

1. Introduction

This essay will discuss TikTok as a mode of communication that is highly similar to both speech and writing, based on the seven features introduced by David Crystal (2006). Subsequently, we will explore the effects of TikTok on language, including its central role in rapidly spreading youth slang, and its possible influence in promoting bilingualism or multilingualism. Furthermore, this paper will consider the effect of TikTok on the wider sphere of society—how it has had a stake in spreading information about the COVID-19 pandemic and extremist ideologies previously, and how it is now a platform that fosters positive encouragement among users—all through language.

2. Background

TikTok was released globally by ByteDance in 2017 after its Chinese counterpart DouYin, launched in 2016, gained immense popularity in China. The video-based social media application has since been downloaded more than one billion times, reaching countries such as India, Southeast Asia, Korea, Japan, Brazil, the United States, the European nations, and more (Davis, 2019).

TikTok allows its users to share short 15-60 second videos, with the option to pre-set popular voiceovers or music, as well as incorporate text in the videos. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) in TikTok recommends popular sounds, videos, hashtags and filters, to the benefit of both the consumer and creators on the platform (Davis, 2019). Like other social media websites, it permits direct messaging, commenting, and allows the user to post a short caption and hashtags along with each video. Another instrumental feature of TikTok is the livestream function which is similar to speech-like communication in various ways. However, usage of TikTok live is significantly lower than uploading videos because stricter rules are imposed. These rules include having at least 1000 followers and being at least 16 years old whereas the age minimum for just TikTok is 13 (Delfino, 2020).

3. Seven features introduced by David Crystal (2006)

Crystal's (2006) seven features of speech and writing will be employed in this section to dissect TikTok and its capabilities.

Firstly, TikTok is both space-bound and time-bound. The main mode of delivering content on TikTok is through uploading short videos of up to 60 seconds. Like text, these videos are space-bound because they remain viewable on the application permanently unless the user manually deletes them. Furthermore, comments and direct messages are also permanent unless deleted, but direct messages, specifically, cannot be unsent. They can only be deleted from the user's phone memory. On the other hand, TikTok's livestream function introduces an aspect similar to speech. On TikTok live, users are interacting in real time with viewers by reading their comments. The livestream session is not saved on the platform, and therefore livestreaming is not considered space-bound, but leans towards being time-bound instead.



Figure 1: TikTok video with pre-scripted acting and subtitles

Depending on whichever function discussed, TikTok can be spontaneous or contrived. The immediate nature of social media manifests itself on TikTok, where uploads are instantly shared with other users. However, between recording the videos and uploading them, there is still a noticeable time-lag, even though it is significantly less than general written modes of communication such as blogs. TikTok is largely utilised as a contrived form of communication,

because a substantial amount of content on the application involve pre-scripted acting and transcribed speech (Figure 1). Contrastingly, TikTok's livestream function adheres more towards the speech-like feature of spontaneity, albeit for a limited amount of time. During the span of the livestream, users can communicate with the viewers in real time, throughout which the creator constructs utterances and responds to comments on the spot.



Figure 2: Dual livestream on TikTok

TikTok is capable of face-to-face communication, but it is mainly visually decontextualised. For the most part, the social media application involves creators uploading their videos for the mass audience base, this means that creators do not know their precise audience. Additionally, the audience cannot provide creators with extralinguistic cues such as facial expressions or gestures as feedback. Markedly, TikTok permits dual livestreaming, in which two creators can be in the same livestream session, much like a video call (Figure 2). In this case, the creators in the livestream can employ extralinguistic cues to aid communication with each other. However, it is important to keep in mind that the main audience in dual livestreams are still anonymous viewers, majority of which are unable to show themselves on screen. Whether it is in the form of short videos or livestreaming, creators cannot employ deictics in their videos without specifying the context as it would give rise to ambiguity, by virtue of the limited spatial range captured by the camera.

As a social media platform, informal language abounds, making TikTok a loosely structured mode of communication. Recorded in June 2020, 62% of users on the application are between 10-29 years of age (App Ape, 2020, as cited in Statista, 2021). This results in an abundance of youth slangs being coined and consequently adopted by TikTok users, which will be further expounded in Section 4: Effects on language. Moreover, profanities on the application materialise as part of text bubbles in the videos, within the captions and comments, or even as part of the spoken content.



Figure 3: @abrahampiper on TikTok talking about linguistics

Though it is perceived as merely a source of entertainment for many with no meaningful purpose, the liberty authorised to users creates a nurturing environment for factual information to be spread across the platform. Hence, TikTok can be used in a factually communicative manner, but typical use remains socially communicative. Vast majority of TikTok users utilise the platform casually to express their personal opinions, induce humour, and interact with followers via comments and thus build solidarity with their followers. Nevertheless, just like any mode of communication, content is dependent on each creator. It is interesting to see how some users choose to post informative content, meant to educate and communicate academic ideas. One example of this is the user @abrahampiper on TikTok, who has several videos talking about issues in the field of linguistics (Figure 3).

TikTok is both immediately and repeatedly revisable. As for the speech-like feature of being immediately revisable, TikTok livestreams lets the speaker rethink and correct his utterance while the viewers are still watching. Further, errors made during TikTok livestreams cannot be withdrawn and the speaker must deal with consequences of what has been said. Apart from livestreamed content and direct messages, TikTok is also repeatedly revisable. The short videos can be remade and modified for an unlimited number of times before upload, with draft history staying obscured. Comments made can be deleted by both the creator of the video or the commentor himself.

As content on TikTok comes in the video format, the communication is prosodically rich. This can be achieved through pre-set music, voiceovers, or simply by speaking or singing personally in the video. The video-based social media application is also graphically rich, especially when the visuals are enhanced with filters and texts that can be spatially organised to be placed on different areas of the interface.

4. Effects on language

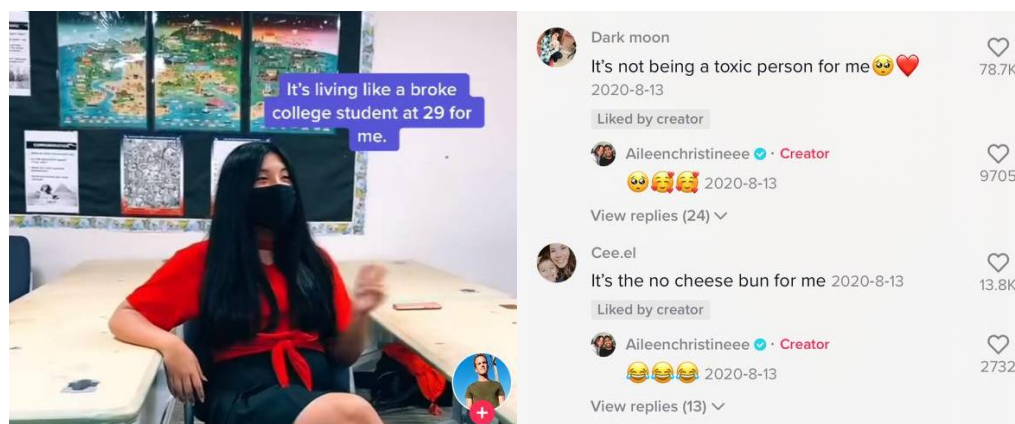


Figure 4: Using the ‘it’s the ___ for me’ construction to point out negative traits (left), and positive traits (right)

As discussed in Section 3, TikTok has played a big part in propagating youth slang today, thereby proving true the sociolinguistic observation of the adolescent peak, in which new variants are most used by adolescents. In the case of TikTok, neologisms have been coined and spread among youths. A lexical example would be the word ‘simp’, commonly used to refer to people who are considered too submissive and attentive to the person they are romantically attracted to. Other examples include phrases such as ‘it’s the ___ for me’, initially used to point out repulsive traits in a comical

diss session, but now used to emphasise just about anything (Figure 4). The wildfire spread of youth slang can be attributed to TikTok’s endless For You Page (FYP), which is a tab with endless recommended videos from creators all around the world. This has allowed for the incidental spread of slang words and constructions from global creators, in addition to the slang words circulated within the small circle of creators that each user follows.

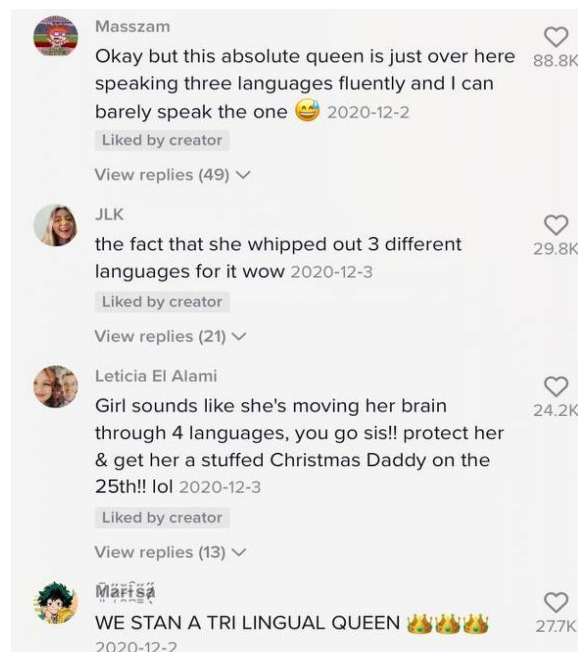


Figure 5: Comments on a video supporting multilingualism

TikTok has the potential to promote and elevate the image of bilingualism and multilingualism. Creators on the platform come from diverse backgrounds, though the standard norm of creators on TikTok are largely based on this demographic described by Kennedy (2020) as ‘young, but female, normatively feminine, white and wealthy’. Hence, with the introduction of bilingual and multilingual creators on the platform, there is increased awareness and support from the monolingual anglophone female base and other monolinguals towards multilingualism (Figure 5). Potentially, this could result in more users adopting positive attitudes towards multilingualism, and developing the desire towards picking up new languages due to exposure on TikTok.

5. Effects on society

The role of language in the categorisation of TikTok content also plays a large part in propagating news and information, including those about COVID-19. Hashtags such as “covid-19,” “covid19,”

and “coronavirus,” have reached 4.4 billion, 33.3 billion, and 93.1 billion views respectively as of 12 July 2020 (Ostrovsky & Chen, 2020). Furthermore, TikTok algorithms have been said to pick up individual preferences quickly, by capturing users’ “likes”, comments and time spent watching each video (Davis, 2019). Putting them together, TikTok effectively recognises well-received videos and their corresponding language labels, which are realised in the form of hashtags, and recommends these videos to more users. As stated by Ostrovsky & Chen (2020), “TikTok has shown itself to be a viable means for practitioners to educate and dispel myths about COVID-19 to a broad and diverse adolescent demographic.” The social media platform can be expected to continue being a hub of current news and information.

While hashtags and the TikTok algorithm can be used to raise awareness of current world issues, hate speech on TikTok was being spread to users whose algorithms lean into the realm of politics or history. Weimann & Masri (2020) cite ‘examples of “blatant, violent white supremacy and Nazism,” including calls for the murders of Jews and black people.’ Instances of hate speech on TikTok appear not just in the hashtags, but also in captions, comments, and within the videos.

On the bright side, it has been found in a study that most of the high frequency words on TikTok have positive meanings, and as such, the model easily distinguishes these positive high frequency words, pushing them to the top of the comment section (Hao, 2020). This phenomenon ultimately cultivates an encouraging and supportive environment within the TikTok community.

6. Conclusion

TikTok adheres to Crystal’s (2006) framework in a non-binary way. It is a mode of communication encompassing many features of speech and writing, providing users with a holistic communicative experience, though users do tend to use some features more than others. The online video-sharing site is nonetheless a proficient mode of communication that can be used extensively to influence attitudes towards language and even multilingualism. TikTok has proven itself to have wider societal impacts, whether positive or negative. If used purposefully for good, and regulated well, TikTok can grow ever bigger to incite beneficial changes to society and individuals.

References

- Crystal, D. (2006). *Language and the Internet*. Cambridge University Press, 2nd edition.
- Davis, J. (2019). The TikTok Strategy : Using AI Platforms to Take Over the World. *Insead Knowledge*, 1–2. <https://knowledge.insead.edu/entrepreneurship/the-tiktok-strategy-using-ai-platforms-to-take-over-the-world-11776#2jirbVIBhVALUAEw.99>
- Delfino, D. (2020). How to 'go live' on TikTok and livestream video to your followers. *Insider*. <https://www.businessinsider.com/how-to-go-live-on-tiktok>
- Hao, J. (2020). Building domain specific lexicon based on TikTok comment dataset. *ArXiv*.
- Kennedy, M. (2020). ‘If the rise of the TikTok dance and e-girl aesthetic has taught us anything, it’s that teenage girls rule the internet right now’: TikTok celebrity, girls and the Coronavirus crisis. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 23(6), 1069–1076. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549420945341>
- Ostrovsky, A. M., & Chen, J. R. (2020). TikTok and Its Role in COVID-19 Information Propagation. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 67(5), 730. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2020.07.039>
- Statista. (2021). <https://www.statista.com/remotexs.ntu.edu.sg/statistics/1095186/tiktok-us-users-age/>
- Weimann, G., & Masri, N. (2020). Research Note: Spreading Hate on TikTok. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 0(0), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1780027>
- Aileenchristineee. (2020). [Image]. TikTok. <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSJeevUok/>
- Callmefab. (2021). [Image]. TikTok. <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSJeeV4Fj/>
- Choi, R. (2021). [Image]. TikTok. <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSJeeJeR8/>
- McClintok, K. [Image]. TikTok. <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSJeeethxd/>
- Piper, A. (2021). [Image]. TikTok. <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSJJKvkLD/>
- <3李. (2020). [Image]. TikTok. <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSJedR3bK/>