Original Paper

Pragmatic Functions of Emoticons in WeChat Messaging

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Abstract

With the development of social media and the updating of emoticons, people widely use emoticons to convey information and express emotions in instant messaging to achieve the purpose of communication. As a new research field, emoticons have attracted extensive attention of scholars in recent years. The previous studies mostly focus on motivation and influencing factors of emoticon usage from the perspective of communication. However, little research has been done on the study of linguistics. The author of this paper intends to explore the roles and pragmatic functions of emoticons in WeChat messaging through discourse analysis based on speech act theory. The study shows that emoticons compensate for the lack of information and eliminate ambiguity in online communication, and that different age groups have different understandings of emoticons. Hopefully the study on emoticons will help people systematically understand the roles and functions of emoticons, thus achieving interpersonal effective communication.

Keywords

Emoticons, speech act theory, pragmatic functions

1. Introduction

With the progress and popularity of technology, the way people communicate has changed dramatically. Network communication occupies an increasing proportion in people-to-people exchange because it breaks down the boundaries of time and space. However, the original computer-mediated communication (CMC) mainly carries out information based on textual messages and lacks of nonverbal cues, which leads to users' incomplete interpretation and misunderstanding.

Therefore, emoticons are designed and updated in various communication channels to remedy those communication gaps. Due to the popularity of using emoticons in online communication, there have been a number of empirical attempts to investigate the use of emoticons.

Some scholars take a fresh look at individual differences in the use of emoticons (Baron, 2004, p. 418; Huffaker & Calvert, 2005, 1083; Liu X. T. et al. 11). Aside from demographic factors, different contexts

and motives also affect the use of emoticons. Faced with different objects and context, people adjust their strategies of using emoticons to meet different communication needs (Liu L. Q., 2020, p. 93). Based on the relevant research on emoticons, the motivation of using emoticons can be classified into four categories: transmitting information, adjusting communication atmosphere, entertainment, and efficiency (p. 89).

The current researches mainly focus on the functions of emoticons. Nonverbal behaviors in face-to-face communication achieve three functions: providing information, regulating social interaction, and establishing affection and intimacy (Ekman & Friesen, 2009, p. 89). Some scholars draw parallels between emoticons and other signs and conclude that emoticons serve the same functions as actual nonverbal behaviors, including strengthening the intensity of message, disambiguating the content, and regulating the interaction (Provine et al., 2007, p. 299; Derks et al., 2008, p. 381). On the one hand, emoticons are considered as "emotion-marks" to indicate people's emotional state (Baron, 2004, p. 242; Rezabek & Cochenour, 1998, p. 201). On the other hand, emoticons are used to indicate illocutionary forces, containing intentions and motivations of the sender (Dresner & Herring, 2010, p. 250; Riordan et al., 2010, p. 1817).

However, few studies have been done on pragmatics, and most of them only focus on the pragmatic functions of emoticons with inadequate explanations. Dresner and Herring stress that the primary function of emoticons is not to make up for the missing content as "emotional markers", but to convey "pragmatic meaning" (p. 250). Song puts forward that text annotation and visual efficiency of emoticons have a positive impact on users' perceived pleasure based on speech act theory (p. 126). Furthermore, Yu and Qin explore emoticons from the perspective of cognitive pragmatics and point out that the process of interpreting emoticons is the process of encoding and decoding language (p. 135). Similarly, Li and Jiang analyze the pragmatic meanings of the "face with tears of joy" in five online dialogues and explain the cognitive mechanism behind these pragmatic meanings (p. 68).

Moreover, it is still unknown that whether the selected emoticon can be used to perform all types of illocutionary in Searle's classification or just some types in order to achieve effective communication. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the roles and pragmatic functions of two typical emoticons, smiling face and frowning face, in WeChat messaging through discourse analysis based on speech act theory. The following two questions will be solved:

1). What are the roles of emoticons in WeChat messaging?

2). What are the pragmatic functions of emoticons in WeChat messaging?

2. Method

There are 200 respondents randomly sampled from WeChat users, including 88 male and 112 female (See Table 1).

Table 1. Background Information of the Participants

Variable	Detailed Information	Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	88	44 %
	Female	112	56%
Age	15-30 years old	169	84.5 %
	31-60 years old	30	15%
	Over 60 years old	1	0.5%
Education Level	Senior high school and below	70	35 %
	Undergraduate degree	121	60.5%
	Postgraduate or doctor	9	4.5%
Frequency of using emoticons	Never	8	4%
	Seldom	11	5.5%
	Sometimes	39	19.5%
	Often	103	51.5%
	Always	39	19.5%

Eligible subjects are between the age of 15 and 60 years old. The study mainly focuses on two age groups including respondents aged from 15 to 30 years old and 31 to 60 years old. In the study, most of the respondents (60.5%) have earned an undergraduate degree. The vast majority of the respondents (96%) use emoticons in WeChat messaging, and more than half of them often use emoticons out of various motives. Therefore, it is worthwhile to research emoticons.

This study has used a combination of qualitative and quantitative approach. The qualitative research collected data from semi-structured interviews based on the functions of emoticons proposed by Rashdi (2018, p.126). Considering that the majority of Chinese users of WeChat emoticons are post-90s, this study selected three post-90s as the interviewees with the minimum age of 20 and the maximum age of 26, and the interview time from 20 to 30 minutes per person. The interview questions are divided into three parts: sociodemographic information, roles and functions of emoticons based on the preset themes, and selections of emoticons with different conversation objects in different situations (See Table 2). This interview provides specific online conversation scenarios and collects interviewees' daily conversations in order to explore whether emoticons can achieve people's communicative purposes.

The questionnaire has been designed based on the roles and functions of emoticons extracted from the qualitative research. The questionnaire is distributed by snowball sampling on the Internet. A total of 205 questionnaires are collected and 200 are valid. There are four sections in the questionnaire (See Table 3).

Table 2. The Functions of Emoticons Obtained from Interviews

Preset Theme	Typical Description in the Interview
strengthen message content	"I think emoticons can show my tone and mood, and make others understand me better"; "I hope that the other party can perceive my mood in WeChat Messaging, and emoticons help me a lot in this way."
soften the impact of negative words	"When my text contains demanding words, I often add a smiling face at the end of the text to soften my tone."
enrich emotional expression	"Pure text is too monotonous to express my feelings well"; "If the other party cannot perceive my emotion, he may misinterpret my meaning. To some extent, emoticons can make my emotion more intuitive."
Compensate for the context	"I think emoticons are equivalent to pure text to a certain extent, because they provide another layer of meaning and enrich the context. We can interpret the text more accurately."
open or close a conversation	"I do not know what to send when chatting with unfamiliar people at the beginning, so I often send a cute emoticon to break the awkward atmosphere and open our topic."
indicate the completion of statement	"Sometimes I will add an emoticon at the end of the sentence, not only to express my feelings, but also to indicate the end of my sentence, which is similar to the role of punctuation."
Improve communication effectiveness	"I think sometimes the other party cannot understand what I really want to express, but emoticons can help me solve this problem"; "Sometimes I can communicate with my close friends with only a few emoticons, which greatly improves the efficiency of online communication."

Table 3. Structure of the Questionnaire

Section	Question
Sociodemographic information	Q1 (Gender)
	Q2 (Age)
	Q3 (Educational background)
Usage	Q4 (Use of emoticons)
	Q5 (Frequency of sending emoticons)
	Q6 (Usage scenarios)
Roles and Functions	Q7-Q10 (roles)

	Q11-Q14 (roles and functions)
Communicative effectiveness	Q15 (Communicative goal)

The first section is about sociodemographic information of respondents; the second section pays attention to respondents' use of WeChat emoticons; the third section provides WeChat messages with smiling or frowning face in different scenarios for respondents to choose the most appropriate roles or functions; the fourth section evaluates the communicative effectiveness of emoticons in WeChat messaging.

The procedures of data analysis can be divided into five steps. Firstly, transcribe the audio recordings and translate them into English. Secondly, extract interviewees' descriptions of the roles and functions of emoticons. Thirdly, annotate emoticons by Searle's taxonomy and select typical examples to examine. Fourthly, analyze pragmatic functions of emoticons through discourse analysis based on speech act theory. Finally, counts different social groups' understanding of the roles and functions of emoticons, providing strong data support for discourse interpretation.

3. Discussion

3.1 Roles of Emotions in WeChat Message

3.1.1 Emotional Markers

The term "emoticon" is a blend of "emotion" and "icon". Its prototype is a facial expression icon, which stimulates and simplifies human facial expression. In the questionnaire, almost 90% percent of respondents put forward that the emoticons enable the receivers to perceive their emotions more directly and strongly during a conversation. Such as the following message in WeChat.

A: I am going to Hangzhou this winter holiday!

B: Great have a nice day!

Actually, the word "great" has accurately expressed the feeling that B is satisfied with A's plan. Meanwhile, B added smiling face that is consistent with the meaning of the word "great" after the utterance, which enhanced the degree of his happiness. Respondents believe that the use of smiling face avoids monotony caused by pure text. From another point of view, smiling face "punctuates" speech. In this situation, the emoticon occurs during pauses, and its function is equivalent to exclamation mark after statements or laughter in face-to-face communication. It is worth noting that in the collected WeChat messages, as long as emoticons are added between the phrase boundaries, almost all punctuation marks in this position will be omitted. It is concluded that emoticons can replace punctuation marks in online communication to some extent.

Additionally, most of respondents believe that the negative message with frowning face spreads more negative emotions than the pure negative one. However, mixed messages are more ambiguous than pure message. Such as the following message:

A: Senior, I am going to choose courses online. Can you recommend some to me?

B: Second Language Acquisition is interesting, so you can choose it. I wish you were like it😭

The word "interesting" is positive, while the frowning face conveys negativity. It is a mixed message—a positive message coupled with a negative emoticon. 32.5% of respondents believe that the message is neutral because the positive message and the negative emoticon can cancel each other out. It implies that you can choose this course but it is probably not very interesting. 33.5% of them present that the senior is not recommend for this course. The message is overall negative, which shows that the meaning conveyed by the emoticon is more important than the one conveyed by text. The rest of them point out that the message is positive, which means that this course is interesting, and the negative emoticon is just to establish a humorous atmosphere. Different receivers interpret mixed messages with their own experiences and imagination. If they want to obtain accurate information, they need to confirm with the sender. To a certain extent, mixed messages will affect receivers' judgment, and is not conducive to the rapid and accurate transmission of information, but there is no denying that the sender intentionally did it to create a special effect. Moreover, the concrete meaning of emoticon is related to the context. When used in this way, emoticons are no longer independent of the text, but become a part of the text.

3.1.2 Indicators of Ilocutionary Acts

The illocutionary point of expressives is to express the affective state specified in the utterance. The sender expresses his feelings about an affairs, such as greeting and apologies. As mentioned in the previous section, emoticon is a graphic symbol used to express emotions and attitudes. It seems that adding emoticons after expressives is redundant from the perspective of syntactic structure. However, the statistics shows that even if the meaning emoticons conveyed is consistent with the illocutionary force in discourse, they enrich emotional expression as an additional information.

Representatives are those illocutionary acts whose point is to commit the speaker to the truth of what has been said, such as statement and description. From the data received, most online conversations start with a statement, which is either objective or subjective, and whether to add emoticons is based on the relationship with the receiver or the context. The subjective statement always contains the sender's emotions. This kind of statements is a basis for the sender to express his emotions or attitudes, which is classified as expressives. The sentence in the questionnaire "I am going to work" is an objective statement. When used without context, some respondents add frowning face after the statement, while some of them add smiling face. It indicates that respondents have different interpretations of this utterance, but it is undeniable that the completion of representatives does not depend on the use of a specific emoticon. Although emoticons can be regarded as a medium to show the power of discourse, it does not affect the identity of representatives. In addition, when sending to intimate friends or easing the awkward atmosphere, respondents usually add emoticons, and the types of emoticons depend on their attitudes towards the event, suggesting their emotional state. While they omit emoticons when having formal conversations.

Commissives are those illocutionary acts whose point is to commit the speaker to some future course of action, such as promising, undertaking and vowing. Such as the following message:

A: Tomorrow is the School Open Day, I would like to invite you to visit my school!

B: I cannot come to visit your school because I have an interview tomorrow. I promise I will come next time. Have a nice day🙂

B rejected A's invitation with a clear mark "cannot". A rejection is a face-threating act in face-to-face communication. However, the receiver explained why he could not go and made a commitment. It shows that the refusal was not his intention. He wanted to participate in the activity but had to give up because of the interview, which mitigates the degree of rejection. Meanwhile, the smiling face here presents a positive image to soften the rejection. Most respondents believe that the emoticon is in tandem with commissives to mitigate face-threatening act and maintain good interpersonal relationships between both sides. From another perspective, the smiling face is a wry smile. In this situation, the smiling face contains feelings of helplessness and regret, which deviates from the original meaning of the emoticon. However, in either case, the degree of face threat is higher for unexplained rejection than for explained rejection, and the lowest level of face-threatening act is the refusal with explanation and positive emoticon.

Directives cover acts in which the words are aimed at making the hearer do something, such as requests and commands. According to data collected, few people give orders directly and stiffly, even conversations between different age groups follow this rule. Most of respondents believe that the directive tone in the formal notice is the strongest, but it is often eased by the word "please" added by the informer. In some informal notices, the sender often adds emoticon at the end. The following is an online communication between a university student and his thesis instructor:

Instructor: Please complete the first draft of your thesis before the start of this school year🙂

Student: I will try my best to finish it🙂

The teacher's utterance implies the intention of urging the student to finish his thesis with an apparent indicative tone. However, the word "please" and the smiling face complement each other to soften the illocutionary force of the request. Most respondents believe that the smiling face is equivalent to the word "please". It indicates that even the word "please" is omitted, the illocutionary force will not upgrade. The emoticon serves to modify the propositional content of the utterance and functions as a softening hedge to downgrade the authoritative position of the leader.

3.2 Pragmatic Functions of Emoticons in WeChat Messaging

3.2.1 Context Compensation

Context refers to any features of the dynamic setting or environment in which a linguistic unit is systematically used. It is generally considered as constituted knowledge shared by the speaker and the hearer, such as cultural background, situation, etc. Context can be divided into two categories: linguistic context and situational context (Hu, 2017, p. 166). Linguistic context refers to the surrounding utterance in the same discourse, while situational context is the situation where communication occurs. The same word expresses different meanings in different contexts, which affects people's understanding. Context

plays a supplementary role in language comprehension, especially in the understanding of implicate meaning and illocutionary meaning.

In the process of online communication, senders and receivers are in different contexts; therefore, some contextual meanings will be lost or ignored, especially nonverbal signs. As mentioned above, emoticons can mimic people's facial expressions so that they can compensate for contextual information missing from pure text. It can also enable the sender to express his intentions more appropriately, or even express the most delicate and subtle emotions that are difficult for the sender to describe in pure text for unexpected communication effects. Such as the following text:

A: Did you see the new movie yesterday🙂

B: No, I was writing my paper😳

A: Oh, I am sorry to remind you of the"misery time". But if you have time later, you can go and have a look. It is really interesting！

B: Ok! I will watch it tonight🙂

The first sentence with smiling face creates a warm and pleasant atmosphere, which lets B know that A was not forcing him to watch this movie but recommended it, thus making up for the missing context of the pure text. After that, B promised that he would see the movie tonight with a smiling face. The whole atmosphere was harmonious, and the best communication effect between the sender and the receiver was achieved.

3.2.2 Identity Construction

Kroskrity proposes that social identity refers to the linguistic construction of membership in one or more social groups or categories (2000, p. 111). Moreover, identity is fluid, which means that people have multiple and multi-level identities. These identities may change or even conflict with each other. Identity construction and language are inseparable. In the process of communication, people are actively building their own image while transmitting information (p. 120). They use language to demonstrate their different social identities. Context also affects identity construction. In a specific context, sender must choose his identity according to his motives, and the choice of identity will be reflected by communication, which finally affects communication effect.

Instructor: Please complete the first draft of your thesis before the start of this school year🙂

Student: I will try my best to finish it🙂

In the context, the instructor added smiling face after the directive utterance, which constructs a kind teacher identity. The smiling face used by the student has two explanations. Most college students believe that this emoticon expresses negative feeling, which suggests that the student does not want to write thesis during the winter holiday. Other students propose that even if the student is not willing to write thesis, he uses the smiling face in order to build his own diligent and progressive identity and to construct harmonious relationship with the teacher. In this context, smiling face embodies positivity. While some respondents argue that the smiling face express happiness, especially people in middle-aged group, which represents that the student is willing to receive and finish this mission.

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3.2.3 Contradiction Easing

Emoticons have carried out an imitation of a complete set of human facial expressions. They narrow the psychological distance between people and improve intelligibility of discourse to a certain extent. In some cases, pure text inevitably gives people a stiff feeling in online communication, which is easy to generate misunderstanding thus causing conflicts, especially among people of different generations in the context of rejection. Such as the following message:

Son: Father, can I go to amusement park with my friends after school?

Father: No, it is too late, so you must go home on time.

Son: Every time you refuse my request ruthlessly, I will not listen to you this time.

In this context, the father just used a few words to refuse the son's request. Although this rejection with an explanation, the tone of the whole utterance seemed very stiff. The utterance implied the mandatory restriction of the elders on the behaviors of the younger, which made his son unhappy. However, if smiling face or other positive emoticons are added to the father's text, the outcome will be different. Positive emoticons can be used to express that the father did not blame or restrict the child, but was worried about his safety, which eased the tension and reduced face-threatening act.

3.2.4 Illocutionary Force Effect

The author has discussed the roles of emoticons as indicators of illocutionary acts. As mentioned above, emoticons are not just used to express emotions. They play a significant role in constructing context and guiding the senders' choice of identity. The specific meaning of information is related to the context. Regardless of the illocutionary acts, emoticons participate in the process of doing things with words as a non-verbal component to strengthen or mitigate the force for effective online communication. In general, as indicators of expressives, emoticons enrich emotional expression and serve as additional information to enhance people's emotions and attitudes; as indicators of representatives, emoticons strengthen the illocutionary force of representatives; as indicators of commissives and directives, emoticons mitigate face-threating act and serve to soften the illocutionary force of the rejection or request.

4. Conclusion

This study shows that emoticons are not only emotional markers but also indicators of illocutionary acts based on speech act theory. Emoticons act as nonverbal behavior in the process of online communication to strengthen or mitigate illocutionary forces for effective online communication. Additionally, although emoticons can be used as a medium for demonstrating the power of discourse, they cannot affect the identity of illocutionary acts, but only serve to strengthen or soften these acts.

According to discourse analysis, there are four pragmatic functions of emoticons, compensating context, construction identity, easing contradiction and generating illocutionary force effect. In general, emoticons play an important role in compensating for the lack of information, eliminating ambiguity in online communication, and strengthening or mitigating illocutionary force. Moreover, different age groups have

different understandings of emoticons. Young people tend to use emoticons to express feelings while adults prefer to apply emoticons to shape a positive image.

However, this study has some limitations. First, the sample of participants are all Chinese users, so it is impossible to generalize the results to all WeChat users around the world. Second, the research subject is the population aged from 15 to 60, which does not include the group aged over 60. The influence of the functions of emoticons on age can be further explored in the future research. Finally, this paper only focuses on two typical WeChat emoticons, smiling and frowning face; therefore, it is uncertain whether there is age differences for other WeChat emoticons.

Acknowledgement

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