Meaningful Signs—Emoticons

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Abstract—As a complement of chat-room talks, emoticons are combinations of certain punctuations, numerals, keyboard characters and special symbols designed to convey an emotion, an appearance, an action, an object and even the tone of chatting. It is playing a unique role in the online communication.

Index Terms—emoticon, chatting language, sign, coined word

Chatting language online, as a new medium language, has put lexical creativity into full play. In a chat room, language can be shaped in different ways by being played with, taken apart and put back together. Therefore, coined words in chat rooms spread rapidly and widely than traditional media. While chatting online, people may find that emoticons are playing a unique role in the online communication.

I. DEFINITION OF EMOTICON

Emoticons first appeared in 1982, which are the creation of Scott Fahlman at Carnegie Mellon University. Fahlman wrote at the time: "I propose … the following character sequence for joke markers: :-). Read it side ways. Actually, it is probably more economical to mark things that are not jokes, given current trends. For this use :-(." (Discovery Channel, 2002, p.58).

As to the definition of emoticons, it is described that emoticons are constructed by combining punctuation marks (sometimes along with characters or numerals) on the computer keyboard to represent emotions or semantic nuances such as happiness, sadness, or qualification (Baron, 2003, p.59-127).

In this dissertation, it is defined that Emoticons ('emotional' + 'icon' means icons with emotion), or smileys are combinations of certain punctuations (?, ", >, etc), numerals (1,2,3, etc), keyboard characters (a, b,c, etc) and/or special symbols (#, @, *, etc) designed to convey an emotion, an appearance, an action, an object and even the tone of chatting. They are typed in sequence on a single line, and placed at the end of a chatting utterance. The two basic forms of emoticons express positive attitudes and negative attitudes respectively: : -) and : -(

For understanding these emoticons, often the idea is to turn your head sideways, and it makes a picture on a lot of the smiley faces**. :-)** for example where the colon **:** represents the eyes, the hyphen **-** represents the nose and the right parenthesis **)** represents the mouth or smiling lips.

Some people use the hyphen - to show the nose, while others will show the same expression without the nose. Example: **;-)** and **;**) signify the same thing. Sometimes, the omission of the 'nose' element seems to be due to various typing speed or personal taste:

Among them, the most commonly used emoticons are:

: -) --- happiness, humor   : -o --- shocked, amazed   : -(--- sadness, displeasure
: .(--- crying   ; -) --- winking   : -] --- sarcastic

II. FUNCTION OF EMOTICON

Real-time chatting online lacks the facial expressions and body language which are so critical in expressing personal opinions and attitudes in social relationships. In face-to-face communication, these extra linguistic cues can help to express meaning while in the chat rooms these cues are unavailable. Without these extra linguistic cures, a rapidly constructed online message, lacking the usual courtesies, can easily appear abrupt or rude. This limitation of chatting language online is noted in the development of computer-mediated communication, and leads to the introduction of emoticons or smileys, which to a certain degree can deal with the above situation. Here is a sample collected from the ICQ chat room to show you the use and location of an emoticon:

<DarK_HerrOr> ur 15   ----   You are 15?
<angeldust78> lol:)   ------   Laugh out loud (smile)
<CRUNK_586> r u sure?   ------   Are you sure?
<DarK_HerrOr> maybe 16 ------ Maybe 16.

In the chat, <DarK_HerrOr> is quite interested in the age of <angeldust78>. However, <angeldust78> keeps silent and adds an acronym 'lol' and an emoticon ':)' at the end of her words, as an answer to the question. So the ':)' and 'lol' (which stands for laugh out loud) smoothes the relationship here, otherwise it would be supposed rude without any response.

III. CLASSIFICATION OF EMOTICON

Various kinds of emoticons are created to convey different meanings. It could be a facial expression, an action, a person and his /her appearance, an animal, an object, and even the tone of the speech. Here emoticons are classified into the following groups:

A. Facial Expression

At the beginning, Emoticons are created for the purpose to serve as a complement of online communication to provide more emotional information to recipients in chat rooms.

: -) --- happy   : -(**---** sad   : -D--- hearty laughing
: -(--- sad   : - { --- angry   ; -) --- wink
: -) --- smile   : .(--- crying   : *(---crying softly
: -e --- disappointed   : -o or 8-0 --- shocked, amazed
%) or : -s --- confused   : ") --- embarrassed
: -T --- keep a straight face   : -/ --- skeptical   x:-/ --- uncertain
: -& --- tongue tied   : - " --- whistling   : -7 --- wry face
=:-O --- scared   &-| --- tearful

B. Action

In addition to the basic facial expression, emoticons can also convey some information which presents one's body language and movements.

: -Q --- smoking while talking   (((H))) --- big hug
1° --- yawning or snoring   `:-) --- sweating   1-O --- yawn
:-@ --- screaming   :p~ ~ --- drooling   : - * --- kiss
:-? --- smoking a pipe   : #) --- drunk

C. Pictures of Objects, People and Animals

Little by little, more and more complicated and delicate emoticons are made to represent vivid pictures of objects, people and animals.

0: -) --- angel   >:-> --- devil   @>--;-- --- a rose
+<: -) --- pope $ -) --- Yuppie   *<) :o) --- clown
==):-)= --- Abraham Lincoln   =:-H --- football player
*<|:-) --- Santa Claus   *<<<<+ --- Christmas tree
+:-) --- doctor or priest   C=:-) --- chef
P-(--- pirate (with patch over an eye)   = : -) --- punk
=):-) --- Uncle Sam   :-[--- vampire
8(:-) --- Mickey Mouse   })i({ --- butterfly
___/___\o/__ --- shark   ><> --- fish
8) --- frog   :\/--- duck   :8) --- pig
3:-o --- cow   3:*> --- Rudolph the red nose reindeer

D. Tone

Even the tones of one's remarks can be expressed though emoticons.

: -] --- sarcastic   :-> --- sarcastic

E. Appearance

In order to be close to a real face-to-face conversation, people's physical characteristics, dress, and hair styles are cleverly replaced by a mixed set of letters, punctuation marks, numbers and other special symbols. Chatters' unique physical appearance (e.g., a big or small nose, curly or parted hair, etc.) will clearly reappear in other chat-room members' mind.

: o) --- a big nose   !-| --- with a black eye
(: -) ---big face   >%-) --- cross eyed
{: -) --- hair parted in the middle   &: -) --- curly hair
8 *) --- glasses and a half mustache   : -)) --- double chin (or really happy)
: -}) --- handlebar mustache   B-) --- wearing glasses
: - { } --- wearing lipstick   : %)% --- a face with acnes
:-~) --- got a flowing or running nose   (- : --- Left handed

These emoticons are so funny and creative that they arouse chatters' rich imagination and give people a helpful aid to develop a better understanding of their partners.

IV. STRUCTURE OF EMOTICON

Emoticons are mainly constructed by punctuation marks, letters, figures and special symbols (#,$,*, et.). Even though there are various ways to combine, punctuation marks play the basic role in each emoticon, due to the fact that emoticons/smiles are based on a smile face ':-)', and other emoticons are just derived from the simple ';-)'. Therefore, the following section a ------ e are mainly based on punctuation marks.

However, there are also some special structures which are not based on punctuation, like section f .

A. *Sequence of Punctuation Marks*

Some basic emoticons are formed by combining only punctuation marks.

;-) --- wink   : -}) --- handlebar mustache : -) --- happy
: -(--- sad   : - { --- angry   : -) --- smile
: - { } --- wearing lipstick

B. *Punctuation Marks and Special Symbols*

Special symbols like %,* ,& , etc, work with punctuation marks to form new emoticons.

:-? --- Smoking a pipe/ tongue sticking out   : - * --- kiss
$-) --- Yuppie   :%% --- has acnes   :-# --- has braces
&:-) --- curly hair

C. *Punctuation Marks and Letters*

With capitalized letters or lowercase, punctuation marks can convey more complicated information.

X-(--- mad   :-D --- laugh   :-T --- keep a straight face   : o) --- a big nose
P-(--- pirate (with patch over an eye)   B-) --- wearing glasses
(((H))) --- big hug   :-Q --- smoking while talking   :-S --- make no sense

D. *Punctuation Marks and Figures*

Figures can be part of emoticons to symbolize one's wide-opened mouths and eyes, a pig's big nose, or even the shining circle over the head of an angel.

:8) --- pig   0: -) --- angel   8) --- frog   :-1 --- whatever   :0 --- surprised
8-0 --- shocked   1-0 --- yawning   8:-) --- little girl   :-7 --- Wry statement

E. *Complicated Combination (3 or More than 3 Types) of Punctuation Marks, Letters, Figures, and Special Symbols*

Very detailed and vivid images can be pictured with three or more than three types of above combination.

3:-o --- cow   3:*> --- Rudolph the red nose reindeer
*<) :o) --- clown   C=:-) --- chef
8 *) --- glasses and a half mustache

F.   *------*, ^-------^ or ^^--- ^^ *Structures and Letter Spacing.*

Words or phrases quoted within different pairs of punctuations, like asterisks (*) and caret (^) can also express emphatic meaning. Letter spacing can also be used for speaking "loud and clear". Some of these methods for emphasis can be combined together in usage. The following sample is an illustration of the combination of capitals and letter spacing for emphasis.

this is a VERY important point   this is a *very* important point
this is a ^ very ^ important point   this is a v e r y important point
this is a V E R Y important point
Asterisks provide stress on something or highlight the personal opinion nature of it:
I certainly wouldn't do it   in *my* view

Furthermore, inserting or copying pictures also can be a good way to attract other participants' attention, if you happen to have some wonderful materials at hand. Suppose you said to your partner that you were hungry, and he could immediately send a picture of a cake to you. Obviously, such kind of expression has its own advantages which can not be replaced by words.

Although a number of emoticon lexicons have appeared (many emoticon pages available on the Web), new emoticons can appear at any time, especially among particular groups of people (e.g., students attending a particular high school).

V.   EXPRESSIVENESS OF EMOTICONS

As a complement of chat-room talks, emoticons have been designed to carry emotional meanings. In addition, skillful adoption of emoticons in chat-room talks can reflect the unique personality of the speaker, and create a humorous atmosphere at the same time.

:.(--- crying   : *(---crying softly
:.(and : *(vividly show a face with tears running down one's cheeks.

From the explanations of these emoticons, one can easily find out that, emoticons are not only tools to create fun, but

also a way to express and convey information , just as indicated in the above example from an ICQ chat room.

It is plain that emoticons are helpful but still crude in some way. "The emoticons can forestall a gross misperception of a speaker's intent, but an individual smiley still allows a huge number of readings (amusement, happiness, delight, joke, sympathy, good mood etc.) which can only be disambiguated by referring to the verbal context." (Crystal, 2001: 36) From Crystal's remarks, we can clearly observe the limitation of emoticons. However, even though emoticons are still rough in its nature, it is one of the most distinctive features of chatting language online.

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