HG2052 Language, Technology and the Internet: Assignment One

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Medium of Communication: Telegram

Abstract

This paper looks at Telegram as a medium of communication for linguistic analysis. Instant messaging platforms have been around for decades, and Telegram as a relatively new player to the field is an interesting mode of communication used by many around the world. Using David Crystal's seven features of speech and writing, Telegram is analysed for its text-like and speech-like qualities in various communicative features offered by the application.

Introduction

Telegram is a cloud-based instant messaging application used by many around the world. Since its launch in 2013, it has gained traction steadily over the years to become one of the most popular multi-platform messaging service around the world, with an estimated 200 million monthly users as of 2019 (Gordon, 2019). Telegram prides itself in being self-funded by its founder, Pavel Durov, who intends to keep the application '…free – no ads, no subscription fees, forever' (Telegram, 2020). Their business model has prompted many to switch over from more popular instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp, especially after large-scale outages (Mogg, 2019). Today, Telegram is known not just for its privacy and security, but also for its new features such as bots, stickers, and channels.

History of instant messaging

Instant messaging is by no means a new form of social communication. In recent years, the advancement in technology has brought about novel features that continue to revolutionise the way such platforms are being used. In the past, the use of instant messaging such as Windows Live Messenger was confined to large and bulky devices such as desktop computers. The advent of modern smartphones and communicative technology such as 4G internet access has brought about greater ease of access to similar platforms. As phones, tablets, and notebooks now come in a smaller form factor housed with greater computing power than ever before, the use of instant messaging has become adopted by more and more around the world.

David Crystal's (2006) Seven Linguistic Features Applied to Telegram
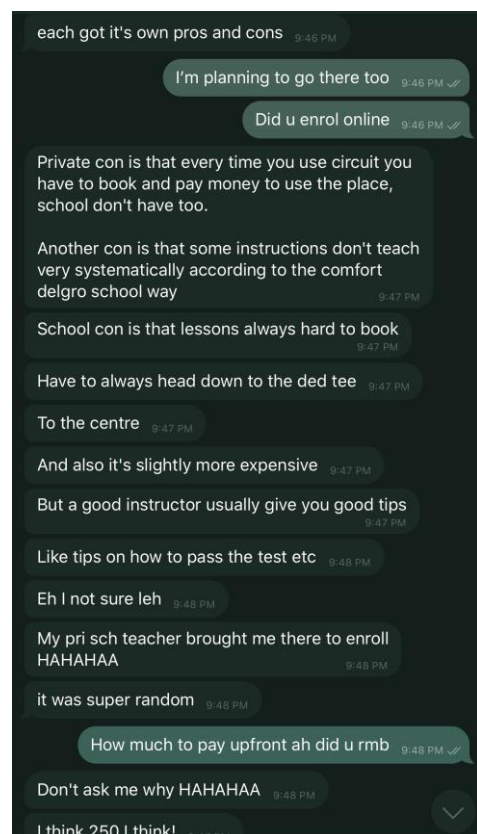
Time-bound/space-bound

Communication in Telegram is space-bound in the vast majority of time, as are all other forms of written discourse, as interlocutors are usually not within close proximity of one another while conversing. The features of Telegram channels are mostly text-like and space-bound, as it is used as a form of one-way mass distribution of information to a large number of subscribers, who are unable to respond to the message.

In private messaging, writers would address their messages to a specific phone number or username, where they communicate with a specific person in mind – a time-bound feature. It is possible for both (or more) participants to be online at the same time, sending and receiving texts instantaneously in private messaging as well as group chats, which is a time-bound feature.

Spontaneous/contrived

As with all forms of written communication, there exists a time-lag between the time a text is written and sent to the time it is received and read. Thus, communication in Telegram can be said to be more contrived than spontaneous. It is typically the case that the recipient may not open the message immediately upon receiving it, and may type out a response at a later time.

Live conversation happening spontaneously

However, the advancement of communicative technology has made it such that the time-lag in most cases is so minute (fractions of a second) that it is virtually negligible. As a result, it is not unusual for both participants to be online at the same time, engaging in spontaneous conversation where both parties share a common understanding that the conversation is live and happening in real-time (Curry, 2013).
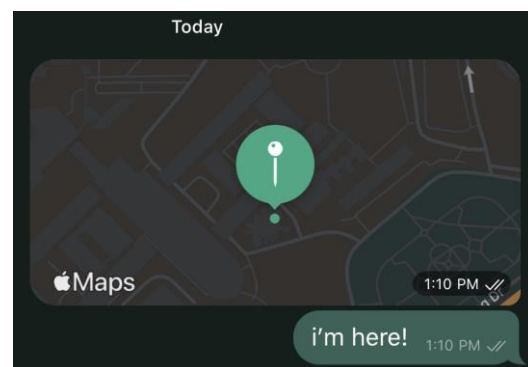
Additionally, Telegram has a Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) feature which allows users to make voice calls and talk in real-time. Thus, many aspects of Telegram are spontaneous as well, owing to technological advancements.

Face-to-face/visually decontextualised

Telegram conversations are visually decontextualised for the most part, as users are unable to see one another through texts to determine non-verbal cues such as body language and emotions.
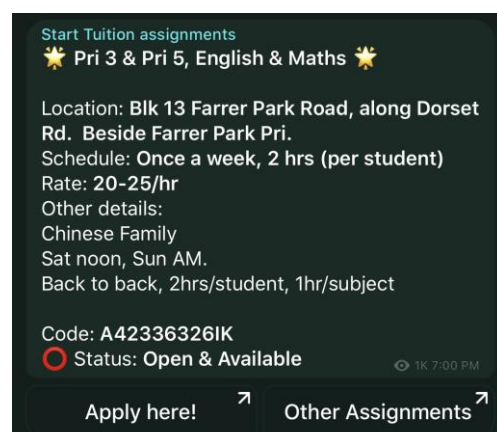
However, deictics are used occasionally alongside other features such as VoIP calls and location sharing. The use of deixis such as 'I'm here' and 'where are you?' can be used and understood when a geotagged message is sent alongside the deictic, or during a voice call where participants have previously agreed on a place to meet.

Deictic used alongside the location sharing function

Loosely structured/elaborately structured

A mix of both loosely and elaborately structured texts can be found in Telegram. In groups and channels where communication is one-way and informative for the most part, an elaborate structure is used to avoid ambiguity as it is typically addressed to a large and diverse group of target audience. The use of jargons may also be prominent depending on the theme of the group or channel, where subscribers are expected to understand its use.

Elaborately structured text found in a channel for tuition assignments used by tutors and parents.
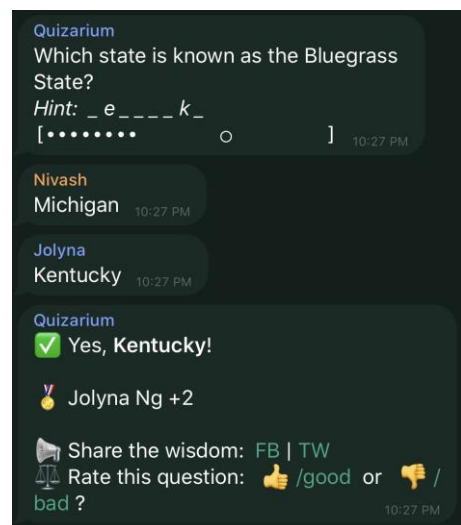
However, in private direct messaging, loosely structured texts are the norm. Similar to many forms of social media, users employ a myriad of acronyms, internet slangs, and colloquial expressions to communicate informally. Texts are also not structured in sentences, but rather, in phrases usually sent in rapid succession, sometimes with the use of visual expressions such as emoticons and stickers.

Loosely structured text between two friends

Socially interactive/factually communicative

The use of Telegram is by and large socially interactive rather than factually communicative, as users typically type in a similar manner they would speak – in phrases rather than in full sentences. They can also play games with the facilitation of bots such as 'Quizarium' as a form of entertainment.
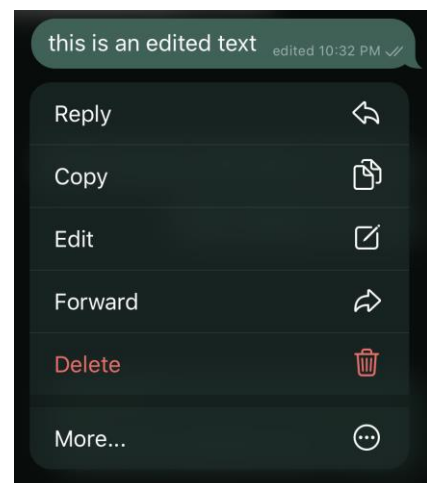

Telegram is used as a factually communicative medium, as users reach out to one another to convey information, particularly in group chats and channels. News outlets such as The Straits Times also make use of Telegram channels to share news stories to its subscribers.
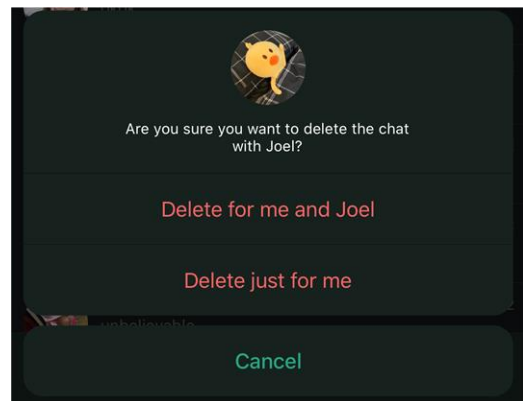
A round of Quizarium played among friends

Immediately revisable/repeatedly revisable

Messages sent in Telegram are immediately revisable, as users can re-type messages before sending it out. The application also has many features that lets users repeatedly revise messages even after being sent. For instance, Telegram allows for edits to be made in messages across all types of chats up to 48 hours after it is sent out (Telegram, 2020).

Edit and delete function on an individual text

Users can even recall messages by means of deletion immediately upon sending, with no time limit attached. Participants also have the option to delete the entire conversation on both parties' devices if they choose to do so. However, there is always a possibility that messages are read by the recipient before the sender has the chance to delete or edit it.

Delete function for an entire conversation

Prosodically rich/graphically rich

Most of the communication in Telegram is done by text, which is graphically rich. The use of capitalisation, boldface, emoticons, stickers, gifs, pictures, and videos are some examples of graphically rich communication in Telegram.

However, there are features in Telegram which allows for prosodically rich communication, such as VoIP calls, voice messages, and video messages. Users are able to speak directly to the microphone to convey information instead of using the text function. In this way, Telegram can be said to support prosodically rich communication for its users.

Linguistic Implications of Telegram

As discussed in the linguistic features, Telegram's diversified offerings of communication services varies in its uses in social contexts. From VoIP calls to channels, the use of Telegram is extensive in both its reach and modality. As a result, communication in Telegram has features that resemble both speech and text alike, depending on the feature(s) used. The application allows users many options in conveying thoughts, messages, and information to others in ways only limited to their imagination. Though much of its features mirror earlier iterations of instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp, Telegram stands out in features such as revisability, where users have the peace of mind of knowing that erroneous messages can be recalled instantly without an indication of deletion being visible to the recipient. Channels are also a major draw for Telegram, as businesses switch over to extend their reach to potential consumers. Bots with varying functionalities shape the way individuals use the application.

Poll bots, trivia bots, quiz bots, to list a few, are appealing for its convenient and fun information-sharing features.

Conclusion

All in all, advancements in technology will only bring about more platforms with complex features and interfaces. Such developments in communication technology is set to introduce newer ways for users to interact with others – Telegram being one of the newer players in the field. In a post-Snowden era of communicative technology (Greenberg 2019), Telegram's appeal to the masses is its commitment to privacy (Telegram, 2020). Users have also switched to Telegram not just for its privacy features such as encryption and secret chats, but also for its reliability, speed, and convenience. The ways in which Telegram is used is varied, as discussed earlier using Crystal's (2006) linguistic properties. It is likely that Telegram continues to shape and transform the way people speak and write using the platform, particularly with the introduction of novel features in the future.

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