



# Non-verbal signalling in digital discourse: The case of letter repetition



Erika Darics\*

University of Portsmouth, UK

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## ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the interactional functions of non-standard spelling, in particular letter repetition, used in text-based computer-mediated communication as a means of non-verbal signalling. The aim of this paper is to assess the current state of non-verbal cue research in computer-mediated discourse and demonstrate the need for a more comprehensive and methodologically rigorous exploration of written non-verbal signalling. The study proposes a contextual and usage-centered view of written paralanguage. Through illustrative, close linguistic analyses the study proves that previous approaches to non-standard spelling based on their relation to the spoken word might not account for the complexities of this CMC cue, and in order to further our understanding of their interactional functions it is more fruitful to describe the role they play during the contextualisation of the verbal messages. The interactional sociolinguistic approach taken in the analysis demonstrates the range of interactional functions letter repetition can achieve, including contribution to the inscription of socio-emotional information into writing, to the evoking of auditory cues or to a display of informality through using a relaxed writing style.

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## 1. Introduction

The aim to provide an academic account of the communicative means that inscribe non-verbal features typical of spoken language and face-to-face interactions into writing has fascinated researchers from the earliest periods of computer-mediated communication (CMC) research (Carey, 1980; Danet et al., 1997; Lea and Spears, 1992; Reid, 1991; Rintel and Pittam, 1997). This interest is not surprising considering the highly important role of non-verbal communication in face-to-face interactions: non-verbal signals not only interact with verbal messages in, for instance, repeating, complementing, contradicting, emphasising or replacing verbal messages (see for example the seminal work of Ekman and Friesen, 1969), but are elementary means of expression of socio-emotional information (for example Ekman, 1989). Non-verbal signalling also has an important role in the creation of conversational coherence, regulating conversation and assisting turn-taking, through the use of interjections (for example Ameka, 1992), backchannel signals (for example Jefferson, 1984) or gestures and facial expressions (for example Chovil, 1991/1992; Ekman and Friesen, 1969). In addition to these discursive, affective and interactional management functions, non-verbal signalling has also been found to be a resource for identity representation,

for instance as the display of dominance and status (for a review see Bente and Krämer, 2011, p. 185).

### 1.1. The research of the non-verbal cues in digital interactions

Following the rapid spread of various CMC channels in the last two decades, and due to the fact that text-based CMC genres, such as e-mail and instant messaging, have become 'mundane' and part of our everyday life (Herring, 2004), the question of whether non-verbal signalling exists in text-based digital discourse has repeatedly been raised in the CMC scholarly tradition (for example Ferrara et al. (1991), but also later work, such as Carter (2003)). As a result of the recent developments in CMC research, general theorisations about the existence of non-verbal signalling in writing have been refined, and the central issue of current scholarship is not whether non-verbal cues exist in computer-mediated discourse, but the means by which these cues are expressed in writing as well as their meanings and functions (Carter, 2003; Danet et al., 1997; Hård af Segerstad, 2002; Lea and Spears, 1992; Rice and Love, 1987).

Research into CMC cues has included a wealth of attempts to categorise, analyse and describe the creative writing techniques and discursive strategies that serve as non-verbal cues in text-based computer-mediated communication genres. However, the majority of these accounts are incidental and lacking a rigorous framework using which linguistic and discursive instances could be discussed. Description of non-verbal devices has repeatedly been restricted to listings, either lacking a justified framework

\* Tel.: +44 (0) 2392 846155.

E-mail address: [erika.darics@port.ac.uk](mailto:erika.darics@port.ac.uk)

(for example Carey, 1980; Cherny, 1999; Haas et al., 2011; Hård af Segerstad, 2002; Riordan and Kreuz, 2010; Sanderson, 1993; Thurlow, 2001), or adhering to the traditional hierarchy of grammatical phenomena (Al-Sa'di and Hamdan, 2005; Herring, 2012). Although these attempts are useful in that they contribute to the description of the taxonomy of non-verbal signalling, they do not account for the range of interactional functions or the context-dependence and the highly variable nature of interpretation of non-verbal signalling (for exceptions see e.g. Darics (2010) and Vandergriff (2013)), at times even treating them in an overtly simplified way. For instance, Crystal (2001) states that

These features are indeed capable of a certain expressiveness, but the range of meanings they signal is small, and restricted to gross notions such as extra emphasis, surprise, and puzzlement. Less exaggerated nuances are not capable of being handled in this way (...) (2001, p. 35).

The present paper aims to provide evidence against such simplifications and address the above described methodological shortcomings by offering a theoretical framework that enables the study of the whole spectrum of written non-verbal cues in context, accounting for their meanings and functions. Before moving on to the introduction of this framework, however, it is necessary to mention a second major caveat in non-verbal cue research: the lack of balance in the description of non-verbal cues. Both Vandergriff (2013) and Kalman and Gergle (2010) observed that previous research has been biased in its focus on the description of certain paralinguistic cues, while ignoring others. The authors point out that such approaches give a distorted view of non-verbal signalling in writing. My overview of non-verbal cue research confirms their observation, and demonstrates that in spite of the acknowledgement of numerous occurrences of linguistic creativity serving as non-verbal cues, a significant number of studies are partial to one particular type of non-verbal sign: the emoticon.<sup>1</sup> Kalman and Gergle (2010) speculate that the possible reason behind the apparent lack of attention given to other manifestations of non-verbal cues in writing lies in the difficulty of identifying and interpreting such manifestations in naturally occurring data, particularly because the cues are highly variable and subtle. Some of the most recent attempts to systematically describe linguistic devices that serve as non-verbal cues do reflect the need to expand the research agenda beyond emotions and emoticons: Al-Sa'di and Hamdan (2005), for instance, set out to present a study of the main linguistic features used in computer-mediated discourse (CMD), Riordan and Kreuz (2010) as well as Haas et al. (2011) have attempted to provide taxonomies of a range of written non-verbal cues, and more recently, Vandergriff (2013) argued for the need of extending the scope of linguistic and pragmatic enquiry to the complete spectrum of CMC cues. The present paper aims to further this line of research by firstly introducing a theoretical approach that allows for the identification and description of the interactional functions of non-verbal signalling – in naturally occurring data – and, secondly, by discussing a specific cue in greater depth that has not been aptly addressed in previous literature.

## 2. Interactional sociolinguistic approach

In their synthesis of their findings on non-verbal communication, Bente and Krämer conclude that “non-verbal behaviour

constitutes a complex communication system that – especially because of the context dependence – cannot be described in a deterministic way. Dynamic and static aspects are fused, and effects are multidimensional” (2011, p. 187).<sup>2</sup> The most important implication of this realisation is that non-verbal devices cannot be treated such a way that the same cues invariably accomplish the same function in every communicative situation: it is not valid to claim that there are generalised non-verbal cue codes (as in Lea and Spears, 1992; Thurlow, 2001) to express emotions and meaning, but rather they have to be viewed as context-bound manifestations (compare with Riordan and Kreuz (2010) or Vandergriff (2013)). This view of cues entails that they cannot at all times be treated as having a distinguishable referential meaning, but rather a “signalling value” dependent on the discourse context and on the previous experiences of the listener. Non-verbal signalling allows “speakers to signal and listeners interpret what the activity is, how semantic content is to be understood and how each sentence relates to what precedes or follows” (Gumperz, 1982, p. 131). The definition quoted above is part of the definition of the notion of “contextualisation cues” – a concept introduced by Gumperz (1982) in his seminal work on the theory of interactional sociolinguistics (henceforth IS). In the IS framework, Gumperz identifies contextualisation cues as features of linguistic form that contribute to the signalling of “contextual presuppositions” and allow for situated inferences about the meanings people intend to convey (Gumperz, 1982, p. 131). Based on this assumption, previous scholarship has drawn on the IS framework to identify whether and how non-verbal cues function as contextualisation cues in spoken interactions and particularly to explore how these cues contribute to inferential process and affect the basic meaning of the verbal message: Goodwin and Goodwin (1992) in their study, for instance, conducted an examination of the role of gestures and body movement and found that speech and gestures are mutually contextualising phenomena, with talk providing resources for the interpretation of gestures, while gestures elaborate and further guide what is being said within talk. Stubbe et al. (2003), demonstrate that together with pragmatic and lexicogrammatical choices, prosody and paralinguistic cues function as important contextualisation cues of stance in professional interactions. Auer (1992) provides a detailed analysis of how a range of non-verbal signals, such as paralanguage, gaze and bodily movements, are involved in the contextualising of social interactional episodes. He also points out that contextualisation research – mainly due to methodological considerations – tends to focus on non-lexical, non-referential cues, mainly non-verbal signals and “linguistic variation” (p. 24).

### 2.1. Contextualisation in digital discourse

Following from these research findings and the points made above about the contextualising nature of non-verbal signals in face-to-face interactions, it makes sense to approach text-based digital discourse from an IS perspective and, instead of an acontextual view of “esoteric marks” (Lea and Spears, 1992), “language play” (Peuronen, 2011) or “expressive respelling” (Shaw, 2008), focus our attention on which non-lexical signs contribute to the contextualisation of typed verbal messages and how.

The understanding and appreciation of such an approach, however, require the clarification of the basic concepts and theoretical assumptions of IS, therefore, in what follows, I sum up briefly how IS defines the concept of context, and what are the resulting methodological implications of this definition.

<sup>1</sup> For example: Derks et al., 2007, 2008; Dresner and Herring, 2010; Fullwood and Orsolina, 2007; Garrison et al., 2011; Hwang and Matsumoto, 2013; Krohn, 2004; Lo, 2008; Markman and Oshima, 2007; Provine et al., 2007; Walther and D'Addario, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> A similar conclusion has been reached by Kalman and Gergle (2010) regarding non-verbal cues in text-based CMD.

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