysis to highlight how these linguists concepts may be seen on a day-to-day level.

SKYPE'S VIDEO CALL VERSUS SPEECH AND TEXT

Technology has given rise to an increasing number of ways of communication, and one such particular medium which has become rapidly popular is the video call. This new mode of communication can be seen in applications such as Skype, which is "a software application that uses voice over internet protocol to allow its users to make voice calls over the internet" (Casarico, 2013, p. 11), and which allows users to "experience video chat using a webcam, and send texts or instant messages during the call." (Casarico, 2013, p. 11) As seen from Figure 1, Skype's video call has seen a jump in users since it began in 2004, with an increase of 1 million users to 70 million users in 2014. The reasons for its popularity, though, are evident. Skype's multi-functioning system allows for an amalgamation of speech and text, and above all, aims to create an environment which allows for the greatest ease of communication. Advantages of video calling include its asynchronous nature, the option to switch to writing in text (should the user so choose to do so) as well as its face-to-face function, amongst others. In fact, the notion of video calling has been so integrated into society that the total number of users for the Microsoft-owned Skype alone amounts 300 million worldwide and as of date, a total of 1.4 trillion minutes of voice and video calls have been made using Skype (Clarke, 2013).

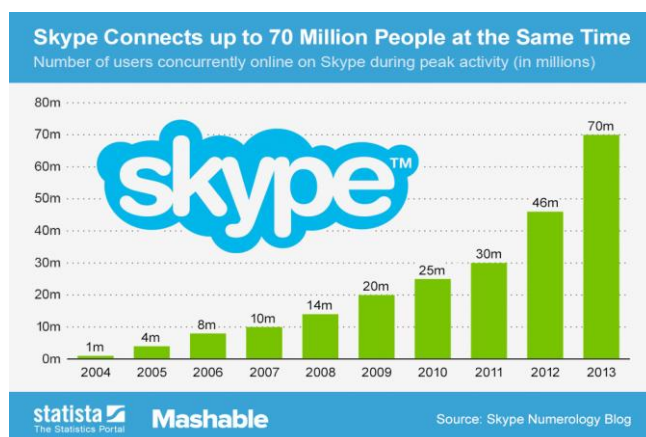


Figure 1. Skype Connects up to 70 Million People at the Same Time. This figure illustrates the increasing number of Skype users.

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A video call made via Skype is a multimodal form of communication which aims to produce an experience which is as close to a physical face-to-face interaction as possible through combining both text and speech. For an instance, in the figure below, both interlocutors rely on a mixture of facial features as seen from the live image as well as via text. The interlocutor Nick begins the conversation by initiating a call, which Ju Lyn answers. Both interlocutors now enter into a synchronous, face-to-face conversation. However, Ju Lyn's first message to Nick is 'Can you hear me . . .', which indicates Ju Lyn's intention to ensure that Nick can hear her. The use of such an interrogative, however, is one that is unique to a video call as it is less likely that an interlocutor would use such a discourse marker during a face-to-face conversation, as a face-to-face conversation assumes that one can hear the other as they are both within the same physical space. Immediately after, Ju Lyn's comment "okay great" acts as a discourse marker that the conversation is about to take a topic shift, and hence her next utterance of "you can see the book title I'm showing you right" is expected and Nick quickly replies to that with a yes. However, it is noticeable that both interlocutors have chosen to rely on the text system rather than speak through the microphone, and only rely on the video call system as a visual secondary aid to accompany the primary-written text in the instant message. This is because Ju Lyn is asking for specific instructions from Nick - namely the book title - and thus responds with "later I forget the name of the text again" indication that she wants Nick to type the name of the book title down for ease of retrieval. The reason for this appears to be the "evanescence of spoken language" (Hockett, 1994, as cited in Nishimaki, 2013, p. 12) in which "spoken language [is] available only at the time and the place it is uttered unless it is recorded" (Nishimaki, 2013, p. 12), while the written form is "permanent and transportable" (Chafe 1994, as cited in Nishimaki, 2013, p. 13). In Nick and Ju Lyn's case, typing the title of the book down makes it

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easier to trace than a spoken one. Hence, Ju Lyn relies on the permanence of the written form in order for her to reread the information from Nick in the future should she miss any.

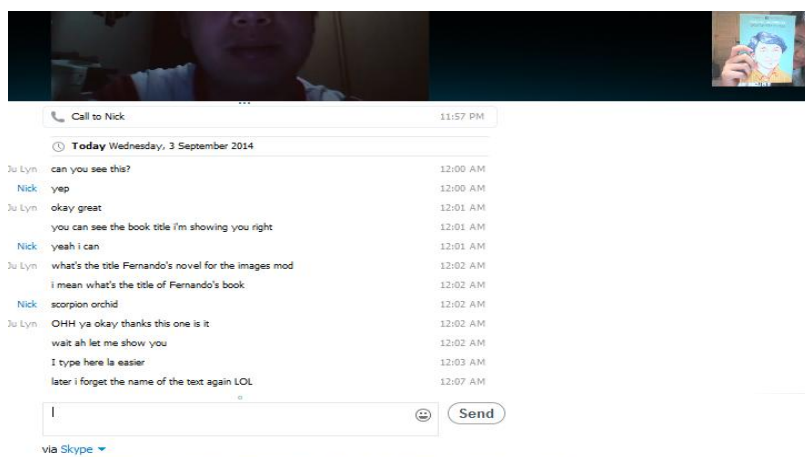


Figure 1

Chafe's evanescence of spoken language can also be applied to Figure 3 below, which presents a scenario whereby both interlocutors, Zibin and Ju Lyn, are in a video call. (Note: the call had already ended) Zibin responds via the instant messaging function whereas Ju Lyn responds through the use of the microphone. As such, the conversation cannot be traced nor be understood because only one interlocutor's messages are captured.

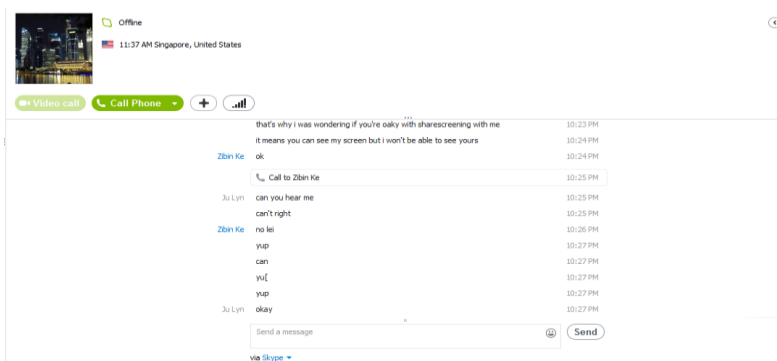


Figure 2

Unlike what David Crystal stated that a text is "visually decontextualised" (Crystal, 2006, p. 31) and that speech is "Face to face" (Crystal, 2006, p.31), the video call appears as

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between text and speech due to it being only partially visually decontextualised. Unlike a telephone call, the video call's attempt to recreate a face-to-face conversation by allowing both interlocutors to see each other allows for more holistic communication. However, this is limited by the positioning of the webcam, and thus each individual can only see a limited range of what the other interlocutor wants to show him. In fact, it is also now possible to limit what the other interlocutor sees by repositioning the webcam. In a particular conversation via the webcam, Ju Lyn checks the title of a book with Nick. Nick repeatedly asks questions such as "I can't see the book, move it closer" and "which book?" which prompted Ju Lyn to reposition the camera and respond with "here, can you see now?" such that Nic could see the book title. Such a feature is only common to video calls, because in face-to-face conversations, both interlocutors are unlikely to have to resort to such utterances as, due to the fact that both interlocutors will be within the same space and time, both will be able to see the book immediately without the use of referencing. However in the case of video calls, both interlocutors are also able to rely on paralinguistic features such as each other's facial movements and physical gestures in order to make out the other interlocutor's emotions, and need not be restricted to a range of emoticons and typography to convey meanings, as it is in text. In this instance, Skype has provided both interlocutors with the bare requirements of a face-to-face conversation as both interlocutors will only be able to read face and hand gestures while being unable to see the rest of the body.

The introduction of the Smartphone has also allowed Skype to properly take off as a new mode of communication, possibly even overriding speech over telephone conversations altogether as Skype is now made portable through the introduction of the Skype on Mobile. Previously, Skype was a desktop-bound application which required users to purchase an external peripheral - the webcam- to be installed and in sync with the computer for video

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calls to take place. This limited the range of users as users who are constantly on the move preferred a portable mode of communication. However, when using Skype, interlocutors also face challenges. One such challenge is the possibility that the increase of technology might not be able to accommodate the increasing number of video call users. Too many users and a possible lack of bandwidth would result in a lowered Quality of Experience (QOE) and thus an increase in "user back-off behaviours" (Zhang et.al., 2013, pg. 2) whereby users would drop the call and revert to texting or telephone conversation should the user experience interruptions during a face-to-face call.

However, statistics appear to show that the QOE of most users are still relatively high, as the rate at which video calls are used as a form of communication appears to be increasing. This is reflected in Figure 4 below, for example, which compares the international phone traffic to that of international Skype to Skype (video calling).

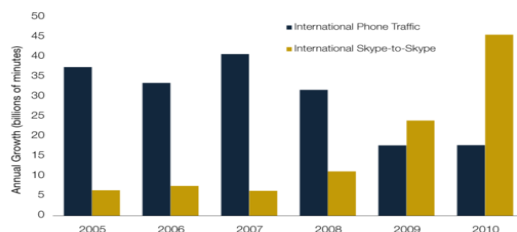


Figure 4. Net Increase in ILD and Skype Traffic. This figure illustrates Skype's growing popularity exceeding international phone traffic

As seen in Figure 4, the number of video call minutes rose from 5 billion in 2005 to 45 billion in 2010, surpassing international phone traffic in 2009. This shows that users find video calls a suitable replacement for telephone calls, as it fosters greater and more personal interaction between interlocutors. The idea that such computer-mediated communications (CMC) can overtake and even replace the existing dominant modes of communication raises the possibility that CMCs, and particularly video calls, are not seen as new modes of

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communication. Rather, they are seen as an improvement to the current mode of speech communication - the telephone. Hence one would state that video calls, as a form of CMC, are part of a continuum leaning more towards speech than text, rather than being "fundamentally different from both writing and speech, as traditionally understood" (Crystal, 2001, as cited in Nishimaki, 2013, p. 20). More people are replacing phone calls with purely video calls, and it is evident that Skype also responds to the increase in people using video calls by introducing more speech-like functions, such as the Share screen and voice mail functions.

The video call has thus has changed the way we communicate as it relies on the desire for a personalised mode of communication. Statistics still show that video calls superseded, and might even replace telephone calls altogether. However, one must also note that while users seek more intimate form of communication, video calls are a relatively a new form of communication and thus the initial spike in video call users could very well be due to novelty. If the rate of technological advancements does not keep up with the users' desire for video calls, one might very well see a return to the telephones due to their greater convenience and portability.

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