

Madeline Lee Cui Ying (U1730979E)
Professor Francis Bond
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Describe one medium of communication not discussed in class and compare it to both speech and text.

An Analysis on Telegram as a Medium of Communication and Comparisons with Speech and Text

Abstract

In this essay, Telegram will be discussed as a medium of communication. Upon summarizing a recent study on the effectiveness of Telegram as a tool for foreigners to learn English, the properties of Telegram and its effects on communication will be examined. Following this, there will be a brief explanation on the new modes of communication enforced by Telegram, as well as an overview of the general effects Telegram has on language and society. Finally, Telegram as a medium of communication will be compared with respect to David Crystal's seven features of text and speech.

1) Introduction

Telegram is a cloud-based instant messaging service that allows the exchange of multimedia messages, voice calls and video calls. The application was founded in 2013 by Russian brothers Nikolai and Pavel Durov and the latest report released by Statista.com estimates 200 million monthly active users on the platform in 2018 (Fig 1). Since then, the number of monthly active users have continued to grow exponentially. During a period of Facebook outages (including Whatsapp) in March 2019, Pavel Durov announced on his personal telegram channel that there were 3 million new user sign-ups within a short span of 24 hours.

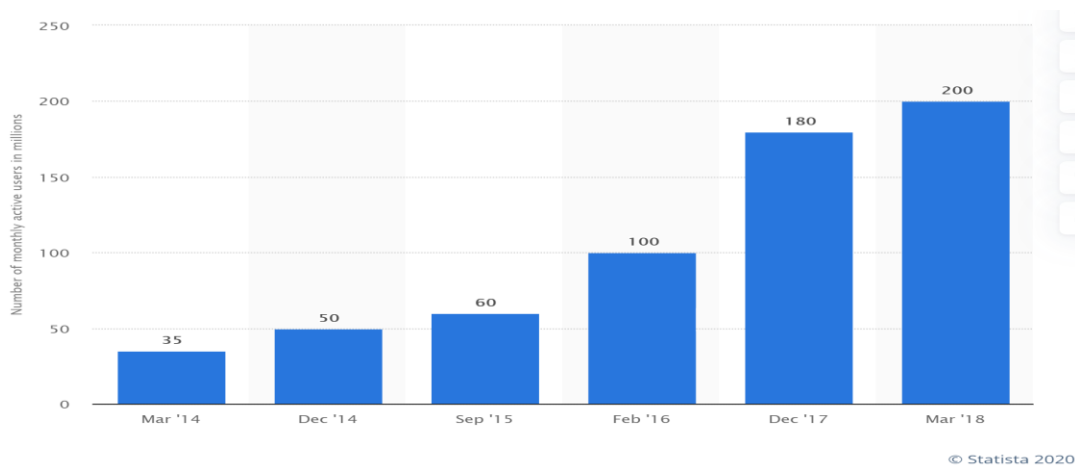


Fig.1: Statista.com bar chart showing the growth in number of monthly active users on Telegram.

2) Summary of relevant literature

A recent study conducted by Payam Noor University in Iran aimed to investigate the Social Impact of Telegram on Teaching English Vocabulary among Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners. (Heidar and Kaviani, 2016) The experiment was conducted by comparing the students' performance on vocabulary tests prior to and after a fixed period of learning English through Telegram chats and channels. The study revealed a significant improvement from the participants' pre-test and post-test results. Thus, the researchers concluded that Telegram would be useful as a complementary tool to face to face instruction and assessment for foreign language teachers. (Heidar and Kaviani, 2016)

3) Properties of Telegram and its effects on communication

One of the unique features of Telegram that differentiates it from other social networking platforms is its high security features. Telegram offers a "Secret Chat" function that is encrypted with Telegram's MTProto Protocol. In fact, the founders of the app even offered \$200,000 in Bitcoin to the first person that successfully hacks its encrypted protocol. The Secret Chat messages are stored on the device instead of on cloud. Furthermore, a self-destruct timer function allows users to set different times for the message to automatically be deleted. It also prevents screenshots of the chat from being taken as well as the forwarding of messages. Although a loophole would be that users can use another device to take a picture or video recording of the chat as it takes place, but otherwise, the security of this feature is considered to be superior to that of other apps. This is evident in the multiple instances of mass migration of users to Telegram as they favor its security features. According to South China Morning Post, Telegram became one of Hong Kong's most downloaded apps last year as many protesters made use of its privacy features to disseminate information and coordinate the protests. Another instance of mass migration of users to Telegram took place in South Korea in 2014, after the government announced a crackdown on speech deemed to be insulting to the president or 'rumour mongering'. There was an active monitoring of Kakao Talk – the country's leading messenger app. As a result, Telegram had 1.5million new users from South Korea within a week. (Iqbal, 2019)

Another property of Telegram is that it is graphically rich - just like other messaging platforms like Facebook messenger and Whatsapp, users have the choice of using emojis and animated emoticons. Additionally, Telegram also has the sticker function which are detailed illustrations of fictional and real-life characters with a certain emotion or performing a certain activity. Stickers may also just be objects with a certain symbolic function. For example, figure 2 shows a sticker set titled "Singapore Language" and it consists of objects and caption unique to Singaporean culture and sentiments. The use of stickers and gifs convey specific messages that emoticons are unable to, and most commonly serves a comedic function. To key in the stickers, one can either refer to the sticker pack, or key the emoji and a list of emotionally corresponding stickers will pop-up. Moreover, Telegram bots allow users to create their own stickers, and this customization feature allows more nuanced and specific emotions to be conveyed nonverbally. According to research, these non-verbal cues add an additional layer of context or set the tone of the messages, playing a key role in online chats today (Gajadhar & Green, 2005)



Fig 2. Telegram stickers with Singlish Slang Terms

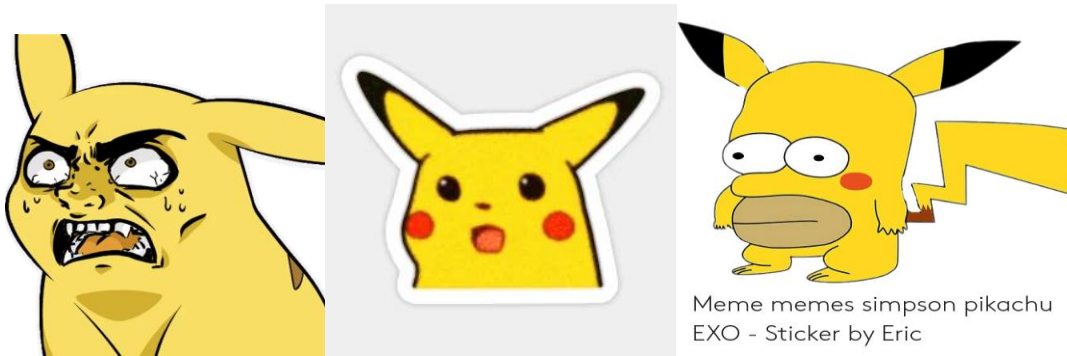
Another distinct property of Telegram is its use of Bots, which are software applications that run automated tasks on the internet and are able to replicate natural human language in chat functions. In Gartner’s top predictions for IT in 2016, he states that ‘by 2020, smart agents will facilitate 40% of mobile interactions, and the post-app era will begin to dominate.’ (Gartner, 2016) One function of Telegram Bots is the conducting of polls in chats. Polls serve as a useful way to compile information that has been communicated, thus communication becomes more organized and efficient. A study on the user interface of Telegram Bots also revealed that bots “do not only facilitate communications within a community, but also change the style of communications and coordinations” (Pratowo 2019) Furthermore, Telegram bots are used in the facilitation of in-chat games within Telegram groups. These in-chat games further enhance the experience of social interaction by adding a playful element to the conversation.

4i) General effects of Telegram on Language

In terms of Telegram’s impact on language, the nature of communication becomes more loosely structured and informal. As online chats are focused on conveying messages efficiently. Short forms and contractions are constantly being used and invented. Some of the abbreviations and contractions used in chat also become integrated into spoken language. For example, the use of ‘LOL’ which stands for Laugh out Loud originated from messaging platforms as a reaction towards humour that is shorter than “hahaha”. Today, ‘LOL’ is often used in spoken language as well. In this sense, language becomes more fluid and constantly evolving, as new terms are often generated from messaging platforms.

Social networking platforms also perpetuate the Internet Meme culture. The Oxford English Dictionary defines memes as an image, video, piece of text, etc., typically humorous in nature, that is copied and spread rapidly by Internet users, often with slight variations. The images below show different variations of the popular Pokemon character, Pikachu, meme sticker. It is not uncommon for memes to be a caricature of cute characters, the humor in these meme stickers thus arises from subverting the conventional adorable quality with an ugly adjustment. The use of memes in social networking culture also influences language use in text and in speech. Language researcher A. Van Wynsberghe terms posits that

internet memes are “A new cultural metalanguage”, suggesting that new forms of language emerge with meme use.



4ii) General effects of Telegram on Society

As studies have shown so far, Telegram appears to have a positive impact on education. According to Baran (2013), university students have embraced the capabilities of social media channels. He clarifies that based on the statistics a major part of students' energy and time is devoted to reading formal and informal online texts on various social media channels, watching the videos and following the tweets and updates related to the course content. Telegram has many channels to educate English, some of which improve English vocabulary learning. (Zimmeman, 2001). A problem students face in learning language is “the lack of opportunities for authentic communication due to non-personalized course content, and complains about being forced to follow a strict curriculum” (Barlett & Bragg, 2006; Donmus, 2010). Therefore, integrating Telegram channels into the current academic practices can provide an environment for informal learning.

Telegram as a medium of communication has also impacted the nature of social interaction between communities, providing a way for people of common interests groups to stay connected and obtain information. The “Find People Nearby” feature on the app allows users to locate others who are around the premises. With permission of the user's location settings, users who wish to meet new people nearby can make their location visible and a list of telegram users who are nearby will be shown. Local groups where participants update each other on the ongoing events in the location, from community events to recent traffic accidents. Big telegram groups allow dissemination of information and provide a platform for groups of people to communicate. As of now, the limit for telegram groups is 5000 participants, which is significantly bigger than that of WhatsApp's, which is 256. Personally, one of the telegram groups that I have been actively monitoring is the NTU Free Food group, where they provide updates on whenever there is excess food from catered events around the campus. Telegram Channels are a medium on Telegram where there is only one-way communication from the owner or author of the channel. Subscribers of the channel have regular updates and hence can stay up to date with their topics of interest.

5) Telegram and how it compares to Crystal's Seven Features that distinguishes texts and speech

Speech like	Text like
<u>time bound</u> <u>spontaneous</u> face-to-face <u>loosely structured</u> <u>socially interactive</u> <u>immediately revisable</u> prosodically rich	<u>space bound</u> <u>contrived</u> <u>visually decontextualized</u> <u>elaborately structured</u> <u>factually communicative</u> <u>repeatedly revisable</u> <u>graphically rich</u>

Fig.2 shows a table of Crystal's seven features, underlining the ones applicable to the nature of communication on Telegram

Using Crystal's seven features of speech and text as a framework to situate Telegram as a medium of communication, I find that Telegram can be both speech-like and text-like. However, in the context of the Secret Chat feature in Telegram, I would argue that its characteristics renders it more speech-like.

Generally, Telegram can be considered both time bound and space bound. It is time bound because in order for an ongoing conversation to occur, both the speaker and one or more addressee have to be present. Conversely, since the intended message is transcribed into typed word form, it becomes space bound and the message can be reread at any point after reception by potentially unknown addressees. With reference to the Secret Chat however, the self-destruct function makes communication more time-bound because the message is only there for a limited time. As such, Communication in the secret chat is also likely to be spontaneous and loosely structured because since the chat is secured with privacy features and there is a time limit before the message disappears, users will neither have the desire nor time to carefully craft their message, rather they will just type the first things that come to mind. On the contrary, in general telegram chats, there may be cases when messages are contrived and elaborately structured. This is especially so when two participants are engaged in serious or formal conversations that require complex and lengthy answers to be formulated.

Telegram also shares both the speech-like feature of being socially interactive and the text-like characteristic of being factually communicative. The casual one-to-one and group chats are more socially interactive, as they are used for the purpose of informal and day-to-day conversations. As mentioned, Telegram's use of bots that facilitate chat games also enhances the interactive nature of conversations. On the other hand, the communication in

Telegram groups and channels which are created to broadcast information are one-sided in nature, and therefore, is factually communicative as the aim is to keep participants informed.

Furthermore, communication on Telegram may be immediately revisable or repeatedly revisable, depending on the reaction time of the sender and whether the recipient has read the message. If the sender deletes the message before the recipient sees it, communication becomes more text-like because the sender does not have to bear the consequences that comes with the mistake in communication. Compared to Whatsapp which replaces the original message with a notification that "This message has been deleted" and only allows deletion up to seven minutes, Telegram leaves no trace of the original message, and the period for deletion is infinite. Thus, if the sender's reaction time is short enough, he/she can prevent the recipient from any awareness that a previous message has been redacted. However, with regards to the Telegram's editing function of messages, it would be more speech-like as altered messages will be reflected as "edited" unlike in text where revisions in communication are invisible.

Finally, in terms of prosody, the communicative method on Telegram is limited as typed words lack the features of speech such as volume, tempo and rhythm. Rather, Telegram is more text-like in this aspect because the visual representation of typed words is graphically rich. As mentioned above, the frequent use of emojis, stickers, Gifs on Telegram also makes it even more graphically rich.

6) Conclusion

To sum up, Telegram is a versatile medium of communication which has multiple features that enhance communication and cater to various communicative needs. Telegram channels can provide a useful platform for the broadcasting of information and serve educational purposes while social exchange on Telegram chats can also provide opportunity for informal learning for foreign language speakers. In general, Telegram appears to be both speech like and text like but depending on different contexts, it can be considered more similar to one than the other.

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