Miles Apart: How Moving to the US Transformed Communication with My Best Friend

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In this article, Elena Petrova discusses how moving to the US affected communication with her best friend. She researches how her writing research identity was transformed by considering chatting in different mobile applications as literate activity. She gives examples of real chats with her friend and analyzes them focusing on different aspects of writing: multimodal representation and translingual writing.

Can you imagine how it feels when you leave someone you truly love because you have to move to another continent? That's exactly what happened to me recently. I have a best friend. Her name is Yuliana. She is my soulmate. We've known each other for seven years. But one day I got a long-awaited—and at the same time, a little scary—E-mail from Illinois State University (ISU). I was offered a place as a graduate student in the Department of English (good news) and had to leave Russia in three months (sad news, especially for my family and friends).

When my preparations for moving abroad began, Yuliana and I had to find a way to communicate regardless of the time difference and long distance between us. We chose several apps to keep in touch as much as possible (these apps included WhatsApp, FaceTime, Telegram, and Instagram).

When I entered the Writing Program at ISU, I realized that all of these communication plans and tools could be considered part of my (and Yuliana's) literate activity. Kevin Roozen, in his *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* (*GWRJ*) article, "Unraveling 'Writing': Interweaving Maverick Literacies Throughout a Literate Life," describes literate activity as "activity

that involves people producing or using some type of text, broadly conceived" (2021, p. 96). The use of the term "literate" helps illuminate that human action involves not only words written on a screen or page, but also a wealth of other kinds of multimedia along with the processes and practices involved in making texts. The term "activity" helps to foreground that people make and use texts to act in the world, not merely for the sake of creating the texts themselves. People usually perceive texting as something casual, something we do daily, but studying and teaching in the Writing Program has helped me reconsider my perception of texting, which is why I think it's worthwhile to offer this discussion of the texts Yuliana and I send each other every day.

I have to mention that Yuliana and I are both teachers of English as a foreign language. We met at the National Research University Higher School of Economics in Moscow because we studied in the same program, and we have the same backgrounds. We were both exposed to the same academic environment for four years as undergraduate students, and we both speak and teach English. What's more, we were born on the same day (yes, an unbelievable coincidence!) and were raised in very similar ways. We've watched many similar films and read many of the same books. All of these connections have definitely made us best friends and have shaped our **writing research identities**—or how our knowledge, experiences, and skills (and the knowledge and skills we don't yet have) impact what we as writers can (and can't) do (ISU Writing Program)—in similar ways. Writing research identity is something everyone has, but it's possible that some of us have never really thought about or analyzed it before. I was certainly one of those people until recently!

While writing this article, and with a better understanding of writing research identity, I asked myself some questions as I was thinking about how my identity and Yuliana's were similar and different:

- How do we write when we communicate with our friends, family, or teachers?

- What language do we use?

- If we speak more than one language, what language(s) do we choose when communicating with different people?

- Do we use any inside jokes or phrases?

- What genres do we use?

- What topics do we discuss?

- Do we use emojis or stickers, and if so, what kinds?

If someone were trying to be specific when answering these questions about a particular kind of communication they engage in, there probably wouldn't be two people in this world who would give identical answers. But as you read on, you'll see that Yuliana and I have similarities that make it easy for us to communicate using these texts, because we have a lot of shared knowledge and experience that connects us. My primary goal for this article is to illustrate how writing research identity is reflected in any literate activity we produce. *We are all writers and we are all unique because our writing is unique.* When people share significant aspects of their identities, it can impact their communications, making it easier to share meaning and understanding.

> **Definition of Genre**
>
> According to a video by The Word Bird, **genre** is defined as "a typified response to a recurring situation" (2014), which is based on a definition of genre provided by Carolyn Miller in 1984.

Communicating across Genres

When thinking about genre, many people will mention literature genres, like fiction, the novel, poetry, and so on, or maybe media genres like horror, romance, YA, and the like. Although this is correct, genre, as a concept, can be used for so much more than this kind of categorization. When my friend and I communicate, we employ different genres and tools such as texting on WhatsApp, sending voice messages on Telegram, talking via FaceTime, and sharing pictures on Instagram. These can be called apps or platforms, but they can also perform as genres.

Genre choice always depends on the *objectives* we have for producing a particular genre. When my friend and I use WhatsApp, our objective is to have some fun, tell each other about recent news, and just have a great time together. In contrast, if my objective in a classroom setting is to obtain important information about an assignment from my professor, I will probably use a more formal genre like an E-mail. Thus, choosing a genre depends on the context and the audience, as well as on the specific choices we're presented with (in some situations, like a particular class, someone in authority might decide what genres and tools we'll use, and we just have to make it work). With the permission of my friend Yuliana, I have done some research digging deeper into the ways we communicate. I added some screenshots of our chats to this article to illustrate my findings more explicitly.

> **More Definitions of Genre**
>
> There is another definition of genre: **Genre** is "the tool (or tools) that the participant(s) use to achieve the objective" (ISU Writing Program, n.d.).

Platforms and Genres of Communication

Here is the list of platforms (or genres) we use for different objectives:

- FaceTime (live video communication): We use this genre when we want to share news and don't want to text.

- WhatsApp: We use this genre to quickly check in with each other about the times we are available to talk on FaceTime. We also use WhatsApp to forward some messages our friends send us on this app. So, here we not only produce text, but we also share and interact with texts produced by other people.

- Telegram: We use this genre to communicate when we don't have time to talk but want to share news. We use text messages, voice messages, and video messages and share pictures and videos with each other.

- Instagram: We use this genre to share posts and memes we like as a way of creating shared memories and jokes.

> **Even More Genre Definitions**
>
> **Genres** are also defined as "kinds of texts that it is possible to identify by understanding the conventions or features that make that production recognizable" (ISU Writing Program, n.d.).

We can view these genres from different perspectives. Yes, these communication apps are ones that Yuliana and I *use* for different objectives. But at the same time, when communicating online, we also *create* genres on these platforms. And when we create or produce our own genres, we can focus on such an important concept by thinking about genre conventions.

Before writing anything new or using a new kind of writing tool or technology, it can be helpful to conduct **genre analysis**—which means thinking about the conventions of a genre as they shape the way we write, what language we use, what formatting we employ, and so on. When creating informal texts, we probably don't think much about all these things. However, they are always present. Let's make it more visible by looking at the genre conventions of the different apps Yuliana and I use to communicate online.

FaceTime genre conventions (see Figure 1):

- It was created for oral communication.

- It requires the phone number or E-mail of the person you're contacting.

- It has buttons showing sound and video settings.

- It also includes the "Take a screenshot" button and the "Finish call" button.

- Your picture is in the right-hand corner, and it can be zoomed in on if necessary.

- You have the opportunity to display your screen.

Every time we use FaceTime, we create a new genre by using FaceTime's conventions to form a new way to communicate. Though it is mainly a face-to-face video app, Yuliana and I use it to quickly share images with each other. We modify the features of Facetime to our advantage. For example, when my friend wants to show me pictures, she uses the "display screen" button, and I can see her photos immediately.

WhatsApp genre conventions (see Figure 2):

- It was created with multiple media and forms of communication in mind.
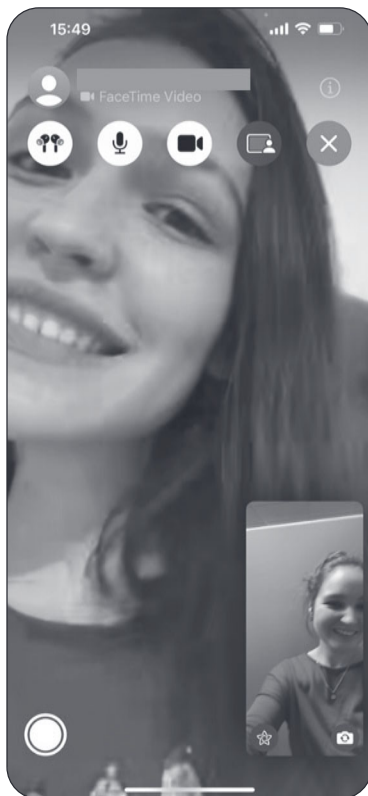

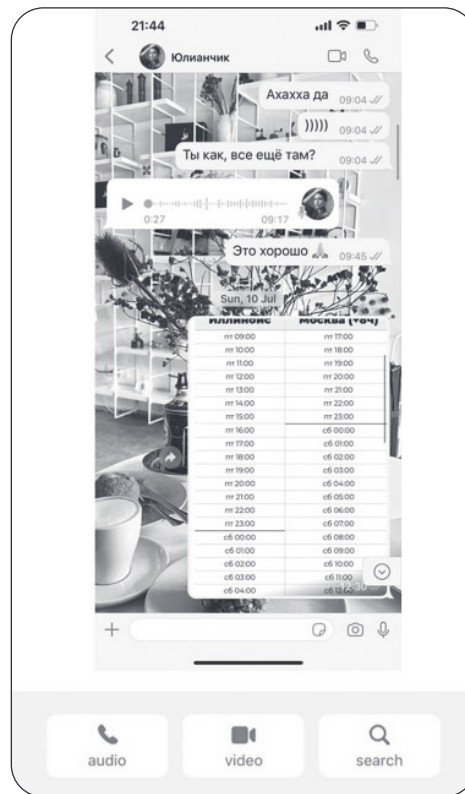**Figure 1:** A screenshot of Yuliana and I using FaceTime.

Figure 2: This screenshot depicts the different features of WhatsApp.

- Its features include:
    * The chat itself,
    * The "Attach file" button,
    * The "Attach photo" button,
    * The "Record audio" button,
    * The "Start audio call" button,
    * The "Start video call" button, and
    * The "Search" button.

All these genre conventions serve different purposes and help us choose how to interact with the app in the appropriate ways. Yuliana and I enjoy WhatsApp because it has features such as attaching files and video calls, but this communication platform does have limitations in its genre conventions. For example, while there is an option to record audio, there isn't one for recording a video. Not all communication apps have similar features, which is why genre research and analysis is important.

Telegram genre conventions (see Figure 3):

- It was created as an alternative way to communicate outside WhatsApp.

- It lets users send text messages, audio messages, and video messages; share media files; and make audio and video phone calls.

- It is also used by some bloggers to create informative and entertaining channels.

- Its features include:
    * The chat itself,
    * The "Attach file" button,
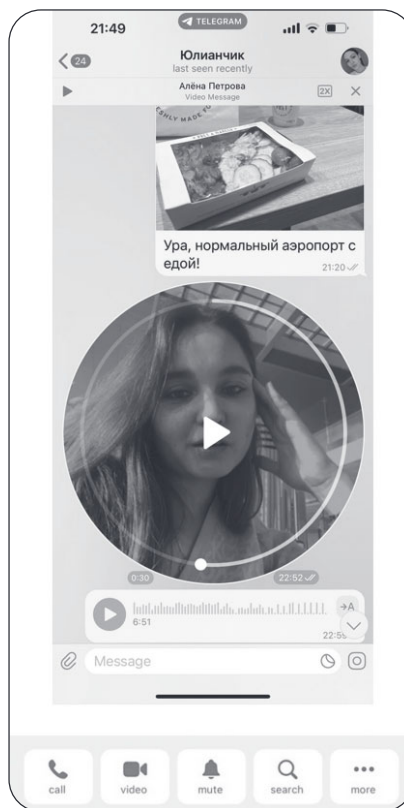   * The "Attach photo" button,

Figure 3: This screenshot depicts the different features of Telegram.

    * The "Record video" button (located in the right-hand corner),

    * The "Record audio" button (if we click on the icon in the right-hand corner, it will change to "Record audio"),

    * The "Choose sticker" button (we love this function and use it a lot to express our emotions or attitudes),

    * The "Start video call" button,

    * The "Start audio call" button,

    * The "Mute" button,

    * The "Search" button, and

    * The "More" button, which includes other functions.

- You can edit or delete texts you've sent. This is a very convenient function to correct typos in a matter of seconds or get rid of texts you've sent by mistake (this function is also not available on WhatsApp; there you can only delete a message, and it will be seen by a person).

For the conversations that Yuliana and I have, Telegram has more useful functions than other platforms we use, which is why Telegram is the genre we use most of all. For example, "Record video" is a button that is only available on Telegram, and we use it a lot to quickly tell each other recent news. This is another example of how important it is to consider a genre's different conventions before choosing an appropriate one for composing. For instance, if you want to film a tutorial on how to knit a dress, you are more likely to choose a video (to demonstrate it visually), not a podcast as your genre. Similarly, when you want to write an article for the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, you might try to avoid some of the complex language used in scholarly articles because one of the genre conventions of a *Grassroots* article is an informal or neutral, friendly tone.

Instagram genre conventions (see Figures 4 and 5):

- It was created for sharing photos and videos online. People can use Instagram to follow each other; view, like, and comment on posts; and exchange direct messages.

- Its features include:

    * The chat itself,

    * The "Start video call" button,

* The "Record audio" button,

* The "Attach file" button,

* The "Attach photo" button,

* The "Flag this chat" button, and

* Some additional functions.

Although it looks similar to other platforms at first glance, Yuliana and I never use Instagram to verbally communicate and we rarely share personal photos on the platform because you can't "x2" voice messages and listen to them two times faster, and you can see the picture the person sent only once. Much like WhatsApp, there are inconveniences and limitations of this genre's conventions that prevent us from chatting a lot on Instagram. However, we do use Instagram for the purposes we don't use WhatsApp and Telegram for. For example, we use this platform for creating text-based posts, commenting on posts, sharing posts that already exist, sending reactions, and so on.
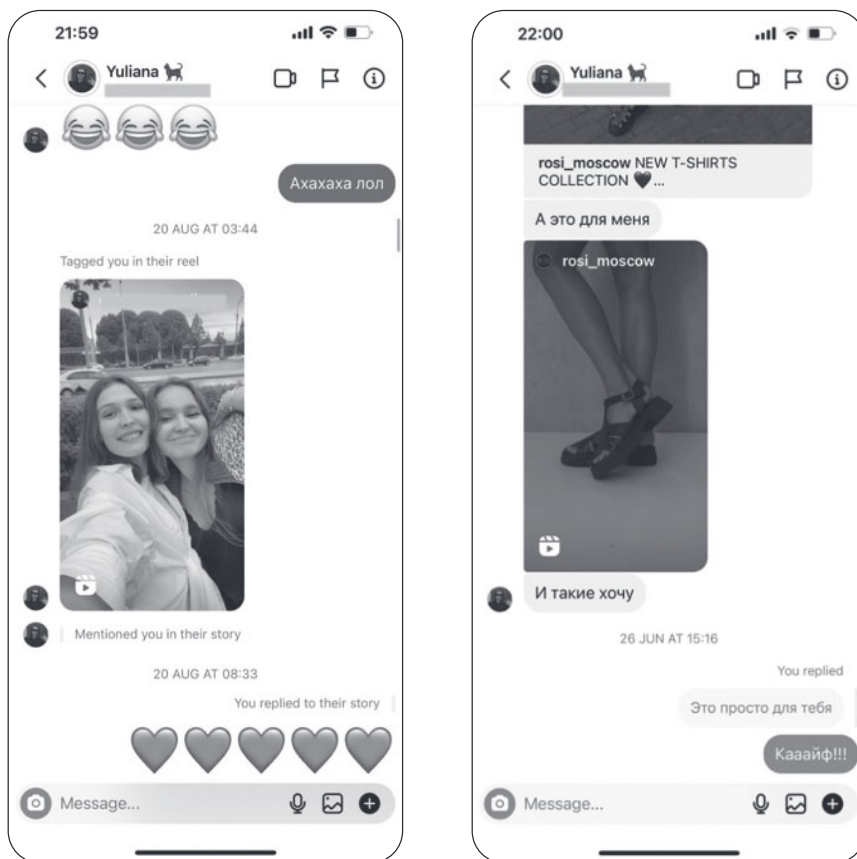
Figures 4 & 5: Together these two screenshots show the uses and features of Instagram.

CHATting with Yuliana

Let us explore the communication genres Yuliana and I use more specifically by "CHATting" about them. Exploring P-CHAT before writing can facilitate the writing process. According to Joyce Walker, P-CHAT can be helpful for "making a place for the individual writer within a *particular* framework at a *particular* time. *This* writer, at *this* particular time and place, trying to learn to write in *this* way, for *these* reasons and hoping for *these* effects" (Walker, 2017).

There are seven P-CHAT terms:

- Representation

- Socialization

- Distribution

- Ecology

- Activity

- Reception

- Production

When we plan our writing (even if it takes three seconds of thinking about how to answer a friend's text), we need to consider our audience (for whom we are writing) to then choose the appropriate genre, language, and mode(s) of writing. Sometimes (especially when texting friends) we do it unconsciously, without realizing it. However, writing is an activity system that involves more steps than you might think.

Let's look at representation consciously and think about all the processes that go on in our brains when we want to send a text. As an example, I will take a small message Yuliana sent me and analyze how I respond to it. All texts are in Russian because it is the language we use to communicate, but translations are always given under the texts.

> **Communication in Activity Systems**
>
> When we communicate through writing, we create **activity systems**, which are "cooperative interactions aimed at achieving a goal" (Russell, 1997). The way we perform the activity depends on the context we perform it in (Kain & Wardle, 2014). In the ISU Writing Program, we use a modified version of activity theory—**pedagogical cultural-historical activity theory** (**P-CHAT**), which helps us break down our writing processes into smaller steps and make them more visible and transparent.

> **Representation Is Key for Writing**
>
> Representation is a crucial P-CHAT concept you have to focus on before writing. The term **representation** "highlights issues related to the way that the people who produce a text conceptualize and plan it (how they think about it, how they talk about it), as well as all the activities and materials that help to shape how people do this" (ISU Writing Program, n.d.).
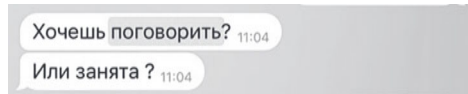
Here is the text (Figure 6):

Хочешь поговорить? 11:04

Или занята ? 11:04

Figure 6: A screenshot of two text messages I received in Russian from Yuliana.

In English, this reads:

Do you want to talk?

Or are you busy?

Here is my thought process (which usually is unconscious with texting, but must be conscious when writing a composition for class or producing any other complex form of literate activity):

- Audience: friend

- Language: informal

- Modes I can use: alphanumeric (using letters and numbers) or visual (pictures, videos)

- Thinking about the content: "Well, I want to talk, but I have a lesson soon. After it, I have a meeting. The only time I'm available is after 4 p.m. (Illinois time). So, I have to tell her that I can talk after 4 p.m. Oh, wait! 4 p.m. in Illinois is 00:00 in Moscow. So, we won't be able to talk today. I'm so sad about that."

After considering all these things, I respond to her in the following way (Figure 7):

Хочешь поговорить? 11:04

Или занята ? 11:04

Хочу 11:04

Домой пришла
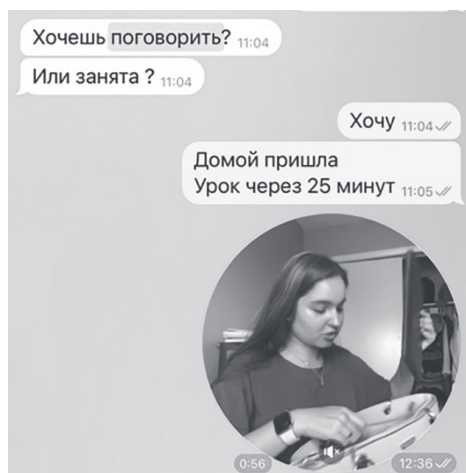Урок через 25 минут 11:05

0:56   12:36

Figure 7: A screenshot of Yuliana's texts with my texts and video message in response.

In English, these texts read:

[Yuliana:] *Do you want to talk?*
Or are you busy?

[Me:] *I want to*
Just came home. My lesson is in 25 minutes

(I then sent a video message in which I say I'm getting ready for the next meeting and will be available in the afternoon after 4:00, and she will already be asleep. I also apologize and say that I hope to talk tomorrow.)

So, while thinking about the representation of my response, I considered multiple things: what I will say, the language I will use, and the modes I will use. I then responded in a way appropriate for this particular situation and for this particular audience.

Multimodal Representation

Due to technological advances, there are more opportunities to write in the ways we prefer. There is also more room for experimentation with modes. We are not limited to just using letters and numbers. Instead, we can write Instagram posts with text, pictures, and emojis. We can create Telegram messages that incorporate short videos, text, emojis, and sometimes images added to the videos. From the example above, we can see that I chose to combine modes: alphanumeric, visual, and oral. This is called **multimodality**.

Let's look at how multimodal representation works in WhatsApp and Telegram chats that I've had with my friend.

Multimodality

Multimodality refers to "all of the modes that humans can use to communicate" (ISU Writing Program, n.d.). This includes the following modes:

• Alphanumeric (something we write using words and/or numbers),

• Visual (pictures),

• Aural (sound),

• Oral (speech), and

• Symbolic (symbols that aren't alphabetic, like emoticons or emojis).

Here I am combining the visual and alphanumeric modes (Figures 8 and 9):

Figures 8 & 9: Two screenshots of messages I've sent using both images and text.

Here I am combining the symbolic and alphanumeric modes (Figures 10 and 11):
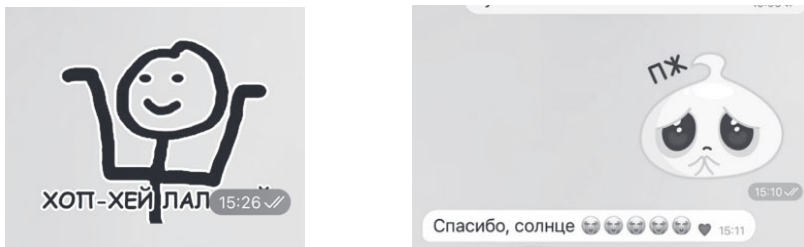
Figures 10 & 11: Two screenshots of messages I've sent using both symbols and text.

And here I am combining the oral, aural, and alphanumeric modes (Figure 12):
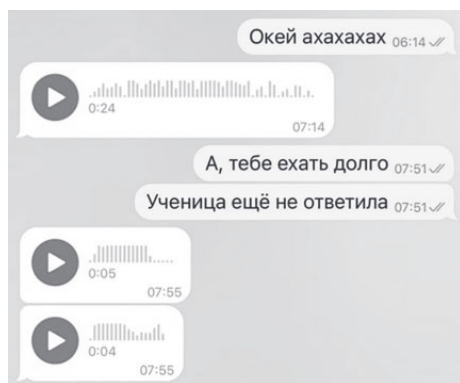

Figure 12: A screenshot of messages I sent using both audio recordings and text.

We can use the alphanumeric mode by simply texting, the visual mode by sharing pictures or videos, the aural and oral modes by sending voice messages and listening to them, and the symbolic mode by sending emojis. Using and combining different modes can be very helpful in different situations connected with producing literate activity. Sometimes simple text isn't enough to convey the ideas we have. If you look at Figures 8 and 9, you can agree that using only the alphanumeric mode wouldn't have helped us communicate the ideas we had. My purpose for creating a multimodal genre was to demonstrate visually how beautiful my breakfast was, and her main purpose was to show me a cute cat that was disturbing her while she was teaching.

Similarly, if there weren't stickers, we couldn't express our emotions in chat as sometimes it is hard to do with just words. There is also an option to add moving stickers. These are a great way to show how we are feeling at the moment. I would even say stickers help us reinforce our relationship and be more emotionally attached to each other. We even created our own sticker pack with our faces.

As for voice messages, they are an indispensable part of our conversations (Figures 13 and 14). Sometimes it is hard to type (when walking somewhere), and it is also inconvenient to record a video message. So, audio messaging is the perfect fit for sharing news immediately. Also, audio messages can help when we cannot call but have a lot of things to tell each other. Sometimes I wake up in the morning and see several five- to ten-minute audio messages
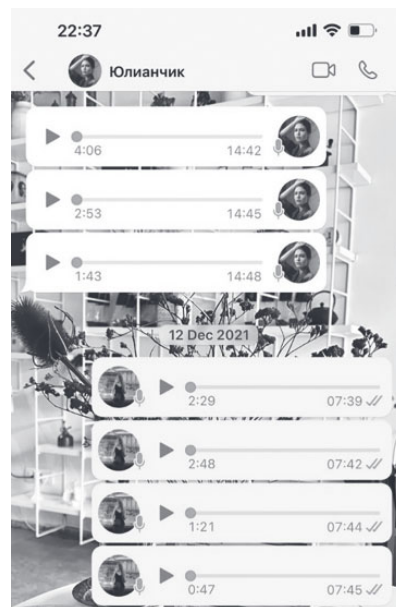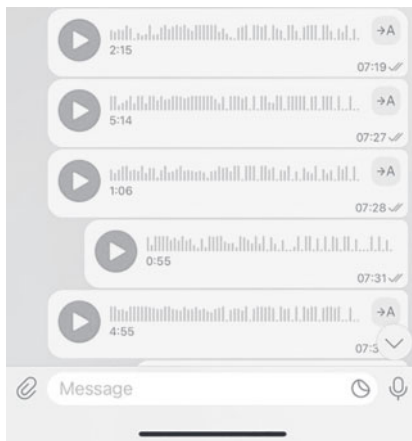
Figures 13 & 14: Two screenshots showing examples of Yuliana and I using the audio messaging feature on Telegram and WhatsApp.

from Yuliana who needs to share her news with me while I am sleeping (one more struggle in maintaining relationships when you are in different time zones).

Coming back to the concept of writing research identity, using a genre such as Instagram for our communication definitely transformed our writing research identities and our relationship because now we have some inside jokes and phrases from the posts we share and view together, and we use these phrases when we produce texts (communicating via WhatsApp or Telegram).

Translingual Writing

Translingual writing is the concept of bringing various languages into the same space and in communication with one another (ISU Writing Program, n.d.). It is based on our antecedent knowledge (things we already know) and reflects our writing research identities.

Figure 15: A screenshot of Yuliana telling me how she feels about seeing her favorite singer perform.

Translingualism in Our Communication

If you go back to Figures 8 and 9, you will see a lovely picture of pancakes and the text "Morning." This is one more feature that makes our chats unique and different from any other best friends' chats: we mix languages (Russian and English) and that's where translingualism comes into play.

Let's look at some examples of translingualism in our chats. In Figure 15, my friend tells me she is going to a live performance of her favorite singer. In English, the text reads:

I'm in this place. I'm very excited

In Russian, we don't have a word that carries the same meaning as "excited," so she decided to use "excited" in English to tell me exactly how she felt about the concert. Our shared antecedent knowledge (previous knowledge of the English language) lets us write this way while being sure that the other person will understand it. Knowing two languages allows us to communicate ideas more easily and gives us more room for expressing our thoughts and feelings in a more accurate and comprehensive way.
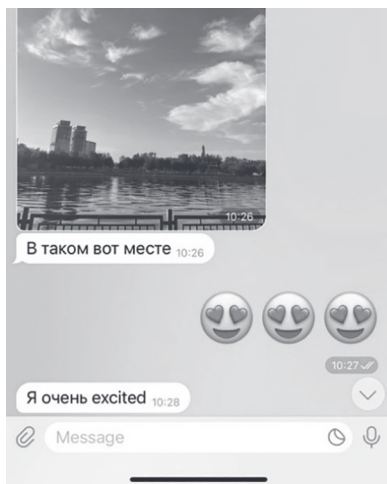
It is necessary to note that translingualism is *not* possible in all contexts and with all people. I will never send anything including English to my dad because he simply doesn't speak this language. I also can't use different languages when

composing some other types of literate activity, for example, writing an essay for class because I have to stick to one language. And this brings us back to representation (explained earlier in this article) and all the things we have to consider before we write.

Let's look at another example. Sometimes my friend and I use English on purpose: Yuliana jokingly says that I am forgetting Russian because of moving to the US, so we sometimes "have to" chat in English. Here is a small random part of our conversation in English (Figure 16):

Figure 16: A screenshot of a conversation in English.

And again, I wouldn't be able to do this with other people who don't speak English.

One more interesting example of translingualism is using English acronyms such as OMG and LOL but transliterating them into the Cyrillic alphabet ("ОМГ," and "ЛОЛ"; see Figure 17):

Figure 17: A screenshot of text messages showing Yuliana and I using the Cyrillic versions of OMG and LOL.

Sometimes we use English words but write them in the Cyrillic alphabet, such as writing sorry as "сори" and please as "плиз" (Figure 18). If we want to add emotions to our message, we usually multiply letters ("сориииии" is sorryyyy, while "плиииииззз" is pleeeeaseeee). We do the same when we
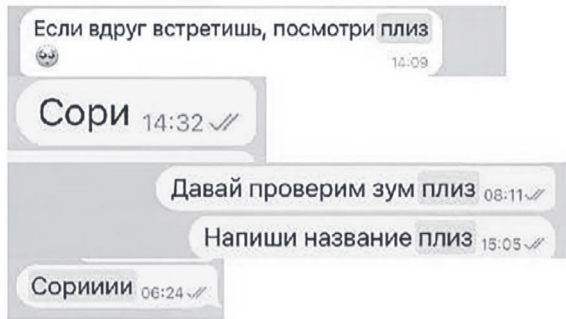
Figure 18: Two screenshots of text messages showing Yuliana and I using the Cyrillic versions of "sorry" and "please."

communicate in person by simply pronouncing these words with a strong Russian accent, so they don't sound English. That's how we transfer our oral communication patterns to our written communication. All these factors shape our unique writing research identities.

How Has Our Communication Changed?

Usually, moving to another country separates people. In this case, it brought us together even more:

- We have more topics to discuss because we are both obtaining new experiences apart from each other. I tell Yuliana about my life in the US, and she recently moved to Turkey, so she shares her stories about her new life, too.

- We started talking *more* than we used to because now we don't have to spend time commuting to meet in person.

- Our texting habits changed—we learned how to use different platforms to communicate and even created many inside jokes about our new lives with the help of these platforms. It definitely brought us closer.

- As we both now speak English more than we used to, our chats have become translingual, which also makes a difference in our communication.

- FaceTime helped us get acquainted with new people. I finally met her boyfriend, whom I had never met in person, and we sometimes chat together.

- I looked at texting from a different perspective and did a lot of research on it, which helped me analyze my writing research identity and the ways it is constantly changing.

- We realized that our friendship is unique, and we will always be together despite circumstances that separate us.

Thanks to digital technologies, chatting in the modern world is getting much easier. Distance and time differences are no longer factors that have to negatively affect relationships. Instead, if managed wisely, they can be an excellent bonding element for you and your loved ones. It can also help you learn more about yourself and your identity, including your writing research identity.

If you also use digital tools to communicate with your loved ones, consider how your personal writing research identity has been shaped by mobile apps, translingualism, and multimodality. You will probably discover a lot of new things about yourself, as I did.

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