

Telegram: Comparison to speech and text and its effects on communication

1. Introduction to Telegram

Telegram is an instant messaging application that was launched in 2013 (Telegram, n.d.). It is a cloud-based messenger where all the data in the application can be stored in the cloud instead of on the users' devices and this means that Telegram can be accessed on many devices such as phones, tablets and laptops simultaneously (Telegram, n.d.).

It is similar to an existing cloud-based messenger application created in 2009 – Whatsapp – as it allows users to communicate via text messages in real-time, make voice or video calls and send attachments such as pictures, audio and video files, contact information and location – live, current or anywhere else on the map – via google maps, which uses global positioning system (GPS).

However, what sets Telegram apart from Whatsapp is that firstly, not only can users send videos stored on their phones, there is a variant to the audio message function that allows them to record video messages (see Fig. 1); these video messages are different from regular video files – which typically have to be recorded before the user can send it out – in the sense that they are a lot quicker as Telegram compresses and sends them as the user is recording it (The Telegram Team, 2017). Lastly, Telegram also has a novel function that offers users the option to start secret chats and send self-destructing messages.

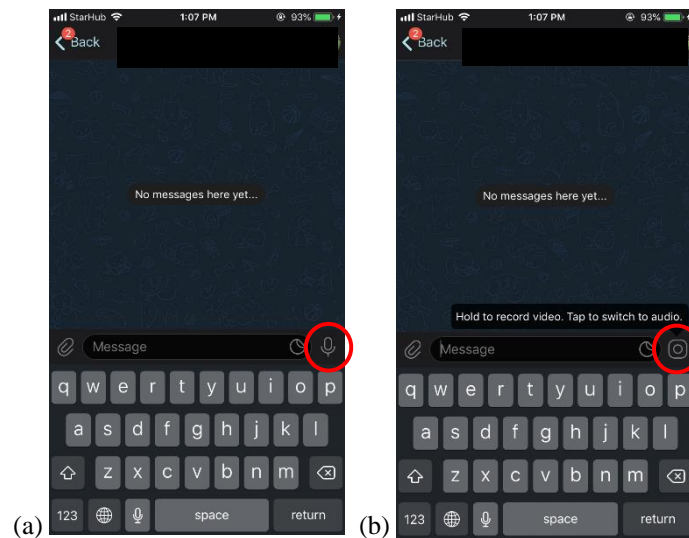


Fig. 1: (a) audio message function and (b) video message function available in Telegram

2. Statistics on Telegram

As of October 2019, Telegram had approximately 200 million monthly active users, according to Statista. This puts Telegram in the last place behind five other messenger applications, among which includes Whatsapp, Facebook Messenger and Snapchat and more (see Fig. 2) While the data may look

discouraging, this is presumably because Telegram was the newest messaging application on the market among the six applications that were surveyed.

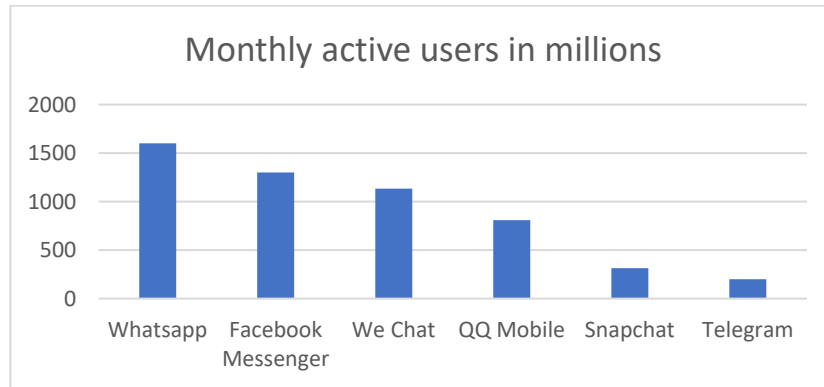


Fig. 2: Comparison of monthly active users in millions across six messaging applications in 2019

Although the absolute number of monthly active Telegram users is relatively low compared to its other counterparts in the market, Telegram’s user growth increased quite rapidly – from 25 million in March 2014 to 200 million in March 2018 – according to Statista. (see Fig. 3) This goes to show that even with its late entry into the market, Telegram has rapidly picked up speed to earn its place beside the giants of the industry (Iqbal, 2019).

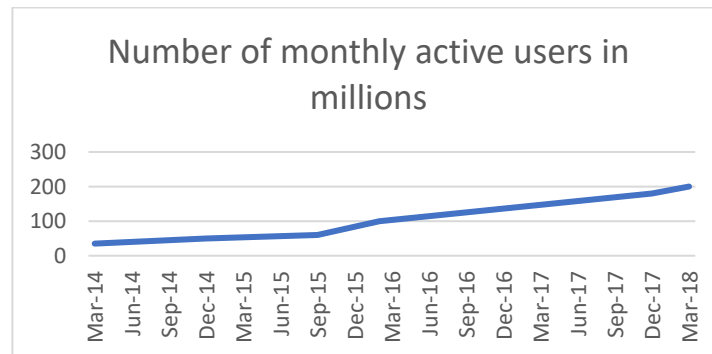


Fig. 3: Telegram’s number monthly active users in millions from 2014-2018

3. Summary of relevant literature on Telegram

Many research studies have been conducted with the aim of determining Telegram’s effect on language learning through the use of its groups and channels. (Famarzi, Tabrizi & Chalak, 2019) Most of these existing studies look into its effect on developing vocabulary (Elekaei, 2018; Ghobadi & Taki, 2018; Heidari Tabrizi & Onvani, 2018; Khodarahimi & Heidari-Shahreza, 2018; Movafagh Ardestani, 2017, as cited in Famarzi, Tabrizi & Chalak, 2019) but other areas of language that has also been explored include grammar (Nabati, 2018, as cited in Famarzi, Tabrizi & Chalak, 2019), reading comprehension (Azadi and Azad, 2017, as cited in Famarzi, Tabrizi & Chalak, 2019) and integrated skills (Famarzi, 2018).

4. Properties of Telegram and its effect on language used for communication

Firstly, a key effect of Telegram on the language used for communication is that the language used to converse on the platform does not only involve conventional text and speech but instead has developed to include graphic illustrations as well. This effect stems from the fact that apart from the regular functions – such as text messaging, audio or video files – that are also found in other messaging applications, Telegram is the first messaging application that provided a different mode of communication that involved the use of visuals such as emojis, stickers and graphic interchange formats (GIFs). According to the Oxford dictionary, emojis are small digital images or icons used to express ideas, emotions and more. In fact, there are emojis to represent almost anything we can think of and some examples include vehicles, food, hand signs, the weather and sports. Stickers provide more comprehensive and detailed representations of the emotions or ideas one tries to communicate across, and they contain pictures of actual characters or people that are associated with a particular emotion or facial expression. Lastly, GIFs are a series of images or soundless video that will loop continuously and do not require anyone to press play (Lepard, 2017). These graphics are increasingly used in conversations on Telegram to represent certain ideas or emotions and this has altered the language used for communication on this platform such that it now encompasses visual illustrations on top of the traditional speech and text.

Building on this point, with the rising popularity of stickers, emojis and GIFs on Telegram, it is inevitable that the conventional language used for greetings, emotions and everyday items or occurrences using words or speech will be replaced by these trendy graphic illustrations, which are supposedly more appealing and convenient. For instance, it is not uncommon for users to simply send one cute sticker to convey a greeting instead of typing the word “hi” (see Fig. 4).

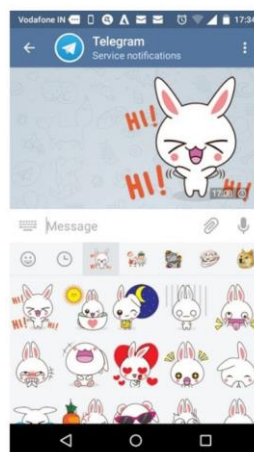


Fig. 4: Use of a sticker to convey a greeting (Makwana, 2016)

Secondly, similar to Whatsapp and other messaging applications, Telegram also has the group function where all members can send and receive messages in a common space (Dargahi Nobari, Reshadatmand, Neshati, 2017) and for Telegram, each group can hold up to a maximum of 200,000 members (Telegram, n.d.). In every Telegram group, there are group permissions, which are default permissions that are

typically set to restrict all members from posting specific kinds of content (Telegram, n.d.) and with this type of regulation in place, it could imply a more controlled use of language on the users' part as it has to be tailored to fit within the specified guidelines.

In addition, Telegram also has a special function that allows users to conduct polls in these groups, which are generally used to coordinate the group's activities and for the members to keep in touch (The Telegram Team, 2018). Language use and communication is made more efficient through the use of polls because firstly, with choices provided for the voters, participants can bypass the need to text or articulate in order to communicate their opinions to others. Secondly, the consensus in a discussion can be more easily attained since everyone is kept on track and only relevant information is exchanged during the process of communication, which also contributes to more efficient language use.

Furthermore, Telegram offers users the option to edit or delete their messages after sending so that they are modified or removed in the recipient(s)' history. While this property makes it convenient for users to rectify any mistakes made in sending out their messages, it may also promote negligence on the part of the users, in that they may put less thought into their message – in terms of its content and who it is intended for – before sending it out.

Lastly, a property that is rather unique to Telegram that affects communication would be the existence of secret chats and self-destructing messages, as mentioned in the introduction. Secret chats use end-to-end encryption, which means that only the sender and recipient can read the messages and no one else can decipher them (Telegram, n.d.). They are also device-specific and not part of the Telegram cloud once created (Telegram, n.d.). With a high level of privacy and confidentiality, these secret chats may give rise to more explicit or less censored use of language in terms of the content of the messages in the chat as well as in terms of the users' word choices.

As for self-destructing messages, its effect is likely to be similar to that of secret chats. While secret chats are still visible on both the sender and recipient's device, self-destructing messages will disappear from both parties' devices after a set time period allocated by the sender (Telegram, n.d.). Despite being an interesting feature, this function may present individuals with the opportunity to cyber bully others since there would be virtually no evidence or consequences in this case.

5. New kind of communication that Telegram has enabled

With the discussion on sticker sets and emojis, it is clear that Telegram has paved the way for the use of the visual medium of communication, where a recipient can understand what the sender means by simply looking at the stickers, emojis or even GIFs that has been sent. These illustrations are clearer and faster in conveying messages than the ordinary image files as the former is associated with specific emotions or facial expressions and are readily available in a "bank" on Telegram. As such, Telegram has certainly enabled its users to communicate with one another through the visual medium of communication.

6. Telegram’s general effect on society and language

As the pioneer application that introduced stickers into text messaging, Telegram’s effect on both society and language is likely to be closely related to that of the increasing popularity of stickers as a social tool (Susanto, 2018).

In the societal context, Susanto (2018) explains that firstly, stickers serve as a safe way of starting a conversation with a new friend or acquaintance and secondly, they can serve to lubricate any social friction experienced by those who are naturally socially awkward. In addition, a survey revealed that 36% of millennials aged 18 to 34 who use “visual expressions”, in other words emojis, GIFs and stickers, say that these graphics “better communicate their thoughts and feelings than words do” (Steinmetz, 2017). The results of this study support the inference made previously that the replacement of language used to describe one’s emotions and day-to-day events by these illustrations are imminent, if not already in place.

As for Telegram’s effect on language, it can mostly be summarised by a study done by Ghobadi and Taki (2018) on Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners that aimed to “investigate the effect of teaching vocabulary via Telegram stickers”. The findings support the fact that “associating lexical items with different types of media, in the case of the study, Telegram stickers, fosters richness of recall cues and increases the likelihood of retention of those words” and according to Ghobadi and Taki (2018), a big reason for this is that “unlike the traditional presentation of vocabulary in the printed form, Telegram stickers are more appealing for the learners”.

Another general effect Telegram may have on language could be in terms of the formality of the language used on this platform as compared to other communication mediums. For instance, research has found that Telegram is less formal than emails (Rostami & Khodabandeh, 2019).

7. Comparison of Telegram to speech and text

Speech	Text	Telegram
Time-bound	Space-bound	More time-bound
Spontaneous	Contrived	Can be spontaneous or contrived
Face-to-face	Visually decontextualized	Can be face-to-face or visually decontextualized
Loosely structured	Elaborately structured	More loosely structured
Socially interactive	Factually communicative	Socially interactive
Immediately revisable	Repeatedly revisable	Immediately revisable
Prosodically rich	Graphically rich	More graphically rich

Fig. 5: Comparison of Telegram to speech and text using Crystal’s seven features

Each of the seven features introduced by David Crystal (2006) follows a continuum, where the speech- and text-like property for each particular feature marks the extreme ends of this spectrum. As such, when comparing Telegram as a medium of communication to speech and text, it is unlikely that Telegram can be classified as having the same property as speech or text for all seven features, but instead, the discussion would revolve around which end Telegram is more likely to lean towards.

Firstly, it can be argued that communication on Telegram is more speech-like as it is more time-bound, mainly because it allows users to send and receive video and audio files or messages as well as make voice and video calls. Thus, information exchanged via this speech-based medium suggests that communication on Telegram is more dynamic and transient. While I acknowledge that text messages on Telegram can be said to be space-bound as they are typically more static and permanent, the function that allows Telegram users to delete messages and send out self-destructing messages would suggest that communication on this platform may be more fleeting than long-lasting.

However, a trickier feature to compare is the spontaneity of communication on Telegram. This is because it is likely to fall in the middle of the speech-text spectrum as it is difficult to confidently claim that it is closer to one end of the continuum. Communication on Telegram can be considered spontaneous if one is referring to the communication that takes place over calls – regardless voice or video – as there is no lag between production and reception when one party speaks to the other and it would be hard to plan complex constructions as well. On the contrary, with the text messaging function on Telegram, one could also assert that it is more similar to writing as the sender is able to plan out and organise the content of their message carefully, create compact expressions as well as re-read and analyse their message in depth before sending it out.

Another feature that is also slightly more complicated to analyse is the extent to which Telegram is considered to be a visually contextualised medium of communication. There are 3 main functions of Telegram that clearly falls on different parts of this spectrum. Firstly, video calls made on Telegram is the most similar to speech and can be considered as visually contextualised as it allows the callers to see each other's non-verbal cues such as facial expressions and gestures as well as use deictic expressions during the course of communication. Moving towards the middle of the spectrum, video files or messages sent on Telegram are less speech-like as compared to video calls as feedback is not immediate although non-linguistic cues can still be included when recording these video files or messages. Lastly, text messaging or even audio messages on Telegram is more text-like and visually decontextualized as recipients can only rely on reading or hearing linguistic cues respectively.

Next, communication on Telegram can be considered more loosely structured and hence, more speech-like. Contractions are common in almost all of the modes of communication offered by Telegram, be it in text messages, in voice recordings or even in stickers used. Similarly, the vocabulary used on the platform is mostly informal, although the level of formality can change depending on the recipient.

In addition, Telegram is also more similar to writing as it is repeatedly revisable. Any errors made in text messages can be edited or deleted immediately. While recipients cannot see the original content of the message, they are able to see that the message had been edited. (see Fig. 6) Interruptions and overlap are generally uncommon, unless the sender and recipient are online simultaneously and communicating in real-time.

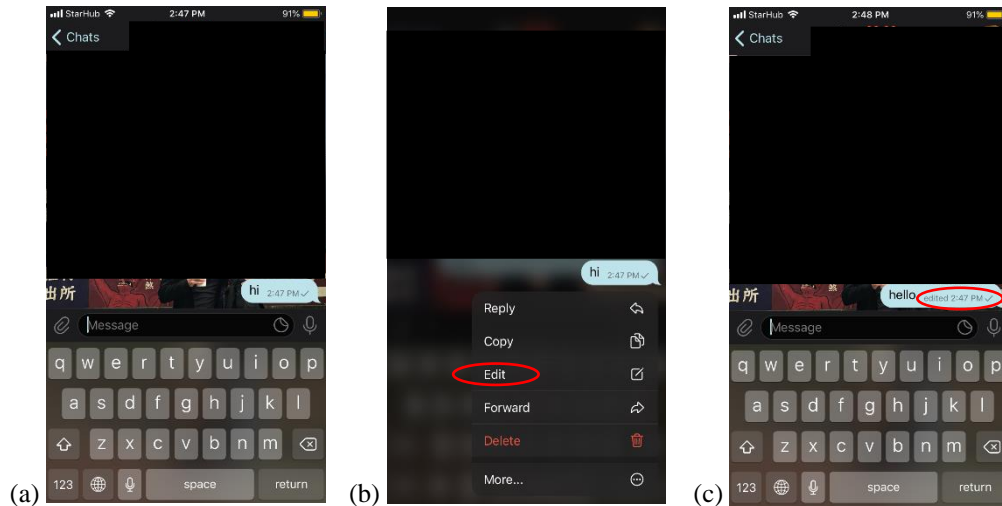


Fig. 6: Process of how a text message can be edited on Telegram

However, Telegram is more text-like in terms of social interactivity. This is evident in the greetings that are often exchanged on this platform as well as the role of it in maintaining social relationships between users, which is typically the reason why people use these messaging applications. As for the use of prosody and non-verbal features, they can be observed in calls and audio messages – in which speech is utilised – and videos files or messages – where callers can see each other – respectively.

Lastly, Telegram could be seen as more similar to text as it is generally graphically rich with the introduction of emojis, stickers, GIFs, images and even videos to be used on the platform, as explained previously.

8. Conclusion

All in all, Telegram is known to be a popular messaging platform that builds and maintains relationships between users as well as the pioneer of many new technologies and trends such as sending self-destructing messages and collecting sticker sets. However, Telegram is not just another crowd-pleasing application that is prominent among the Millennials and the Generation Z; its attractive stickers may stand a chance at becoming a secret weapon for educators to overcome the obstacles in teaching vocabulary to students. Looking at Telegram as a whole in comparison to speech and text, there appears to be more speech-like features than text-like ones, though there are some grey areas as Telegram has functions that are similar to both speech and text in certain domains.

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