

Conventional Faces: Emoticons in Instant Messaging Discourse

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Abstract

This study investigated the emoticon in situ and attempted to examine emoticons in their own right as conventions of IM discourse, rather than comparing emoticons to Standard English (SE), written or spoken. We analyzed a corpus of naturally occurring IM conversations in order to uncover the conventions of emoticon use, including frequency, type, and placement. Our analysis illustrates that IM users access a shared body of knowledge about the types of emoticons they employ and also appear to rely on that body of knowledge to determine where they place emoticons within an utterance. We also suggest that examining the emoticon as a meaningful linguistic unit reveals that seemingly idiosyncratic uses of the emoticon may have rhetorical significance. We suggest that treating computer-mediated communication (CMC) as a language independent of SE is more generative toward theorizing CMC conventions. Knowledge of CMC conventions may help scholars and teachers to more fully understand adolescent literate practices.

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Keywords: emoticons; instant messaging; computer-mediated communication; paralinguistic markers; language conventions; punctuation

1. Introduction

Instant Messaging, or IM, is a popular form of real-time electronic communication. It involves the use of IM software available via the Internet (such as AOL Instant Messenger, GoogleTalk, Yahoo! Messenger, Facebook) to engage in synchronous text-based conversations with one person at a time or in multiple one-on-one or group conversations. Across a variety of computer-mediated communicative contexts, IM appears as part of the everyday literate practices of business professionals collaborating in real-time, family members conversing with each other, college students working on class assignments, and many other social groups who choose to engage in IM to balance spatial and temporal communicative constraints. Like many forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC), IM integrates multiple print-linguistic and non-print-linguistic forms of representation.

In spite of the IM's continued popularity, there remains no shortage of arguments in the popular media that suggest IM discourse is detrimental to the English language. Much criticism targets the linguistic features of IM discourse, including frequent use of abbreviations, acronyms, non-standard or multiple kinds of punctuation, and unconventional capitalization; this criticism highlights the ways in which language use in IM environments looks very different from the features of language evident in Standard Written English (SWE). One such popular representational form in IM is the emoticon (such as “:-)”), a visual representation constructed through the use of a series of typographic

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symbols. Emoticons, specifically, have been scrutinized by language scholars from fields as diverse as psychology, neuroscience, and sociolinguistics as “an unnecessary and unwelcome intrusion into a well-crafted text” (Provine, Spencer, & Mandell, 2007, p. 305). Pop-culture grammarians like Lynne Truss (2004) refer to emoticons as a “paltry substitute for expressing oneself properly” (p. 193). Attacks are often centered on the ambiguity of the emoticon. David Crystal (2001) identified the emoticon’s shortcomings: “It is plain that they are a potentially helpful but extremely crude way of capturing some of the basic features of facial expression, but their semantic role is limited” (p. 39). Such assertions appear to indicate a limited role for the emoticon within CMC.

In a CMC setting and with IM, where creativity is an integral characteristic of expression due to the constraints of the medium, a community of users will naturally adapt in innovative ways in order to communicate (Crystal, 2001). Some unique linguistic features of the IM discourse have developed in relation to the technological reality of the IM medium itself (the synchronicity of IM mirrors the communicative contexts of face-to-face spoken interaction and typed messages, appearing as the primary mode of interaction, reflect written communication). This mixed origin has complicated researchers’ approaches to the study of IM discourse, including emoticons. Should emoticons be studied as speech acts? As linguistic units? Or, as Crystal suggested, an entirely “new species” of communication?

Further complicating mainstream views and approaches to understand IM discourse is an increasingly clear preferential position toward standard spoken or written discourse. Articles that view IM through written or spoken language lenses assume the emoticon to be compensatory in function—specifically that it is compensatory for facial expression in contexts where face-to-face communication is not available to interlocutors. Though one use of an emoticon can be a typographic representation of a facial expression, limiting emoticons to one usage function is a quick dismissal of what appears to be more integral feature of IM discourse. The view that emoticons are compensatory without a proper objective investigation is premature and employs a fixed conceptualization of this IM discourse feature that fails to consider how emoticons are employed within the actual practice of IM communication.

Furthermore, that emoticons are considered “intrusions” in texts suggests that as long as interlocutors are particular in crafting their messages, language alone can explain meaning—a conception of linguistic communication that is more closely aligned with SWE. Similarly, the notion that emoticons are “crude” representations of facial expression may indicate a partiality toward face-to-face interactions as a more exact way of understanding the meaning of facial expressions than the emoticon can provide. These assumptions quickly crumble when everyday communicators consider a miscommunication found in an e-mail or a possible misreading of a friendly smile as flirtation (or a flirtatious smile as friendliness). Practitioners of language understand that even in ideal written or face-to-face interactions, language and facial expressions can be ambiguous.

As researchers, we find ourselves attracted to investigating existing theories of the emoticon because we are each active participants in IM culture. Each of us engages in IM regularly in our professional and personal lives. We do not deny that we are still what Patrick Hartwell (1987) called “lames” to a certain extent, “profoundly removed from the active life of language in the communities we live in” because we study and analyze language for a living (p. 11). But at the same time, we find ourselves in a unique position where we are more involved in the production of IM discourse than previous generations of researchers. Our position as IM users makes us more attuned to the range of possibilities beyond compensation that emoticons can offer within IM discourse—and more hesitant to accept current arguments that the emoticon is simply decorative, additive, and unnecessary. Like most compositionists and rhetoricians, we understand the value of withholding judgment premature to a systematic, data-driven investigation.

Consequently, we find the pervasiveness of the “emoticon as compensatory and intrusive” limiting. Current views of the emoticon predetermine the semiotic value of emoticons and fundamentally limit the ways language scholars view and research this non-print-linguistic form of representation. Similar to Christina Haas and Pamela Takayoshi (forthcoming), we believe the first step in understanding IM discourse, and emoticons in particular, is to identify the conventions of emoticon use and function in authentic contexts. Our research leads us to conclude that the predominant methodological approaches being taken toward the emoticon results in a different view from what we have come to see the emoticon as doing within IM discourse.

This study seeks to understand the emoticon via an *in situ* investigation of the emoticon and attempts to examine emoticons in their own right as conventions of IM discourse, rather than as conventions of Standard English, written or spoken. Working with this assumption, our guiding questions in this study are *How are emoticons used within American IM discourse?* and *What, if any, conventions are associated with their use?* Toward this end, we reexamine existing treatments of the emoticon and move to rely on a Grounded Theory approach to analyze a corpus of naturally occurring IM conversations to uncover the conventions of emoticon use, including frequency, type, and placement.

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