

KakaoTalk and Its Comparison to Speech and Text

1. Introduction

KakaoTalk is an online messaging application launched on 18 March 2010 (Bushey, 2014). The app was developed by Kakao Corp and has many functions that sets it apart from the conventional messaging app such as iMessage or WhatsApp that offers its users additional convenience. These unconventional qualities include gifting of items, open chats that allow users to join various interest groups and many other intriguing functions that will be mentioned in this study. The use of KakaoTalk is very widespread in South Korea and as the app was launched domestically, many of its functions are exceptionally useful for the South Korean users. KakaoTalk is a very unique and interesting subject of analyses and in this study, the use of the app in the South Korean community will be used to compare to speech and text.

2. Literature Review

Many Korean studies have used KakaoTalk and its subsidiaries as a subject of their study due to the large influence of Kakao in South Korea. One such study done by students from Sungkyunkwan University looked at the linguistic phenomenon brought upon by KakaoTalk. They referred to the emoticon, audio message and other non-chat functions as *non-verbal features* and found that these help users to communicate their *feelings or gestures as effectively as in face-to-face dialogues* (Choi, Lee, Kim, & Kim, 2012). Due to the frequency of usage of KakaoTalk among Koreans, a study by Choi & Yook (2018) even looked into “The Potentiality and Reality of the use of *kakaotalk* in English learning”. Their study found that Korean students preferred using KakaoTalk over all other mobile applications on their personal mobile device and used this information to conduct a study on the impact of using KakaoTalk as a collaborative platform for learning the English language. KakaoTalk is easily accessible, allows for group chats that gives students a platform to share and collaborate, and has many functions such as the use of emoticons that creates a less formal and more of a fun learning environment for students. The study found that the use of KakaoTalk *had a positive effect on the increase of their English translation ability* (Choi & Yook, 2018). KakaoTalk impacts the Korean society as a whole as majority of the Korean population uses the app and due to the frequency of usage.

3. About KakaoTalk

KakaoTalk is the most frequently used messenger app within the South Korean community – according to Statista (see Fig. 1).

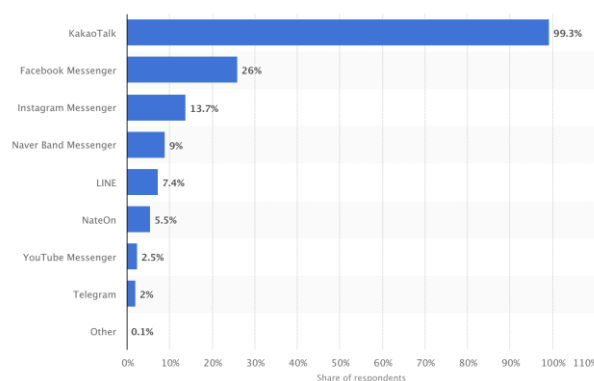


Fig. 1: Most frequently used instant messenger services in South Korea in 2019

There are close to 46 million users within South Korea and more than 52 million users globally as of the last quarter of 2020 – according to Kakao Corp’s 4Q20 and 2020 Annual Earnings Results (2021) (see Fig. 2). It was reported that in the last quarter of 2020, the South Korean population stood at approximately at 51,269,185 people. As such, the growth in usage of KakaoTalk can be said to be growing at a slower pace as it is slowly reaching saturation domestically. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the app is used widely in the South Korean community and this widespread use poses a large impact on the community as a whole.

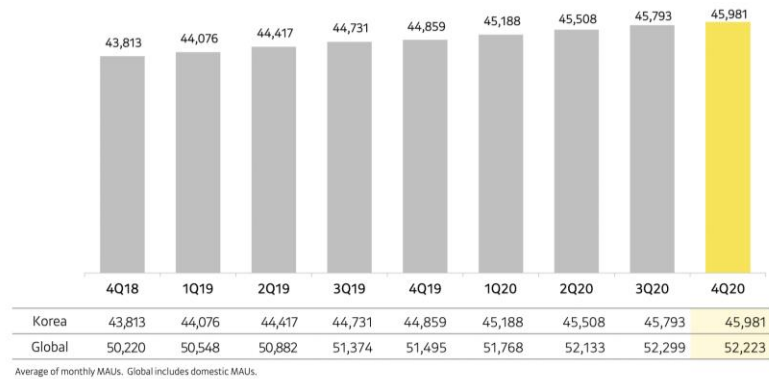


Fig. 2: Monthly active users of KakaoTalk in Korea and globally (in thousands)

4. Properties of KakaoTalk

KakaoTalk, like most others, have the basic functions of a messenger app. Through the app, one can chat with people in their contact list through text and make free voice or video calls on Wi-Fi or cellular network. On top of these, they offer other services such as secret chats, emoticons, customisable profiles and even unconventional functions such as open chats and a gifting service.

4.1 Chats, group chats, secret chats and open chats

As per most messenger apps, users sign up for an account on KakaoTalk using their respective phone numbers and are allowed to link their existing contact list on their mobile device to the app. KakaoTalk however, allows users to also create a KakaoTalk ID for their accounts, allowing them to exchange KakaoTalk IDs with others without revealing each party’s phone numbers. Users can start one-on-one chats with their friends or have the option to make a group chat. KakaoTalk does not limit the number of people who can be added into a group and this makes things more convenient for big organisations or groups who need a platform for communication. Another thing that sets KakaoTalk group chats apart from other apps is that users can decline invitations to group chats, providing the user with their own privacy and discretion, also minimising spam.

Apart from the usual chatrooms, users can also start secret chats. Secret chats ensure end-to-end encryption and added privacy as chats cannot be previewed in the notification page or banners on devices, but can only be seen when the chat is opened on the app. Secret chats are also sent in a separate chatroom from the usual one-to-one chats. This means that users can have two separate chats with the same person: a normal chat as well as a secret chatroom. Users can make use of this function to send important information such as passwords and codes without having to worry about information being leaked.

The most unconventional and interesting function of KakaoTalk chats is the open chat. Users can create chats that others can access via different methods such as a search for a keyword related to the chat on the KakaoTalk app or a shared link. Users have the freedom to choose one-on-one chats or group chats with a limit of 500 people and participants have the choice of joining these chats with their original profile picture and name or a temporary alias and an icon of one of the KakaoTalk characters (refer to the second picture from the right in Fig. 3). This function safeguards the user's identity and other than this, users can report other users for inappropriate behaviour. Upon review by Kakao, the reported user can be banned from using the open chat function for a period ranging from a week to months or even a permanent ban.



Fig. 3: Creating (left four) and participating (right four) in open chats

4.2 Audio messages, voice calls, video calls and Kakao live

KakaoTalk allows users to record audio files and send it to others via chat. Additionally, users can make voice and video calls for free. On top of that, users can also start live broadcasts in group chats. This function is called Kakao Live and group participants can watch and send comments as one user streams a video from the camera of their mobile device.

4.3 Birthday updates and Gifticons

Alike most other applications, KakaoTalk prompts users to input their birthdate upon the creation of their account. However, unlike most other messaging apps, KakaoTalk shows a list of upcoming friend's birthdays (refer to Fig. 4)

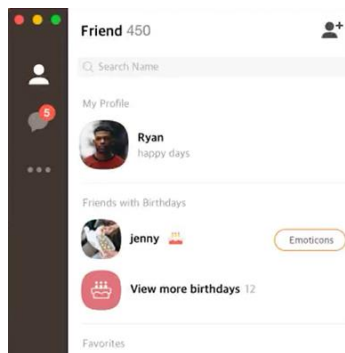


Fig. 4: Birthday and upcoming birthdays list

In South Korea, the use of online gift coupons is extremely common. These gift coupons are called 기프티콘 (pronounced gi-peu-ti-kon or gifticon). The KakaoTalk app offers users the option of sending these gifticon to their contacts. These gifticons are pre-purchased by the sender and the receiver can either order the item online by entering the gifticon code at the checkout or by physically going down to the store to purchase the product and scanning the barcode at the register. Gifts can vary from food, beauty products, clothes, household products and more (refer to Fig. 5). Together with the gifticon, users may also attach e-cards with short messages for the recipient (refer to Fig. 5).

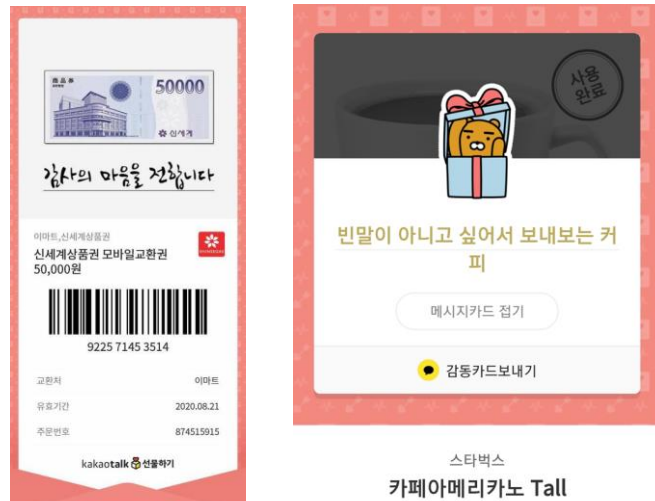


Fig. 5: A 50,000 KRW KakaoTalk gifticon (left) and a message card (right)

4.5 Emoticons

KakaoTalk has a large variety of emoticons that users can purchase and use in chat. The variety of emoticons include animated emoticons, cute emoticons, character emoticons, short message emoticons and many others. Each emoticon pack contains about 24 separate stickers and costs about 2,000 to 2,500 KRW each. Users can choose to purchase them on the in-app Kakao emoticon store for their personal use or gift it to others.

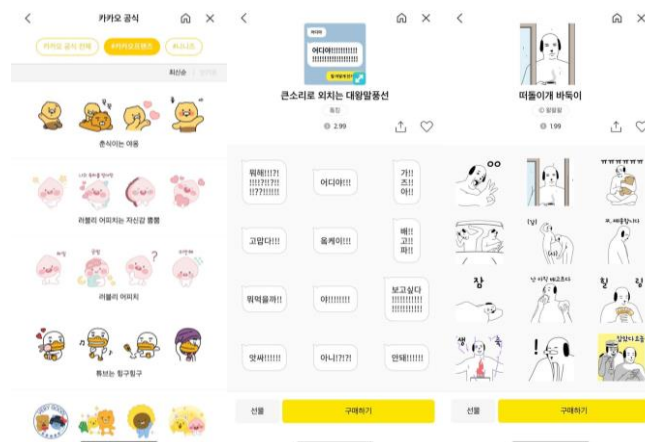


Fig. 6: Kakao emoticons

5. KakaoTalk and its comparison to speech and text

KakaoTalk is a multifunctional app and thus it would not be possible to classify it entirely under Crystal's (2006) seven features of speech and text. The comparison of the app to speech and text is to solely understand the qualities of the functions on the app and their similarity to speech and text.

KakaoTalk is a communication platform and due to its multifunctional quality, it supports both space-bound and time-bound communication. The app's voice message, voice call, and video call functions allow users to hear the other's voice or even see them in real time and thus communication via these functions are time-bound as a result of its dynamic and transient qualities. The chat, emoticon and gift card functions are, however, space-bound due to its static nature. The emoticons, photographs, videos and links that can be sent via chat on KakaoTalk

gives the app a graphically rich quality but the abovementioned communication methods that are more time-bound are also generally more prosodically rich.

The spontaneity of communication via KakaoTalk is dependant on each feature of the app and the time lag with regards to each feature is key in determining this. The voice call and video call functions are fully spontaneous as users can speak, hear and even see each other in real time. The chat, voice message, emoticon and gift message functions are, however, contrived. Even if both users are online at the same time, there would be a lag due to the time it takes for users to type down their messages. The KakaoLive is the function that really lies in between being spontaneous or contrived as the broadcaster can broadcast their sound and video in real time but viewers would have to type down comments and responses to the broadcast, resulting in a time lag. In this case, KakaoLive would be spontaneous for the viewers viewing the broadcast but contrived for both viewers and the broadcaster as time is taken for the viewer to generate comments and for the broadcaster to receive and read it.

Other than the video call and KakaoLive features, all other functions on KakaoTalk are visually decontextualised as there is no transaction of non-verbal cues available through all other functions. The video call feature allows users to give and receive both linguistic and non-verbal cues such as facial expression, body language and gestures through the real time video. In the case of KakaoLive, the viewers are able to receive the broadcaster's non-verbal cues but this is not possible in the broadcaster's case.

Whether communication is loosely or elaborately structured on KakaoTalk depends fully on the context in which the user is using the platform. Communication regarding work, school and all other formal situations as well as informal communication such as with friends, lovers and family are possible through KakaoTalk. The tone the user decides to take on determines whether communication is loosely or elaborately structured.

KakaoTalk has many different chat options and functions that allow users to interact with people they have in their contact list or even strangers. KakaoTalk does give businesses a platform to start channels that interested parties can subscribe to but KakaoTalk can still be viewed as a mainly personal communication platform and thus it can be argued that the app is more socially interactive than factually communicative.

KakaoTalk functions that allow spontaneous communication are the same functions that allow users to immediately revise words. However, in chats, users are unable to edit the messages they have already sent. They can only delete them within a certain time frame. After that period of time, users can only delete the messages off their chat and not off the recipient's chat as well. Despite that, the chat functions of KakaoTalk are repeatedly revisable as although users are unable to edit their texts directly, they still can send multiple texts to revise their first text. Due to the number of chat functions heavily outweighing the number of functions that provide spontaneous communication, KakaoTalk can be classified as more repeatedly revisable than immediately revisable.

In summary, despite the fact that communications on KakaoTalk is more socially informative than factually communicative, KakaoTalk leans very slightly towards being more text-like as communications are more visually decontextualised and repeatedly revisable. However, in all other aspects, KakaoTalk is both speech-like and text-like in varying contexts and it can be said that the app remains neutral on the spectrum of being speech-like or text-like.

6. KakaoTalk and its impact on language and society

KakaoTalk is mainly a chatting platform for most users and due to the necessity of the action of typing, many who use the chat in informal settings will find ways to shorten the sentences that they desire to communicate to their recipient. They make use of emoticons, abbreviations and shorten sentences into a few words to make texting easier, faster and more convenient for them.

The physical typing of Korean Hangeul takes about *three to ten times for time* than it takes to verbally speak the same words and due to this, users of KakaoTalk often use *radically shortened vocabulary* or just the initial phoneme of each word (refer to fig. 7) to shorten the time it takes to type out and send a text such that the speed of texting can be closer to that of speaking (Choi, et al., 2012).

Actual Korean word	Use of word on KakaoTalk	Translation
가능 (ga-neung)	ㄱㄴ (g and n consonants of Hangeul)	Possible
열심히 공부해 (yeol-sim-hi gong-bu-hae)	열공 (yeol-gong)	Study hard
게임 (ge-im)	겜 (gem)	Game

Fig. 7 Examples of shortened phrases and abbreviations used commonly in chat

The example below shows how Koreans can shorten sentences typed out on KakaoTalk.

지금 게임 할 수 있어? ji-geum ge-im hal su iss-eso? Can you play a game now?	지금 겜 가능? ji-geum gem ga-neung? Can game now?
--	--

The sentence is shortened by three characters that reduces the amount of time taken to send the text on KakaoTalk. This behaviour is similar across most Korean social networking sites but due to the high frequency of using KakaoTalk in communication, there has been a phenomenon of many Koreans speaking in the shortened form in face-to-face conversations despite there being no need to increase the speed of producing the utterance.

Apart from the shift of language, KakaoTalk's open chat has literally opened new opportunities for people to meet other people in a secure and private manner. Open chats caters to multitudes of different users and some of these include students looking for homework help and a platform for discussion, people looking to socialise, people looking to pick up foreign languages, singles looking for blind dates, and many more. This is very unique compared to most other big scale messenger apps and considering that KakaoTalk is the most frequently used messenger chat in South Korea, open chats definitely do play a huge part in how citizens can meet and form interest groups as well as get the support they need.

7. Conclusion

KakaoTalk sets a high standard for many other messaging apps in regards to function and convenience. Other than all the features mentioned in this study, KakaoTalk has a large mirage of other functions that provide users with the ease of doing many things all through one app. In line with South Korea's niche of aesthetics and beauty, the emoticons offered on the app

give users the platform to communicate with each other with additional vibrancy, animation and fun that creates a new atmosphere for communications within the society in general. The influence the app has on language and society can be attributed to the scale of the Kakao company in South Korea. Further studies can be conducted on the use of open chats and other features such as the NAVER hashtag in KakaoTalk chats in education. More research into the possible uses of this platform of communication can definitely benefit the Korean society and set a standard for online messenger apps globally.

References

- Bushey, R. (2014, January 04). Check out Kakaotalk, an insanely Popular South KOREAN app that Traffics 55 billion messages per day. Retrieved February 10, 2021, from <https://www.businessinsider.com/how-to-use-kakaotalk-2014-1>
- Choi, E., & Yook, C. (2018). The potentiality and reality of the use of kakaotalk in English learning. *The British and American Language and Literature Association of Korea*, (131), 309-334. doi:10.21297/ballak.2018.131.309
- Choi, M., Lee, A., Kim, J., & Kim, S. (2012). A study of Linguistic phenomena of SNS Messenger Kakao Talk. *Textlinguistics*, 33, 467-493.
- David Crystal (2006). *Language and the Internet*. Cambridge University Press, 2nd edition.
- Kakao Corp. (2021, February 9). 4Q20 and 2020 Annual Earnings Results. Retrieved February 17, 2021, from <https://www.kakaocorp.com/ir/referenceRoom/earningsAnnouncement?selectedYear=2020>
- Kang, Y. (2017). An communication aspect of ‘KAKAO-TALK’ conversation and its sociolinguistic feature. *EOMUNYEONGU*, 92(Null), 5-37. doi:10.17297/rsll.2017.92..001
- Rivera, I., & Staff, S. (2015, November 09). Kakao talk's new open chat feature lets users chat at the click of a link. Retrieved February 10, 2021, from <https://www.swirlingovercoffee.com/kakao-talks-new-open-chat-feature-lets-users-chat-at-the-click-of-a-link/>
- Statista. (2019, March). Share of mobile messenger users who use KakaoTalk in South Korea in 2019, by age group. Retrieved February 10, 2021, from <https://www.statista.com/remotexs.ntu.edu.sg/statistics/984645/south-korea-kakaotalk-usage-by-age/>