

## Introspective Study of Emotion Icon in Public Chat as a Gesture of Texting

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### Abstract

An emotion icon, better known as emoticon is a metacommunicative pictorial representation of a facial expression that, in the absence of body language and prosody, serves to draw a receiver's attention to the tenor or temper of a sender's nominal verbal communication, changing and improving its interpretation. The present study investigates the use of these nonverbal cues in whatsapp public chat. The analysis focuses on the multifunctionality of emoticons, their role in online relational work, and possible connections between emoticon use and language proficiency and thus contributes to a more complete understanding of emotive communication online. Its ultimate goal is to help clarify the role of emoticons within a larger conceptual framework of emotive and relational meaning. To this end, this study takes a micro-analytic approach to show how English as foreign language learners use emoticons in text chat. The analysis shows that emoticons are highly context-sensitive and can display affect or serve as contextual cues to signal illocutionary force or humor.

**Keywords:** Emotion Icon, Sociolinguistic, Text Chat

### 1. Introduction

Since nonverbal cues are largely unavailable in text computer-mediated communication (CMC), text-based emoticons such as smileys :) =) :-) and their variants :-} :-> :D, winkies ;-) ;) , and frownies :( have been viewed as compensatory strategies (e.g., Crystal, 2001). Like other nonverbal cues, emoticons are highly context sensitive (e.g., Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Wolf, 2000) and therefore offer productive ground for qualitative studies. Such researches could provide for a richer and better understanding of emoticons and their interpretations in different contexts.

Like nonverbal cues in oral interaction, emoticons are not an add-on feature but are constitutive of CMC, and they occur in online discourse. As more and more people around the world use web instruments to communicate with others in social or institutional settings, many do so in a second or foreign language. The present study investigates the use of these nonverbal cues in text chat. The analysis focuses on the multifunctionality of emoticons, their role in online relational work, and thus contributes to a more complete understanding of emotive communication online.

### Emoticons

Researchers have speculated that emoticons function to express feelings and attitudes as an online substitute for what is expressed in face-to-face (FTF) interaction via facial cues (Halvorsen, 2012; Provine, Spencer, & Mandell, 2007). Because emoticons are iconic, they are easily recognized as facial expressions (Walther & D'Addario, 2001).

Emoticons depending on the context of communication – mainly the following three different

functions (Dresner & Herring, 2012)

- *Supplement*: When emoticons are added as paralinguistic in order to convey an important aspect of a linguistic utterance, they help to clarify the meaning of a text and to eliminate misunderstandings: e.g. “When I returned home, she was already there :- (“. The textual message could be understood both, in a positive and negative way. With the added emoticon the meaning is clarified unequivocally. Here, the emoticon is used as an illocutionary force (Walther & D'Addario, 2001) that augments the meaning of textual message by substituting nonverbal cues.
- *Support*: Emoticons are also used to support a text message: e.g. “*I am happy :-)*”. In this case, there is a denotative correspondence (congruence) between the text and the emoticon.
- *Antiphrasis*: When emoticons are used to contradict or annul the verbally expressed meaning, they produce ambiguity. Used in this way, they are used to express sarcasm: “*I am happy :- (“*, irony: “*This has to be taken very seriously ;-)*”, or to mitigate disagreement: “*Sorry, but I do not agree :-)*”

It has been proposed that verbal and nonverbal cues are equally important for text interpretation in CMC (Vandergriff, 2013). Furthermore, the interpretation of non- and para-verbal cues is analogue to FTF encounters context-sensitive, (Darics, 2013).

In principle, emoticons can be classified in pictorial emoticons, e.g. Santa Claus \*<:-) or emotional-attitudinal emoticons (Amaghlobeli, 2012) that represent:

- facial expressions*: happy :-), laughing :-D, sad :-(, angry :-{, wink ;-)...
- action*: kiss :-\*, yawn 1-O, screaming :-@, big hug ((

The substantial body of emoticon research shows that emoticons are not textual equivalents of facial cues and they do not always express emotion. They can enhance or complement the verbal message by expressing the sender's emotions and/or attitudes; they can modify the verbal message but not change its valence; and they are generally affiliative. Even though existing research generally acknowledges the context sensitivity of emoticons, very little research has been done at the discourse level to describe how they are used in context.

#### 1.1 Emotive Communication

Emotion management in negotiations is a very promising avenue. The analysis of emotions has also found some attention in electronic negotiations research. It has been shown that in the restricted environment of CMC, emotions provide important contextual meaning for the interpretation of messages (Brett, 2007). Furthermore, affect is contagious and tends to be reciprocated also in CMC (Friedman, 2004).

However, the presence of emotions is not always salient and their particular influence may differ from FTF-negotiations. Earlier research has suggested that emotions contribute to a form of “hyperpersonal” communication (Walther, 1996) or to extreme behaviors like flaming (Rice, 1987). Therefore, researchers have pointed out that more work is needed in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how emotions work and evolve in virtual environments (Martinovski, 2010).

Emotive communication, like other types of interpersonal communication, allows participants to do relational work. In successful communication, speakers seek to accommodate the often conflicting needs of saying what they want or have to say and building rapport to enhance social cohesion.

## **2. Methods**

The current pragmatic investigation of emoticons is designed to document some of the meanings or functions one form can have in different contexts. Its ultimate goal is to help clarify the role of emoticons within a larger conceptual framework of emotive and relational meaning. To this end, this study takes a micro-analytic approach to show how EFL students use emoticons in classroom text chat and tries to answer the following questions:

1. The following two questions guided the analysis:
2. What meanings do emoticons contribute to the meaning of the verbal message in text chat?
3. Do Emoticons serve as supplement to text messages in electronic negotiations?
4. Are Emoticons used to support textual messages (congruence)?
5. Are Emoticons used to mitigate disagreement or to express sarcasm (antiphrasis)?

To test our research questions, we collected data in a laboratory experiment in a language institute. The design varies the communication mode and the availability of emoticon support. The data analyzed consists of 16 mobile-mediated conversations that were conducted by 32 participants. All together, the participants accounted for 1398 messages, each transcript of the chat sessions was copied to a word document and was analyzed.

## **3. Results**

Emoticons display the sender's stance, functioning as emotive communication devices, affect signs, or "indices of speakers' feelings, attitudes, or relational feelings, attitudes, or relational orientations toward their topics, their partners, and/or their own acts of communication in different situations" (Caffi & Janney, 1994, p. 327).

In the 1398 text messages of the emoticon treatment, emoticons are overwhelmingly used as a supplement (1166 times, 84.3%). Only 143 times (3.4%) emoticons were coded as being redundant to the text messages and in 178 cases (12.3%), the emoticon was used as antiphrasis to the text. While the use of the three functions differs significantly ( $X^2(2) = 1059.27, p < .001$ ).

These results provide support for the notion that emoticons serve different functions. emoticons are used to supplement text messages and therefore substitutes written text in messages. Therefore, we also test for differences in number of thought units in the respective treatments. Factorial ANOVA shows a significant main effect of emoticon support  $F(1,94) = 19.012, p < .001$ , a nonsignificant main effect of the communication mode,  $F(1,94) = 1.432, p = .234$ , and a non-significant interaction effect,  $F(1,94) = .464, p = .497$  on the amount of exchanged thought units. ANOVA post-hoc tests verify that the differences between groups due to the used communication mode are significant, emoticons are also used to support text messages (congruence between text message and emoticon) or to mitigate disagreement, to express sarcasm or irony (antiphrasis of emoticon to text message). Therefore, the researchers analyzed in addition to the frequency analysis reported above, whether emoticons are related to specific behavioral patterns reflected in the communication categories. On average, negotiators used most often the "happy"-emoticon ( $M = 13.40$  per negotiation,  $SD = 11.20$ ). The emoticons "sad" ( $M = 2.43$ ,  $SD = 3.11$ ) and "winking" ( $M = 2.45$ ,  $SD = 2.67$ ) were similarly often used. Every second negotiator used one time the emoticon "angry" ( $M = 0.50$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ) or the "laughing" emoticon ( $M = 0.62$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ).

Negotiation dyads referred least frequently to the "shorts" emoticon ( $M = .16$ ,  $SD = 0.51$ ). To test whether emoticons are linked with specific communication patterns correlation analysis using Spearman's rho and performed bootstrapping was run. Results show that frequencies of used emoticons correlate with the relative frequencies of integrative and distributive action categories but only to a minor degree with information categories:

The "happy" emoticon correlates positively with "agreeing, accepting, conceding",  $r_s = .301, p < .1$ , and expressing positive emotions,  $r_s = .332, p < .05$ , and negatively with communication used to reject or disagree,  $r_s = -.234, p < .1$ , and expressions of negative emotions,  $r_s = -.330, p < .05$ . The use of the "sad" emoticon is negatively linked to "agreeing, accepting, conceding",  $r_s = -.295, p < .1$ , and expressing positive emotions,  $r_s = -.261, p < .1$ . Similarly, the "angry" emoticon is

less used in combination with the communication categories “agree, accept, concede”,  $r_s = -.294$ ,  $p < .05$ , but rather with statements expressing negative emotions  $r_s = .279$ ,  $p < .1$ . The emoticon “winking” is related to providing information to the counterpart,  $r_s = .245$ ,  $p < .1$ . Last, the emoticon “shorts” is positively linked to expressions of rejection and disagreement,  $r_s = .220$ ,  $p < .1$ , and expressions of negative emotions  $r_s = .337$ ,  $p < .1$ .

To evaluate how emoticons are used as antiphrasis (to mitigate the statement of the textual message or to express sarcasm or irony) additional nonparametric group analyses was used. Of all 110 emoticons serving as antiphrasis, the happy emoticon is used 84 times, the sad emoticon 16 times, the winking emoticon 23 times, the laughing emoticon 8 times, and the shorts emoticon once, while the angry emoticon was used never as an antiphrasis.

Results indicate that the sad emoticon is more often used than the happy emoticon in combination with categories “new offers”, “tactics or threats” and “request information”, (all  $p < .05$ ). Furthermore, the researchers found no differences in the used relative communication units when either the sad or the winking emoticon are used. Therefore, the researchers found no clear pattern how emoticons are used as antiphrasis.

#### 4. Discussion

Aside from imitative strategies, some emoticon uses represent strategies that foreground the recipient’s inferred wants and needs. One such strategy is the display of positive evaluations of the recipient and/or his/her actions. Regardless of their specific functions, emoticons are affiliative strategies that send a metamessage of rapport alongside the verbal message. Finally, emoticon use itself may index identity and youth (Yus, 2002) in spite of considerable variability across contexts and communities of practice.

Situational factors such as the language learning context in general and participant characteristics such as age and language proficiency shape online discourse (Herring, 2007), as do participants' beliefs regarding the norms and tone.

The management of affective complexity is fundamental for negotiators to reach mutual understanding in communication and a positive relationship (Te'eni, 2001). This research proposed that integrative negotiations can be supported with communication tools that facilitate the contextualization of communication by providing emoticons. Results of the designed laboratory experiment support this claim: emoticon support makes communication more effective. Our results show that negotiators with emoticon support need less words/text to reach agreements compared to negotiators without emoticon support. Also negotiators exhaust the full range of functions of emoticons by additionally using emoticons to support text message, to mitigate the content of text messages. Finally, emoticon support

significantly changes negotiation behavior by facilitating integrative negotiation behavior.

### 5. Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that emoticons are affiliative strategies that text-chat participants use to build rapport, regardless of whether they are expressing affect, displaying relief, happiness, or friendliness, cueing humor, or mitigating FTAs. This study specifically focused on form-meaning pairings. Most importantly, the analysis documented that emoticons are multifunctional, a finding in line with previous work (Dresner & Herring, 2010). Highly context-sensitive, a smiley emoticon, for example, will interact with linguistic features including syntactic position to serve a range of functions from conveying amusement to mitigating FTAs. At the same time, each emoticon will typically have a number of variants. A smiley, for example, may show up as :) or =) Some researchers (e.g., Dresner & Herring, 2010) who view punctuation as a function of emoticons have speculated that their variation and multifunctionality has to do with the novelty of the medium, and that this seemingly chaotic state of affairs mirrors early writing, which also showed a great deal of variation in orthography and punctuation. Once emoticon conventions become widely accepted, the argument goes, their use will become more regularized. While variant smiley forms :) =) :-) may perhaps fall by the wayside in favor of one dominant smiley form, there is no reason to expect that emoticons will have fewer functions or meanings.

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