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THE INTERPLAY OF EMOJI, EMOTICONS, AND VERBAL MODALITIES IN CMC: A CASE STUDY OF YOUTUBE COMMENTS

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1. Introduction

Emoticons, as their name (a blend of “emotion” and “icons”) may suggest, are commonly linked to expressing emotions. However, it has already been shown that their role in online written communication is a bit more complex than their name indicates. In 2010, Eli Dresner and Susan Herring have published a seminal paper on the subject, showing how they also constitute “indicators of illocutionary force” (Dresner and Herring, 2010: 249). The Oxford English Dictionary has also somehow acknowledged this second important use by defining them as “used to convey the writer's feelings or intended tone”. Since the beginning of the 2010s, Internet users have started using more and more emoji alongside emoticons. Those “small digital images or icons” (Oxford English Dictionary) have comparable roles and functions (and in fact traditional punctuation-based emoticons may turn into equivalent emoji on some platforms or websites) but add more complexity to what is expressed by emoticons. Indeed, they are much more numerous, may represent faces, people, animals or things, and are rendered differently depending on the platform they are used on. Confronting this newfound complexity, Susan Herring and Ashley Dainas have gone back to examining the discursive uses of both emoticons and emoji (alongside other “graphicons”) and have identified two other functions: “nonverbal signaling” and “punctuation or structural markers” (Herring and Dainas: 2017). While the functions of emoticons and emoji have been examined rather extensively (see references in Herring and Dainas: 2017 for studies of their functions in different modes and platforms), to our knowledge, their relationship with verbal (in the sense of “relative to words”) modalities in those different functions has not yet been explored (a notable exception is Amaghlobeli: 2012, but she only studies emoticons in SMS discourse). After all, while emoticons and emoji are traditionally considered as nonverbal cues making-up for the lack of non-linguistic cues in CMC (computer-mediated communication), the “face with tears of joy” emoji has been named word of the year 2015 by the Oxford Dictionaries. Internet users have reacted strongly to this decision, mainly claiming that emoticons and emoji are not words at all. This makes it all the more relevant to question and explore the relationship of emoticons and emoji with verbal modalities, which is what this article intends to do. It will then seek to answer questions such as how emoticons and emoji interact with verbal modalities, whether they complete or replace verbal modalities, or, to view the issue from a different perspective, whether emoticons and emoji always constitute nonverbal modalities.

2. Methodology and data

Those questions will be explored by looking at the different functions of emoticons and emoji described above and by contrasting them with what verbal modalities have to offer in those functions. This will be done using the tools of discourse analysis and pragmatics in order to offer a micro-analysis of comments posted on the page of a YouTube video. Of course, answers to those opening questions could be different according to the CMC mode

studied and what it enables to do. YouTube comments are not often considered in studies about emoticons and emoji, maybe because there is not much interaction in them (see Benson, 2014: 90, or Sindoni, 2014: 194). However, they seem like an interesting choice with regards to the object of this article since commenters generally aim at reacting to the video or other comments. That often implies taking an affective or evaluative stance, which is an expected function of emoticons and emoji.

The dataset studied is composed of 915 comments that were posted on the page of the video "DIY makeup tricks with school supplies". This video was posted on September 18, 2017 on a very popular YouTube channel called Miranda Sings (it had more than 8,5 million subscribers as of September 2017). To obtain this set of data, all comments were collected from the day the video was put online to 28 September, 2017, 10 days later, in order to obtain a wide and varied sample of comments. In this lapse of time, the video had been seen a little more than 880 000 times, and 4041 comments had been written, amongst which 915 used emoticons and emojis. Those 915 comments are the ones studied in this article. They were all copied and pasted as separate images and then saved in order to keep a stable corpus to work on and to prevent them from disappearing, which is one of the main problems one may encounter when working on digital corpora collected on social networks.

A last methodological and terminological issue remains to be dealt with. The word "emoji" is sometimes used to refer to both "emoticon" and "emoji". Conversely, the word "emoticon" is sometimes used for both "emoji" and "emoticon". It has been chosen here not to use either one as an umbrella term and to retain the use of the two distinct labels since they refer to two distinct forms. Emoticons are indeed "a representation of a facial expression such as a smile or frown, formed by various combinations of keyboard characters and used to convey the writer's feelings or intended tone," as the Oxford English Dictionary puts it. They are formed from ASCII characters and "have been used in computer-mediated communication (CMC) since 1979" (Herring and Dainas, 2017). As for emoji, from Japanese "e" (picture) and "moji" (letter, character), they are often seen as the evolution of emoticons. They no longer use characters and punctuation but are "small digital image[s] or icon[s] used to express an idea, emotion" according to the Oxford English dictionary. They may represent facial expressions, just like emoticons, but also objects, body parts, symbols, or animals, among other things. Some platforms automatically turn emoticons into emoji (this is not the case of YouTube) but most emoji do not have an emoticon equivalent. For those reasons, it seems better to use the two distinct terms and not use one for the other. However, they do "fulfil similar roles" even if "emoji are more visually complex and may be expected to function somewhat differently in CMC as a consequence" (Herring and Dainas, 2017). This is why it has been chosen to study them together, but potential differences will be taken into account when relevant.

3. Beyond indicating emotions: emoticons as indicator of stance

Since the early days of CMC studies, emoticons have been viewed as making up for the lack of non-linguistic cues in CMC. Twenty years ago, Landra L. Rezabek and John J. Cochenour already described them as "visual cues formed from ordinary typographical symbols that when read sideways represent feelings or emotions" (Rezabek and Cochenour, 1998: 201). Since then, they have often been construed as "indicators of affective states, the purpose of which is to convey nonlinguistic information that in face-to-face communication is conveyed through facial expression and other bodily indicators" (Dresner and Herring, 2010: 250). For instance, inserting a smiling face in an utterance would be a way to make up for the impossibility to physically smile. This is what Rezabek and Cochenour already wrote in

1998: “For example, the combination of symbols :-) represents a typical smiley face and conveys the sentiment that the person sending the message and using that particular emoticon is pleased, happy, agreeable, or in a similar state of mind” (Rezabek and Cochenour: 201). After all, this is why the “smiley face” emoticon is also called “happy face”: the facial expression is perceived as a synonym for the emotion it is supposed to express. This function of emoticons and emoji, “expression of emotion” (Herring and Dainas: 2017) is consensual among scholars and hardly questionable. However, it seems rather incomplete. Emoticons and emoji do enable to express affective states, but expressing an affective state itself can indeed have multiple purposes. Even in face-to-face conversation, people more often than not do not smile for the mere sake of expressing an emotion. There is far more in a smile than just an affective state. First of all, a smile, as any facial expression or bodily gesture, may be an indicator of how a speaker stands in an interaction. Expressing an emotion may therefore have a pragmatic and argumentative function.

The stance-taking theory of American linguist John W. DuBois may be of some help to understand how, rather than expressing an emotion *per se*, the primary use of emoticons and emoji may then be to indicate stance, and in the case of YouTube comments, a reaction to the video. This theory was developed in a 2007 article in which DuBois writes that “one of the most important things we do with words is take a stance. Stance has the power to assign value to objects of interest, to position social actors with respect to those objects, to calibrate alignment between stancetakers, and to invoke presupposed systems of sociocultural value” (DuBois, 2007: 139). This is all the more true in YouTube comments, whose first and foremost purpose is to react to the video, most of all to like it or dislike it. Interestingly enough, even if DuBois only talks about words, all the stances he describes can virtually be achieved thanks to emoticons and emoji too. Emoticons and emoji, in this perspective, must be viewed as being far more than descriptive. They have a pragmatic or argumentative function more than a merely descriptive function: a smiling face emoticon or emoji more often than not doesn’t merely say “I am happy” (expressing an emotion) but says “I appreciate the video”. It doesn’t mean expressing an emotion for the sake of it but taking a stance with respect to the video, which really is argumentative, not descriptive.

In the perspective of the stance-taking theory then, expressing an affective state is not something speakers do *per se*, but something they do in order to react and position themselves with respect to the commented object, that is with a pragmatic purpose. Let’s look at a few examples. Laughter emoticons and emoji of all kinds are the most common type used in the dataset, which is not surprising since the video is intended to be funny. As expected, laughter emoticons and emoji are not necessarily used with a descriptive purpose, for example saying “I’m laughing”, but rather to state a reaction to the video, “I found that funny”, which is precisely the speaker’s stance. In fact, over 915 comments, 150 precisely consist in quoting a sentence or a dialogue or a passage of the video and adding a laughter emoticon to show one’s reaction to the quoted piece. A laughter emoticon or emoji, be it XD or tears of joy, packs the whole reaction or stance of the commenter in a single image. One might argue they are more concise, hence straightforward, than a whole sentence: instead of writing something as « I found that funny », the emoticon packs the whole stance in a single graphic sign, which can then be used without any words, as in this comment:



Of course this is not specific to laughter; it is also the case with other emotions, such as disgust, happiness, anger, or shock:

MIRANDA!!! 😱😱😱
RÉPONDRE 👍👎

In this comment, the shocked face is not merely the expression of an emotion but a reaction to what Miranda does in the video. Another interesting example is the angry face:

your hacks are very good but why SCHOOL!!!!!!! 😡
RÉPONDRE 👍👎

The angry face is used by the commenter to criticize the video. Again, the purpose of using this angry face is clearly not to merely express an emotion. It even goes beyond evaluation. It enables the commenter to show his clear lack of approval, which is a matter of alignment. This is in fact one of the possible functions of stance-taking in DuBois's theory: in discourse, speakers may align or not align their stance with that of the co-speaker, or the object which is commented in the case of the dataset studied here. Again, emoticons and emoji enable to do that just as words.

Therefore, stance is not only a matter of affective state, and so are emoticons and emoji. Plenty of them, particularly emoji, do not represent facial expressions and are not really about expressing emotions. A good example is emoji representing gestures, which are often used to take an evaluative stance, or to show one's approval of the video and its content ("alignement" in DuBois's words). There are plenty of them, under many different forms, in the dataset. The most frequently used (from 10 to 20 instances) are the following:

- The thumb, up or down, 👍 and 👎. It is the most frequent in the dataset (20 comments use it). It may express a negative or positive evaluation.
- The "ok hand" 🙌 also expresses a very positive evaluation and is used rather frequently (it is found in 13 comments).
- The clapping hands emoji 🙏 is used with a similar purpose of expressing a positive evaluation (and is used in 10 comments).

Less frequently used (from one to five instances) gestural emoji include:

- The raised fist 🖊 can be interpreted as a sign of support.
- The sign of the horns 🤘 probably means something like "you rock", and may thus be interpreted as a positive evaluation again.
- Praying hands 🙏 may be used to show admiration or approval.
- Hands in the air 🙌 may also be interpreted as a positive evaluation where they express a celebration of what the video says or shows:

Other non-gestural emoticons and emoji are used to express an evaluative stance, for example:

- The heart ❤ and its many variant forms such as the sparkling heart or growing heart. It means the commenter loves the video, or Miranda, or some element or person in the video.

It is often present too, with or without other modalities (180 comments contain a heart of some kind meaning “I love X”).

-A last interesting example is the face with sunglasses emoticon, 😎, which is used only twice in the corpus. This emoji doesn't even describe a state of mind or an emotion of the commenter but rather a perceived image of the object, which implies an evaluation of it, that in this case is positive (in this case, the sunglasses may be interpreted as an attribute of “coolness”).

4. Stance emoticons and emoji versus/as verbal modalities

Sometimes, emoticons and emoji are sufficient to express a stance, and no verbal modality is needed in this case. We have already considered comments where the speaker only uses an emoticon that appears alone as a proposition. This is what has been called a “naked emoticon” (Provine et al., 2007). For instance, the commenter will use a single heart emoticon or emoji instead of writing “I love this video” or “I love Miranda”. It then packs the whole propositional content –and the whole stance- in a single image. From the point of view of discourse, a “naked emoticon” or emoji also constitutes a whole turn in the interaction (Herring and Dainas, 2017). Conversely, emoticons and emoji sometimes appear alongside verbal modalities that would have enabled to reach the same effect:

love you Miranda<3<3<3


RÉPONDRE  

Here, the speaker doesn't really need the heart emoticon to express their stance. The three last parts of this paper will give potential explanations for those redundant uses but for the moment, suffice it to say that the verbal predicate “love you” would have been enough to convey the message and that the emoticon duplicates the content of the verbal statement. This is in fact why other commenters write “I love you” or “I love this” with words only and no hearts or emoticon of any sort.

Those two opposite cases suggest two things. The first one is that the function of emoticons and emoji sometimes overlap the function of some verbal modalities. Sometimes, a commenter will have a choice between using a verbal modality, such as a verb or a noun, or an emoticon or emoji. Secondly, it shows that if emoticons and emoji sometimes make up for the lack of non-linguistic cues in CMC, they are not to be simply opposed to linguistic cues. Even when they are inspired by a non-linguistic modality, such as a gesture or a facial expression, their use goes far beyond transferring this mere gesture or facial expression inside CMC. This is particularly obvious when they swap place with a verbal cue in a message:

 if you're SOO pigmented!

RÉPONDRE 1  

If u  Miranda u will sub to me

RÉPONDRE 1  

Anyone else gonna try to do the sleeping eyes makeup and see if ur teacher will really belive ur awke iam going to 🤪

RÉPONDRE 👍 🗨️

In these examples, the “thumbs up”, “heart” and “face with tears of joy” emoji are used as lexemes on the syntagmatic axis, as if they belonged to the same paradigm as traditional verbal units, such as a verb or a noun. The first one is used as an equivalent to the verb “like” and is followed by a conditional clause. The second one is used as an equivalent to the verb “love” after a subject pronoun, and the third one is used in the same place as an infinitive after TO. There are also instances of nominal use of emoji:

sooo 💖mented ! 🌈

RÉPONDRE 👍 🗨️

In this playful use that works in the same fashion as a rebus, the emoji simply stands for the noun it replaces (a pig emoji for “pig”). It is an expected use of emoji since they may represent objects, and hence have a referential use, just as a noun does. In those nominal uses, an emoji can even be used as a nominal root to which a suffix is then added to form an adjective:

🤪🤪🤪🤪🤪🤪🤪🤪🤪 this video was making me very tired I passed out while you were talking.

This video is 🐷🐷🐷🐷🐷y!!!

RÉPONDRE 👍 🗨️

The poop emoji is used as a nominal root to which the adjectival suffix is attached in order to form a hybrid form composed of an image and a portion of a word, and which has the same meaning as “poopy”.

Therefore, in some comments, emoticons and emoji contribute to the propositional content of the message. Some convey propositional content on their own (stand-alone emoticons and emoji), some convey referential content (emoji used as lexemes), so that it seems hardly possible to consider them as non-linguistic cues.

One might argue that in terms of reference, they are less efficient than words since the semantic content of an emoticon or emoji is not always clear or even consensual. For instance, users may use a same emoticon to replace different verbs: in the dataset, some users use the thumbs up emoji as an equivalent of “like”, while some other use it to mean “agree” or “approve”. However, polysemy is also a feature of words, and there is no reason why emoticons should be limited to one single meaning. What is more, there is referential stability in emoticon and emoji use. For example, in the dataset under study, the heart sign always seems to mean “love”. Indeed, when it is used in combination with a verb that duplicates its content, the verb in question is found to be “love” in all cases (and never “like”). As for “like”, it seems to be conventionally duplicated by the thumb up emoji. Hence, to some extent, the choice of one or the other emoji can be interpreted as a stabilized expression of the degree of the predicate, just as choosing between “like” or “love” is.

What is more problematic from the point of view of reference, though, is the case of stand-alone emoticons and emoji. In this case, the emoticon/emoji often stands for the verbal part

of the proposition (for instance ♥ for “love”). While this is enough to make the stance clear, it leaves the subject and the object implicit. The absence of the subject is in itself not that much of a problem. Indeed, the subject is by default understood to be the speaker. By definition, the utterance is delivered by the first person of the speaker. Therefore, in the case where the comment is reduced to a single emoticon or emoji, like the heart, it is thought to be a first person predicate (“I love”). After all, subject deletion is a common feature in CMC discourse (Werry, 1996: 54), and that frequently happens too with verbal predicates in YouTube comments, where the first person singular often does not appear (“like this”, “love you”...). If the subject didn’t coincide with the speaker, then we may guess it would have to be mentioned in front of the emoticon or emoji, even though there is no case of that feature in the dataset. The question of the object is much more of a problem. Indeed, in comments consisting of a stand-alone emoticon or emoji the object is left implicit and ambiguous and can rarely be recovered in the context. In the case of the single heart used as comment, there is no way to know if what is liked or loved by the speaker is the video, a part of the video, or Miranda herself.

It seems hardly arguable that even though words may sometimes convey an ambiguous reference (for example “it” as an object in “love it” may be ambiguous when its referent doesn’t clearly appear in the context), they generally enable to be make the reference of the statement clearer. Moreover, without the use of determiners and other nuances brought about by linguistic operators, it seems difficult for emoji and emoticon to reach the precision of verbal language.

5. Emoticons and emoji as illocutionary force markers

The central idea of Dresner & Herring’s seminal 2010 article is that emoticons may be used as illocutionary force markers, markers that indicate how the message is to be taken or understood. The idea that emoticons may contribute to message interpretation is in itself not new. *The New Hacker’s Dictionary* already pointed this out in 1994 in its somewhat humorous definition of the word “emoticon”: “An ASCII glyph used to indicate an emotional state in email or news. Although originally intended mostly as jokes, emoticons (or some other explicit humor indication) are virtually required under certain circumstances in high-volume text-only communication forums such as Usenet; the lack of verbal and visual cues can otherwise cause what were intended to be humorous, sarcastic, ironic, or otherwise non-100%-serious comments to be badly misinterpreted (not always even by newbies), resulting in arguments and flame wars.” (Raymond, 1994: 162). In 2001, Joseph B. Walther and Kyle P. D’Addario had also already concluded from an experiment that emoticons contributed to message interpretation (Walther and D’Addario, 2001). However, Dresner and Herring have offered the first detailed account of how emoticons function as illocutionary force markers drawing on the speech act theory and in the frame of a thorough exploration of emotional and non-emotional meaning of emoticons. The central idea in this perspective is that emoticons may “help convey the speech act performed through the production of the utterance”, that is “help convey an important aspect of the linguistic utterance they are attached to: What the user intends by what he or she types.” (Dresner and Herring, 2010: 255-256).

For example, a tears of joy emoji or a smiling emoticon might indicate that a remark is not to be taken at face value. It is a rather frequent use in the dataset, that is found with very similar statements:

"Class gets boring mother truckers it's time for me to take a nap"

IM DYING 😵😵

RÉPONDRE 50 👍 🗨️

I'm pissing myself 😵😵😵😵

RÉPONDRE 👍 🗨️

you're so cute 😊

RÉPONDRE 👍 🗨️

The emoticons and emoji used here indicate that the statement is not to be taken literally. In the two first comments, the person is not literally dying or pissing themselves. One may argue that a statement such as "I'm dying" would not be taken literally anyway and that the emoticon or emoji is not really required for the reader to understand that. However, even though it is not required, the function of the emoji or emoticon is to mark explicitly the fact that the statement is not literal and is meant as a joke. This strategy may be seen as choice of the speaker to make the implicit, paradoxically, more obvious. However, in the third example, the emoji really is needed: it indicates that it is not a serious compliment and is more of a joke. A more subtle example would be the use of the smirking face emoji, which often indicates that something is implied in the statement, for example that there is a sexual connotation to what is said. But, a bit surprisingly, this emoji is never used in the dataset. Conversely, an emoticon or emoji may also confirm that a remark is not to be taken as a joke:

0:16 i miss old miranda she wouldn't say that 😞

RÉPONDRE 👍 🗨️

The disappointment face confirms what the verbal part of the message suggests and signals that it is not meant to be taken as a joke or an ironic statement.

More originally, an emoticon or emoji may be used to change the value of a preceding emoticon or emoji:

Oh no... 😞🤔😵😵

RÉPONDRE 👍 🗨️

In this comment, it seems the commenter only pretends to be appalled with a first emoji but shows with a second emoji that they are really joking.

Since they enable to calibrate the force of the utterance, emoticons and emoji are also used to manage facework online, that is not hurting the hearer's feelings and avoiding to be rude. Here is an instance of this function:

OMG soooo creepy 1:44! 😞

RÉPONDRE 👍 🗨️

Because of the connotation of the adjective “creepy”, the comment could have been perceived as negative. But the emoji enables the writer to mitigate the connotation brought about by the adjective. It indicates it should not be perceived or taken as a piece of criticism. Using an emoticon may also make a directive (an order or a command) less imposing, as is the case here:

Hi Miranda please do shout outs in one of your vids and please include me 😊

RÉPONDRE  

The smiley face is used to mitigate the imperative, alongside the more conventional verbal cue « please ». In the dataset, the same tactic is also found in the context of issuing an order with an imperative, but mitigated thanks to a wink:

Do a video on Star Stable Online please!! ;)

RÉPONDRE  

In all cases, whether they are used for mitigation or not, emoticons and emoji are used to make (or try to make) one’s intentions when typing clear. This is the conclusion Shao-Kang Lo reached in an article telling about a study of his that shows “that when Internet users are faced with pure text without emoticons, most people cannot perceive the correct emotion, attitude, and attention intents. However, when emoticons are added in the same context, the receiver’s perception of the messages starts to significantly change. Also, when opposite-meaning emoticons are used, the receiver shows extreme difference in perceptions. Emoticons allow receivers to correctly understand the level and direction of emotion, attitude, and attention expression.” (Lo, 2008: 597).

For Dresner and Herring, emoticons, when they indicate the illocutionary force of the utterance, are comparable in function to punctuation. “[U]ses of emoticons as indicators of illocutionary force can be viewed as an expansion of text in the same way that, for example, question marks and exclamation marks are.” As an expansion of text, they may then be less verbal-like than emoticons and emoji used in stance-taking, but they remain within the scope of linguistic expression in written communication. Again, they constitute far more than mere non-verbal cues as had been postulated in the early days of CMC.

6. Emoticons and emoji as markers of emphasis

There is another use in which emoticons and emoji influence how meaning is conveyed in a message. Indeed, apart from indicating the way a message must be perceived, emoticons and emoji can also be used alongside other means to express emphasis in CMC. In this case, emoticons and emoji enable the commenter to reinforce an assertion or a predicate, just as an intensifying adjective or adverb might do, or a contrastive speech pattern in spoken language.

A first tactic to put emphasis on a statement is to use multiple emoticons and emoji, particularly multiple use of the same one:

#idontknowimtakinanap :D :D :D

RÉPONDRE  

MIRANDA!!! 😱😱😱

RÉPONDRE  

Arguably, one shock face or one grin would have the same meaning, but three probably makes it stronger.

A second technique of emphasis consists in using an emoticon or an emoji that mirrors the content of verbal cues, thus reinforcing them:

that eye thing creeps me out 😬😬😬

RÉPONDRE  

You stupid Miranda 🍌🍌🍌🍌🍌🍌🍌🍌 boooooooooooooooooooooo you Miranda

RÉPONDRE  

The anguished faces reinforce what the message already says with words, and so do the thumbs down. In this case, expression of emphasis and expression of illocutionary force logically converge. It should be noticed, however, that expression of emphasis is not the only function of emoticons/emoji that are redundant with verbal content. Commenters sometimes have other motivations, which will be exposed further on.

Emoticons and emoji used as markers of emphasis often appear alongside other features. There are traditional ones, the ones that belong to the grammar of English, such as high degree adjectives and adverbs. There are also less traditional but more or less conventionalized. For example, commenters often use the repetition of a vowel to “represent [...] expressive intonation” (Werry, 1996: 57), as for instance with “sooooo”. They also use caps or all-caps to show their excitement (in CMC, capitalization is “employed as a convention for expressing emphasis”, Werry, 1996: 57, and is interpreted as shouting). This is the case in this comment:

XD OMG THIS MADE ME LAUGH SOO HARD XDDD ILL TRY ONE OF EM XD

RÉPONDRE  

Here, the commenter writes in all-caps, which, if done purposefully, could express excitement. They use the intensifying adverb “so” with a double o to translate expressive intonation. They also use the shortened form OMG, which is the acronym for “Oh my god”, a form that quintessentially expresses a high degree of surprise or excitement. Last but not least, they use the laughter emoticon XD twice, at the beginning and the end of the message. Framing the message with this affective emoticon is a form of emphasis and possibly shows that this affective stance concerns the whole of the message (not just an element of it).

In cases like the ones studied above, emoticons and emoji play a role that is comparable to that of intensifiers of all kinds. They are intensifiers of their own and, just as intensifiers, only

make sense when used alongside another unit, which is often verbal and bears the propositional content of the message. So, again, emoticons and emoji can't be opposed to linguistic cues but seem to rightly belong to them, far from being mere non-verbal cues. However, this is not true of all emoticons and emoji uses. In fact, in the set of data studied, two uses of emoticons and emoji seem to attach them to non-verbal cues.

7. Phatic use of emoticons and emoji

There is a curious phenomenon that can't be left unnoticed in the dataset: many commenters put a laughter emoticon at the end of their message, even though the message in question is not particularly funny or even intended to be funny. In some of them, the discrepancy between the content of the message and the emoticon/emoji used at the end of it may be accounted for by using the functions that have been previously exposed. Indeed, as the previous examples have shown, the laughter emoticon may be used to express a stance or to create irony. But in some messages, those interpretations don't seem to hold that well. A good example is the following comment:

I'm just wondering that there is 120 crayons in that box where did all of the other ones go xD

RÉPONDRE  

The emoji does not correspond to the content of the comment: it is not particularly funny, nor does it state an emotional reaction to the message. It doesn't seem to suggest a reaction that would be complementary to the message. More than express a reaction or irony, this laughter emoji may well mirror a phatic use of laughter that already exists in face-to-face communication. According to some neuroscientists, laughing at the end of an utterance is a way to create empathy with the hearer. In a 1996 study of why and where people laugh in conversations, neuroscientist Robert R. Provine found out that "most of the laughter seemed to follow rather banal remarks" (1996: 41). He and his team analyzed this phenomenon and found out that laughter in this case is purely social and merely a way to create empathy, to bond with the hearer. This is what Provine called the "punctuation effect". In a more recent study, Provine and other scholars have examined "whether the punctuation effect extends to emoticon placement in typed English text posted on website message boards" (Provine et al., 2007: 301). The study concluded that "the mechanism governing the punctuation of text by emoticons is less clear than that involved in the placement of laughing in speech and signing" but that "[a]s in the case of laughter, emoticons do not necessarily follow comments that have obvious emotional impact" (Provine et al., 2007: 304). So, even though the study was not very conclusive, commenters could well use laughter emoticons and emoji at the end of their message to reach the same effect as speakers do when they laugh at the end of their utterances. After all, comments are meant to be read, and the authors of the comments quoted above may well aim at creating empathy with the potential reader.

While this is a phenomenon which is common to CMC and face-to-face communication, in both cases, it is triggered by a non-verbal cue. In this case, the laughter emoticon or emoji does really reflect what the speaker would do in face-to-face communication: laugh. It is difficult to think of emoticons and emoji used with the punctuation effect as anything else than a non-verbal cue.

8. Emoticons and emoji used without linguistic or paralinguistic use

Last but not least, in the dataset, some emoticons and even more emoji seem to be used without any linguistic or even paralinguistic function at all. More precisely, commenters appear to be sometimes using emoticons and emoji with a mere esthetic function. Emoji, more than emoticons in this case, may for instance make the message more colourful (at least with operating systems that doesn't show them in black and white) and attractive. This is particularly obvious in emoji uses such as the following:

Out of all the youtuberes I like your my favorite person in the world 🌍

RÉPONDRE 👍 🗨️

I have 2 days until holidays (I live I'm Australia 🌍)

RÉPONDRE 👍 🗨️

I'm so Patrick star... ⭐

RÉPONDRE 👍 🗨️

The emoji used in those messages do not add content or paralinguistic information to the message. They could be suggested by the platforms used to type the message (some phones suggest an emoticon when a certain word is typed), but they would remain illustrative nonetheless. What is more, there are comments where it cannot be the case, such as the following, where the queen emoji adds nothing in terms of meaning or content but can't have been generated in this fashion since the queen emoji appears before and after the word "queen":

your so bootiful and funny BTWS 😊HATERS BACK OF MY QUEEN 🤩🥰love you Miranda 🥰

RÉPONDRE 👍 🗨️

Those emoji therefore appear to be merely illustrative. In fact, using emoji, which are small, sometimes colourful or cute, pictures, might be perceived by the commenter as a way to make a message more pleasant to read. This could be the case in the following comment, which is pretty long by the standards of CMC, and punctuated with illustrative emoji:

Hi 🥰 i ❤️ love your videos there so cool 😎 this 1 is cool to but I think 🗨️ if we all to blue eyes
•• or different eyes what are not are real eye color we will get in trouble so next time do your
own really eye color like mine brown because I really have brown eyes

RÉPONDRE 👍 🗨️

Again the emoji used in this message merely duplicate what words already say and add nothing in terms of stance, meaning, or even force or emphasis. In this case, emoticons and emoji constitute neither linguistic nor paralinguistic cues. Their purpose is merely esthetic.

9. Conclusion

The two last functions examined in this article put aside, it seems that emoticons and emoji are becoming increasingly conventionalized as textual markers. Their uses are not as chaotic as it seems, and they can no longer merely be simply opposed to linguistics cues and verbal modalities, as used to be the case in early studies. They have integrated all domains of the traditional material of linguistics: communication of descriptive content in the same way as lexical words, communication of attitudinal information and illocutionary force in the same way as punctuation (and some grammatical words), or expression of emphasis. As Dresner and Herring write, this may now call for future investigations in the degree to which they have become conventionalized (Dresner and Herring, 2010: 264). Another interesting direction for future research would be to try and determine whether emoticons and emoji tend to replace verbal cues in the domains of expression where both can be used.

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