Original Paper

On the Popularity of Emoticons

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Abstract

Emoticons are now ubiquitous in people's daily communication in China. The popularity of this new kind of expression is attributed to complex interplay of environment, culture, economy and life style. The functions of emoticons in communication center on the social aspect, to both the sender and the receiver. The aim of the study is to describe, analyze and summarize the usage of emoticons and the social functions in communication.

Keywords

Emoticons, popularity, social functions, communication

1. Introduction

"Speech and writing are the two major media of communication, but speech is prior to writing." The written language is only the revised record of speech, and considered to be inauthentic. While we communicate with speech, the hearer can infer from our tones, intonation, facial expressions or gestures to get the appropriate meaning and achieve successful communication. However, with written language, methods for inference are much limited since we are unable to see and hear the writer, and therefore, lead to misunderstandings from time to time.

With the rapid popularity of the Internet and the great influence of social network platforms in recent decades, a large quantity of cyber languages have been created and playing increasingly important roles in people's daily communication on the web. Up to now, the cyber language has developed into various forms, generally moving towards informality of expression, which also implies the current trend of human language.

Among all cyber languages, emoticons are most frequently used by common people. An emoticon (or emotional icon) is generally defined as "an ASCII glyph used to indicate an emotional state". Actually, it includes packages of expressions, gifs., emojis., and so on. The basic feature that distinguishes emoticons from the letters of a language is that they are the non-phoneme-based products of certain

feelings and ideas. Letters constitute the phonemes of various languages while emoticons constitute the phones of the universal figurative language by means of which people express their feelings and ideas. And this special kind of cyber language comes into fashion because of varieties of reasons.

2. Reasons for the Popularity of Emoticons

Generally speaking, the popularity of emoticons is the result of the complex interplay of environment, culture, economy and life style. It is the product of integrity of linguistics, sociology and computer science whose advantages are incomparable to the written or spoken language on the Internet.

2.1 Contents of Emoticons

The contents of emoticons mainly result from the following two factors: culture and environment. Emoticons can be seen, in a sense, as the complex combination and reflection of the traditional and contemporary culture of a language community. Despite deeper and deeper culture contact and diffusion today, what we have to acknowledge is that the valuable elements of specific culture must be carefully conserved and passed down to our next generation. And we are the generation to be taught by our culture as well. That is why there are still some differences of emoticons used by people in different culture. For example, the emoji. "heart" is widely used by the French people, while it is hardly accepted in the US.

In addition to culture, environment is quite important to shape emoticons. The environment includes not only natural, but also social environment. Take the emoticons used in the US as an illustration, when the financial crisis broke out, the emoticons mostly appeared to flout the living conditions and show sarcasm to politics, religion, belief, unemployment, etc. And those who are kept in people's packages of expressions are primarily celebrities either in the government or in the market.

2.2 Forms of Emoticons

The various forms of emoticons are mainly caused by the development of economy and changes of life style. To begin with, the increasing economy provides material base for emoticons. It is the advanced technology and various network platforms, such as weibo, weixin and QQ, that make the creation and spread of emoticons possible. And we can see that, in China, there is a large number of emoticons and that most Chinese people can create emoticons with their cell-phones or laptops in their everyday life. They are so common and flexible that the origins of their emoticons can come from real or imagined characters on TV, at work, at school or in the family. Different from the US emoticons, most of the Chinese emoticons are used for entertainment, making the senders' attitude or emotions more acceptable to others. That is possibly because the Chinese people pay more attention to the harmony and effect of their communication in their daily life, which in turn, accounts for the variety of emoticons.

3. Social Functions of Emoticons

Emoticons are the product of social existence, and can reflect and influence that particular society. It has been found that emoticons make valuable contributions to communication methods in addition to being used for entertainment purposes. They are frequently used in CMC to express emotions, clarify the meaning of an ambiguous message, mark irony and sarcasm, or generally compensate for the lack of nonverbal cues. The social function of emoticons can also be referred to as the interpersonal function, which plays an important role in establishing and maintaining social relations between people. And there are different functions to both the sender and the receiver in the course of Internet communication.

3.1 To the Sender

As to the sender, there are mainly two functions: the emotive and the phatic function. The emotive function of emoticons is to express the sender's attitude towards the subject or situation of the communication. The spoken and written languages of human beings also have this function, but there are some differences between that of an emoticon and the spoken or written language, since emoticons themselves have the nature and focus of expressing emotion. Therefore, when people send emoticons to others, he is definitely showing his feelings or attitudes, which are transmitted with vivid pictures all the time. The phatic function is mostly employed to maintain good relationships with the receiver. By using emoticons, it provides the possibility for the receiver to imagine more exactly the sender's expression and understand the meanings of the communication better. And in this case, the emoticons are complements to spoken or written language. As a matter of fact, emoticons are often in the company with the speech or writing, rather than appear alone in communication.

3.2 To the Receiver

The first function of emoticons is conative and the second is referential. Conative functions mean that the emotions can influence the receiver's actions and thought, while referential function helps convey messages and information to the receiver. They are closely related and always coordinated to promote the course of communication. According to John Searle's classification of illocutionary speech acts, there are five general categories of speech acts that "share the same illocutionary point, but differ in their strength." And emoticons function to make the different strength or force more specific and clear, or even change the strength. For example, the references of the utterance "the door is open" can be explained differently with different emoticons. If it is followed by an imperative expression, the receiver know that the sender wants him to close the door, but if it is followed by a crying expression, the receiver can see it as an account of the sender for which he cannot do something. In this case, emoticons actually offer the context for the communication, which is a fairly important factor in linguistic study.

4. Conclusion

Emoticons are really important in CMC, since they are supplemental instructions for both sender's expression and receiver's understanding, especially to the Chinese people. That is because Chinese is a rather reserved language, whose tone falls on words, in contrast to other languages whose intonation falls on sentences. With the help of emoticons, people can communicate with more efficiency. But still, a generation gap lies in the usage of emoticons, which can cause various misunderstandings between different ages and deserves further discussion.

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