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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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
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.
Our findings indicate that the emoticon is largely a conventionalized linguistic feature of IM discourse and is more complex than previous investigations have afforded. Understanding the emoticon as an individual semiotic entity in its own regard, a conventionalized construct formed from the medium itself and, potentially, defying both purely written and oral mediums, permits a more accurate interpretation of the emoticon as instantiated in CMC generally and in IM discourse specifically. Additionally, our findings highlight the need for language scholars to consider their methodological and analytic approaches to research in order to increase research reliability and replicability while limiting researcher bias. This study further demonstrates a continued need for scholars and practitioners to investigate language phenomena as they occur in and outside the classroom, phenomena increasingly digital and computer mediated, to better understand, discuss, and teach effective communication.

2. The Emoticon: A Conceptual Framework

Overwhelmingly, researchers who study IM discourse attempt to explain features of IM within a conceptual model of written or oral language (Baron, 2004; Crystal, 2001; Gurak, 2001). Although these researchers claim that IM technology does allow for a new form of communication to emerge (Crystal), their underlying assumption is that IM discourse retains characteristics of speech, writing, or both. Due to the reliance on the speech/writing dichotomy, scholarship has been quick to label anything other than familiar forms of print-linguistic text as additive or “paralinguistic,” thereby limiting the understanding of emoticons while not fully accounting for all their potential uses in IM discourse.

Paralinguistic features are those features that function outside a language system, such as non-verbal cues like gestures or facial expression, or the modification of a verbal representation of a word or message like shouting or inflection. In speech, such attributes contribute to the meaning of a given message and help the listener understand the intended meaning (Goodwin, 1986; Holler & Beattie, 2004). In the absence of visual punctuation in speech, for example, a listener may understand whether a message is a question or a statement based on the speaker’s inflection. A speaker, likewise, may use a surprised facial expression when conveying a statement, communicating to a listener that notion of surprise about the situation or statement.

In writing as well as in some forms of CMC, such as IM, there is a natural lack of the paralinguistic due to spatial separation. Some scholars (Antonijevic, 2005; Krohn, 2004; Crystal, 2001) agree that the use of emoticons in CMC is “an attempt to compensate for the lack of the usual nonverbal components” (p. 322). Smiljana Antonijevic defined emoticons as “emotional icons. . . visual representations of facial expressions used in computer-mediated-communication (CMC) to indicate the mood and/or emotion of the user” (p. 1); other scholars who have studied CMC and emoticons define emoticons in similar ways (Derks et al., 2007; Provine, Spencer, & Mandell, 2007; Rezabeck & Cochenour, 1995). Lewis Cynthia and Bettina Fabos (2005) found that “With IM’s limitations as a written communication, these tools (emoticons) were one more way to express emotion and engage the reader” (p. 483). Although we agree that part of the function of the emoticon is paralinguistic in nature, the paralinguistic label for the emoticon fails to account for all its current instantiations.

It may be useful, perhaps, to consider the emoticon as evolutionary—much like natural language. The “inventor” of the emoticon, Scott E. Fahlman, proposed using a series of symbols to indicate mood in the body of an e-mail to prevent miscommunications from happening. The Carnegie Mellon professor wrote

I propose that the following character sequence for joke markers:

:-)

Read it sideways. Actually, it is probably more economical to mark things that are NOT jokes, given current trends. For this, use

:-((<http://www-2.cs.cmu.edu/%7Esef/Orig-Smiley.htm >)

This 1982 post was an explicit attempt on one person’s part to compensate for the absence of paralinguistic cues in SWE. The:-) in this post, however, is one individual’s pragmatic, creative use of the symbols available on a standard QWERTY keyboard. The:-) is used as an explicit paralinguistic marker to signal to other readers that a joke is about to be made or to indicate a writer’s mood.

Not all emoticons, however, continue to follow such explicit rules. Robert Provine, Robert Spencer, and Darcy Mandell (2007) found that emoticons appeared in what might be considered unnatural positions in speech: mid-phrase. They labeled these mid-phrase emoticons idiosyncratic and as further evidence of a “higher-order linguistic process”
underlying punctuation in spoken speech, sign language, and IM discourses (p. 303). In a few short years, the emoticon seems to have become more than a paralinguistic marker for the presence or absence of humor. The emoticon, according to Provine et al., punctuated the discourse much as would a comma or colon.

The emoticon has begun to not simply serve as a paralinguistic device in IM discourse but as something more rhetorically motivated and increasingly semiotically charged. Provine et al. begin to illustrate, through their discussion of non-standard emoticon usage, the emoticon’s complexity and potential to be more than a crude stand-in for missing facial features.

3. Methodological Considerations

In the present study, we look at features of language and not the intent of language use or audience perception. While acknowledging the social aspect of new language forms as an interesting and valuable enterprise, we feel the logical first step to understanding IM as a literate practice is to investigate the new forms of language within the discourse; the emoticon representing one case of a new language form. In other words, before we can study its social dimensions, we need an understanding of IM as a written form. While some may contend that a study of linguistic features is not in the realm of Rhetoric and Composition scholarship, we align ourselves with Susan Peck-MacDonald’s (2007) assertion that as researchers we need to pay “more attention to more aspects of language, avoiding reductive binaries, revisiting past assumptions, and taking a more positive look at the variety of ways in which language is our subject” (p. 617). Like Peck-MacDonald, we contend that the study of language is a vital part of our discipline. In an age of rapid language change, it is increasingly important to pay close attention to the language level, for it is only with a thorough understanding of what the discourse is made of that we can truly understand its social significance.

To begin to address our research question, we allowed our research question to dictate the best types of methods available to us. We emphasize the imperative to make careful methodological decisions because methods establish the nature of the data that will be collected. Researchers must ask themselves what they want to know and if the type of data that a method yields can satisfactorily answer their questions. In past research on the emoticon, for instance, researchers have been primarily interested in the social function of emoticons and have asked questions about usage intent and user perception. They have chosen to ask questions that are best answered through qualitative methods that often parallel ethnographic case studies. These kinds of methods reveal descriptive data about an individual’s social practices with emoticons and are appropriate for the particular types of questions that the researchers pursue.

An example of methodological approach and its yielding of specific results is a study conducted by Daantje Derks, Arjan E.R. Bos, and Jasper von Grmbkow (2007). Derks, Arjan, and von Grmbkow. Asked students to respond to a chat a-contextually with one of six emoticons and surveyed those students about the emoticons used. Based on this self-reported data set, the researchers concluded that emoticons are not used as frequently in negative conversations as they were in positive ones. The results of this study, which involved both asking young people to engage in a chat conversation and participate in a survey, are helpful in developing an understanding of users’ perceptions of emoticons in IM discourse. Similarly, Joseph Walther and Kyle D’Addario (2001) showed their research participants an e-mail message shared between friends and asked participants to respond to questions about how they perceived the e-mail messages; their questions dealt with the tone of the message, the impact of emoticons on the message, and how easily the message was interpreted. Kristin Byron and David Baldrige (2007) also distributed questionnaires to participants, asking them to comment on how they perceived the author of an e-mail message they were given to view. The researchers discovered that the readers’ personality traits influenced how they understood the non-print linguistic portions (including emoticons) of the messages. All three studies were grounded in questions about readers’ perceptions of the emoticon, and each generated fruitful data that tell us something about how college students perceive others’ emoticon use, albeit in a-contextual settings.

Studies that are built upon the social uses of the emoticon, whether their focus either on intent or perception, permit us to see the emoticon and its purposes through the eyes of actual users. We can also begin to see how emoticons are used as rhetorical devices (for example, in Derks et al., 2007; emoticons are primarily used in non-serious situations) and are employed for defined social purposes. These studies establish that users are developing ways of understanding and using emoticons and have already formed some definite opinions about “proper” usage.

Our research question, though, seeks to uncover features of emoticons within IM discourse without interpreting or inferring authorial or reader intent; therefore, a quantitative approach is required. By quantifying use, we can gain a better understanding of patterns of convention and can identify which emoticons are most employed by interlocutors
generally and in certain instances. Additionally, by quantifying our work and explicitly describing our coding scheme and procedures, we allow for others to study IM conventions in ways that could verify or challenge our findings.

For this study, our methodology was informed by a Grounded Theory analytic approach to the examination of our data set. Developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967) as a way of examining the work of medical personnel, grounded theory stresses an in situ, field-based, and context-driven study of human activity. Context-specific methods for data collection and sampling allow for the development and dimensionalization of data-based categories which are then put in comparison with one another. These dimensionalized categories are then taken back to the data and refined to build a more systematic and data-supported explanation of the phenomenon under investigation, thereby allowing for a more iterative, recursive construction of a theory about the object of study.

Our data set was collected to ensure that IM conversations were naturally occurring. That is, participants’ conversations were not explicitly generated for our study, but rather, the conversations collected were part of participants’ conversation logs—records automatically kept within users’ IM accounts that provide a history of conversations. Asking users to provide these archived conversations ensured that the participants’ interactions through IM were not implicated by our investigation. As such, we believe these conversations provide evidence into the explicit functions of IM as a form of social interaction whereby we might understand linguistic features of these interactions as in situ realizations of an IM discourse.

Further, as an analytic approach, Grounded Theory maintains that any theorization about the object of study be verified by the data set through a series of comparisons between that data set and the emerging theoretical categories. In this way, the comparative moves made within this approach help to ensure that any explanation of the data is “grounded” in the data itself. As we discuss in our Methods below, our coding of the data is constructed by the usage of emoticons evident in the data in terms of their features, placement, and quantity. By allowing the coding scheme to emerge from the data set, rather than applying our own conceptual categories to the data, we are better able to reflect a Grounded Theory paradigm, which accounts for conditions, interactions among participants, strategies and tactics of use, and consequences of use (Strauss & Anselm, 1987, pp. 27-28; emphasis ours). Additionally, the move to understand features of IM discourse without comparing such features to conventions of SWE arises in part out of our methodological approach. That is, borrowing conventions of SWE to explain discursive features of IM does not allow for the generation of a theory about IM discourse to be grounded in the actual features of IM. Rather, such a move would rely on SWE to explain IM features.

4. Methods

4.1. Data collection

We analyzed an intact data set collected in 2005 by Christina Haas and Pamela Takayoshi for their study of language features of IM. This corpus of data included 59 transcripts of naturally occurring IM sessions, consisting of approximately 32,000 words produced by 108 interlocutors (see Haas & Takayoshi, forthcoming). The transcripts of IM conversations ranged in length from six entries to 536 entries and averaged 107 entries per session, with an average of seven words per entry. All of the transcripts in the corpus were collected from college students enrolled at a large midwestern university, with the majority of transcripts coming from students enrolled in first-year composition courses. Some of the transcripts were collected from students enrolled in a senior English seminar. With IRB approval, students were asked to provide printed copies of prior IM sessions—many of which took place with other students, but in some instances appeared to occur with others not connected to the university. One of the major tenets of Haas and Takayoshi’s study was to capture IM sessions that had occurred without the intrusion of their research team. For this reason, many of the conversations in the data set were collected long after the conversation had taken place (students were provided written instructions on how to retrieve prior conversations). These transcripts were collected into a standard corpus, in which each conversation transcript was numbered and collated (see Haas & Takayoshi, forthcoming).

4.2. Coding

Our analysis of the IM transcripts centered on coding emoticons by type, frequency, placement, and context relative to frequency of occurrence. After reading and re-reading our data set, we initially coded each instance of emoticon use by type (e.g.,):-),;-),:-P,:-(, and so on). These types were collected in an attempt to understand whether similarities
occurred across conversation transcripts. The derivations were coded on the basis of the emoticon’s mouth, with the assumption that a similar mouth shape in the context of a facial expression would convey a similar mood. For example, for both 8-) and :-) the “)” expressed a comparable emotion (consult Table 1 for a list of emoticon types and derivations). It is important to note that the mouth’s importance for emoticons may not be universal but is a defining feature of the emoticon within an American IM user dynamic. Other cultures or culture subsets may, and have, devised other emoticon types and uses. ¹ As our findings show, similar emoticon types appeared in multiple conversations. From these listings of emoticon types, we began counting instances to see which emoticons occurred most frequently in conversations. Frequency of use of certain types of emoticons and their usage in a given place or context can measure whether their use is a conventionalized practice. That is frequent use of an emoticon in a particular place across multiple conversations may suggest conventionalized practice. Again here, the frequency of emoticon types was standard across the data set; smileys:-) were the most frequent type of emoticon used across all conversations. We categorized emoticon types according to frequency to generate a list of instances of emoticon use that occurred most-to-least frequently in the data set. A sample of our top six emoticons by frequency is listed in Table 4.

Next, we moved to a selective coding process that attempted to account for emoticon placement. This category, “placement,” was most generative, indicating the situated nature of emoticon use. To code for placement, we re-read our data set, noting the places within phrases where the emoticon appeared. Phrases were defined as individual utterances, typically entire communication turns submitted to IM software and made visible to other interlocutors, separated spatially by the interlocutors pressing the “enter” or “return” key. Viewing the phrase as the entire utterance submitted to the IM conversation packages the utterance as one deliberate, delivered unit. Defining a phrase in this way helped us to establish the parameters of placement by establishing first the communicative unit and then observing where emoticons were placed within that unit. Most phrases in the transcripts were made manifest via short utterances. Some consecutive phrases were entered by the same interlocutor but separated via their submission time into the larger conversation. Using phrase structures as our guide, the last round of selective coding revealed five distinct places where emoticons appear within an utterance (or on a line) (see Table 2).

¹ The importance placed on the mouth may be a cultural phenomenon. A simple search for emoticons from other cultures reveals that there are different ways to alter a facial representation that appear to be more predominant than changing the mouth of the emoticon. For instance, Japanese emoticons (Manga emoticons) appear to rely heavily on alterations of typographical symbols representing the eyes to change facial expressions (for example, =ˆ) or T,T; for emoticon display direction (the emoticons present in this corpus face the right right margin of the screen while Japanese emoticons face the bottom of the screen).
Table 3
Refined coding scheme.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number In Data Set</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Placement</th>
<th>Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>:-P</td>
<td>Immature Luv</td>
<td>End</td>
<td>There is still time, save yourselves:-P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>:-P</td>
<td>Moved-on</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>I asked u yesterday if u were avoiding me, when u said no, I started writing, ok “:-P” just checking…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>:-)</td>
<td>The Older Woman</td>
<td>Start</td>
<td>:-) thanks so much ‘the smitten boy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>:-\</td>
<td>OLD</td>
<td>Alone w/</td>
<td>[Precedes utterance]: I understand. :-\</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>:-D</td>
<td>Female 2</td>
<td>Alone</td>
<td>[in response to Male 2’s comment]::-D</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After selectively coding for placement, we added the category of “context” to our coding scheme as both a pragmatic and defining feature. Context, defined as the print-linguistic utterance(s) connected to an emoticon, initially served as a tracking device—a way for our research team to quickly reference the transcripts in case we needed clarification about a prior round of coding. However, as our findings show, the category of context became an integral part of our coding scheme as a way to account for the functions of emoticons within utterances, and also helped to explain the “Alone with” and “Alone” emoticons in more significant ways. The context parameter became a necessary coding element to differentiate, as Table 2 shows, the instances of emoticons appearing “Alone with” (the emoticon appears alone on a line, but is connected to another line of text by the same interlocutor immediately preceding or following it; see Table 2 for an example) from the placement of emoticons coded as “Alone” (an emoticon not immediately attached to another utterance by the same interlocutor; see Table 2 for an example). In order to code for context, we returned to the data set and performed an in vivo coding of each instance of emoticon use again, this time drawing out each instance of emoticon use along with the print-linguistic utterance (if any) appearing previous or subsequent to the emoticon.

The category of linguistic context was especially helpful in determining how we should code auto responses (or “away” messages)—preemptive, prescribed, and automatically delivered responses that an IM user can arrange to be sent in response to any incoming messages when she chooses. Since an auto response is programmed to appear each time someone sends the user an IM, one away message can appear multiple times within the same conversation. An example of this phenomenon appears in the transcript:

(the smitten boy): i’m ready whenever.
(Auto response from THE OLDER WOMAN): kelly & Amy are here:-)
(the smitten boy): are you there?
(Auto response from THE OLDER WOMAN): kelly & Amy are here:-)

If we view language as an interaction between two or more interlocutors, then coding the second, third, or even fourth instance of the emoticon in the auto response assumes an active communicative role on the part of the “Away” user. The auto response is arranged purposefully by one interlocutor as a communicative device for other online interlocutors. The user writes the auto response only once; subsequent instances of auto responses are prompted by the technology. As the name implies, the user creates the auto response but the technology automatically decides when to employ the response (for instance, an auto response will not appear until another user attempts to converse with the interlocutor. The computer responds to the user with the auto response). As researchers, we are interested in describing the features of emoticons’ use and frequency in users’ practices, so our protocol for including emoticons used in auto responses was to (a) count the first instance; (b) count the second instance, even if the response was the same, but only if the auto response elicited a response; and (c) count the emoticons in the message if the auto response from the same interlocutor changes throughout the IM conversation. Avoiding double counting emoticons in multiple instances of the same away message was important to achieve an accurate accounting of communication within IM discourse. Where
Table 4
List of emoticons by instances (I) and percentage (%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most Frequent Emoticons</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>:-)</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>:-P</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>19.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>:-[</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>18.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O:-)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>:-(</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>:-D</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Least Frequent Emoticons</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>=-O</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>:-[</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>:-\</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a first instance is new information for an interlocutor, it can also be a flag the other interlocutor is busy, eliciting a concluding utterance from the active participant. This concluding comment, however, generates a repeat of the previous automatically delivered away message, a message that no longer serves as an active discourse feature. By eliminating possible non-active uses of emoticons, we intended to limit possible duplication of data and a potential skewing of the results.

After refining our coding scheme, we returned again to the data set and reviewed each instance of emoticon use. The transcripts were divided in half, and the research team worked in pairs to analyze one-half of the data set. After this round, the pairs switched halves of the data set and reviewed the coded data for the remaining portion of the coding scheme. The group then met as a whole and sampled ten percent of the coding (30 instances out of 301 total instances of emoticon use) to review the final round of coding. Within this round, the group reached a simple inter-rater reliability agreement of 97 percent (29 out of the 30 sampled codes were agreeable). Table 3 shows examples from our refined coding scheme.

5. Results

5.1. Emoticon selection and frequency

Throughout the 59 IM transcripts examined, we found 301 instances of emoticons. Participants displayed an overwhelming reliance on just three of all possible emoticons to be used and implemented and utilized only eighteen different emoticons in total, which we categorized into eleven emoticon types. These three emoticons,:-),:-P, and ;-) comprise 220 (73%) of the 301 emoticons appearing in the data set. The :-) was the most used emoticon (106/35%), with the rhetorically playful emoticons:-P and ;-) surpassing the general:) with 114 instances (38%). Other emoticons used by the participants included the O:-) (21/7%), the:-[(with its basic derivations (20/6.5%), and the:-D (18/6%). The least frequently used emoticons were the =-O (8/2.5%), the:-[(6/2%), the:-\ (6/2%), the) ((1.5%), and the <3 (1/5%) (Table 4).

5.2. Placement

Much like the types of emoticons used, placement of the emoticons is largely conventionalized within the IM discourse. The IM users in this data set place emoticons at the conclusion of a line of text nearly half the time (147 instances/49% of total use). These “End” placements occur either where punctuation should be or alongside punctuation. Emoticons appeared at the “Start” of lines as well but with far less frequency (27/9%). In this data set, emoticons appeared least frequently “Alone” (18/6%). Sixty-one (20%) emoticons (“Alone with”) appeared alone on an IM line but were coupled with the same interlocutor’s utterance previous or subsequent to it. Forty-eight emoticons (16%) were situated in the “Middle” of an utterance. The majority of emoticons follow similar percentages of appearance throughout the data set, with emoticons appearing more frequently at the end of an utterance and least frequently alone (Table 5).
Table 5
Top six emoticons in terms of frequency used (placement).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emoticon type</th>
<th>End</th>
<th>Alone with</th>
<th>Middle</th>
<th>Start</th>
<th>Alone</th>
<th>Total by emoticon type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>:-)</td>
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<td>20</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>106</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>;-)</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O:-)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>:-(</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
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<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>54</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>277</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.3. Emoticon variances

In the context of the data set, the distinguishing feature of the emoticon is the symbol used for the mouth. As noted previously, the mouth is significant from our data set and may be culturally variant. Whereas many emoticons share similar punctuation for other facial representations, a colon for general eyes and a dash for a nose, there is a reliance on the symbol for the mouth to distinguish one desired expression from another. For example, the :-) can exist with or without the nose and potentially achieve the same end. Likewise, the colon in the :-) can be switched for the number eight (8) to make 8-). On the other hand, it may be that the change in the mouth of an emoticon can be understood as a difference in degree of magnitude for the expression, for example, the feeling expressed in :-) might be increased by forming :-D. The difference in facial expression between :- (and :-P is clearly the result of changing only one element of the representation. For this reason, the move to create a designated difference in facial expression is largely reliant on changes of the punctuation representing the mouth of the emoticon. The exception to this general rule of thumb is the ;)—as opposed to the :-)—where the punctuation markers representing eyes clearly make a difference in the facial expression. This feature of emoticons may also signal a conventionalization within emoticons that helps to explain how various expressions across emoticons are constructed.

6. Discussion

6.1. Emoticons are conventional

Emoticons are conventionalized in the present corpus, indicating that usage conventions are shared within and across conversations and multiple interlocutors. Our data demonstrates that a large group of users are drawing on similar types of emoticons and using them in particular places within an utterance. In our data set, there were only eighteen total emoticons that users employed. This suggests that not only do users tap into a shared body of knowledge about the types of emoticons, they also appear to rely on that body of knowledge to determine where they place emoticons within an utterance. An example of placement convention can be seen in the choice to include emoticons at the beginning of an utterance. For instance, in the following excerpt of a conversation between Boy and Girl from our transcripts, Girl uses an emoticon to begin an utterance:

(Boy) for the whole night
(Girl):-(yea. 6 pm sat-6pm sun
(Boy) oh.ok

Another example shows a similar move made in an exchange between Interested boy and flirty girl in which flirty girl also starts an utterance with an emoticon:

(Interested boy) thanks
(flirty girl):-P now was that so hard? lol
(flirty girl) door’s open see u in a bit
That users chose to include the emoticon at the “Start” of an utterance 27 times in our corpus suggests that there may be conventions associated with the placement of emoticons. That is, emoticons are not merely placed anywhere within an utterance but are systematically located in particular places (either at the start, end, middle of an utterance, alone accompanied by an utterance, or completely alone). These findings are consistent with Provine, Spencer, and Mandell. However, unlike Provine, Spencer, and Mandell, our focus on instances of emoticon use at the level of language also revealed one category of placement not mentioned in prior research; namely, the category of an emoticons appearing “Alone” as a complete utterance in and of itself (for a complete discussion of “Alone” emoticons, see section 6.2).

This finding pushes against notions in existing research of the emoticon as exclusive and idiosyncratic. For example, Naomi Baron (in Layne, 2001) characterizes the emoticon as an idiosyncratic device that is “used to identify specific users and to set apart distinct social groups” (p. 1). If what Baron argues is true, then “emoticons are on the way out” (p. 1); in other words, a language or a code shared only by a small group of people is not likely to survive. Based upon data presented in this study, however, we suggest that their conventionality proves that emoticons are very much a part of IM discourse and culture.

6.2. Emoticons are inventionally

The conventional nature of the emoticon does not remove the possibility for rhetorical usage, nor does it imply that the conventions are fixed. In the same way that conventions of SWE do not determine the rhetorical function of language use, conventions of emoticon use are characteristics that do not define the emoticon’s rhetorical function. Rather the user has ultimate control over using emoticons rhetorically; she may draw on a set of shared conventions, but is still free to use emoticons in inventive ways. Examining the emoticon as a meaningful linguistic unit reveals that certain instances of the emoticon are rhetorically significant and beckon our attention. Specifically, the instances of emoticons appearing “Alone” as a complete utterance (appearing 15 times in our corpus) can be examined in the context of the IM conversation to indicate rhetorical significance. Consider the following examples:

(Goodfrnd) trying to get a smile outa you...
(BrknHeard):-
(Goodfrnd) well...
(Goodfrnd) keep me posted

(Boy) wanna watch a movie?
(Girl) lol:-)
(Boy) or are you too busy?
(Girl) oh-so-busy!
(Boy):-(
(Girl):-D juuuuuuuuuuuuuuuust kidding

In each of the examples above, emoticons appearing alone serve as the entire utterance by a participant, and in each instance the emoticon also elicits a response from the respondent in the conversation. In the first example, BrknHeard’s smile signals an end to the conversation taking place. BrknHeard’s emoticon is a response to Goodfrnd’s suggestion (or, perhaps, an explicit request) for a paralinguistic cue. In this instance, BrknHeard chooses to employ an emoticon as a response that functions as a communicative signal between interlocutors, a rhetorical device that seems to allow for a shift in the conversation. Moreover, the emoticon smile (as opposed to any other kind of linguistic response, such as “haha” or “lol” or “< smile >” ) demonstrates the interlocutors’ understanding of how to work within the parameters of the CMC medium. Essentially, the smiling visual icon stands in for not only an interlocutor’s face, but it also stands in for the print-linguistic cue to shift the conversation. In the second instance, Boy’s invitation to watch a movie appears to have been rejected, and when Boy expresses regret, the interlocutor Girl is forced to alter her response (“just kidding”) accordingly. Boy’s production of the frown emoticon demonstrates his awareness of audience, in that showing this particular emoticon indicates, in this context, that Girl will understand this expression of regret. Together, it appears that the placement of emoticons alone—functioning as the entire utterance—highlights the rhetorical significance of emoticons that equals (if not exceeds) the rhetorical significance of a print-linguistic utterance.
This is not to say that emoticons can completely substitute for print-linguistic utterances within IM. We did not find any conversations in our data set comprised totally of emoticons, and such a conversation seems highly improbable. More often, emoticons appear along with print-linguistic text and seem to function closely with what Provine, Spencer, and Mandell see as punctuation markers within IM. Emoticons may be used to signal a pause in a message or a cue to invite a response. However, because of the one-to-one, real-time nature of exchanges in IM, the results of Provine, Spencer, and Mandell’s study of asynchronous message postings to a broader audience may not be fully applicable to IM discourse. Message boards and IM are different forms of Internet discourses, presumably with their own features of genre and audience.

6.3. Emoticons enhance punctuation

Provine, Spencer, and Mandell acknowledge that emoticons appear as forms of punctuation in IM, however our analysis suggests that emoticons function as a form of punctuation not necessarily equivalent to punctuations used in SWE nor commonly implied in speech. This is most evident in the emoticons that appear within the “Middle” placement category (appearing 46 times in our corpus). Although this is a theme consistent across all areas of placement in our study, these instances of emoticons appear often as breaks in the phrasal structure of individual lines or utterances, and as such, they lead us to believe that punctuating with emoticons is one convention of IM discourse. However, as a form of punctuation, emoticons may be placeholders, tone setters or response cues. The following examples indicate the use of emoticons in ways that enhance the rhetorical performance of punctuation.

In the following excerpt from our transcript, a conversation between Boy and Girl, Girl uses an emoticon in the middle of her utterance.

(Boy) but my shyness probably saved me from a rejection i’m probably wasn’t ready to handle
(Girl) i like it, at least at this time. its exciting O:-) to try to get u to open up more to me.
(Boy) lol

Another example shows a similar move made by Roommate #1 and Roommate #2.

(Roommate #2) oh:-P I didnt finisht hat topic...
(Roommate #1) no.smiles:-D cuz “Roommate #1” loves ann

In each of these examples, users employ emoticons in the middle of lines in a way that suggests a break in the structure of an utterance. These breaks may be read as “pauses” in the text, but more importantly, their appearance in the line distinguishes the main idea of the utterance (the subject) from its supporting information. The break between “its exciting” (main idea) and “to try to get u to open up more to me” (supporting information) in the Boy-Girl exchange indicates an elaboration in the use of the second phrase which is distinguished by the emoticon. The same kind of structural break is evident in Roommate #1’s “no.smiles” (main idea) and “cuz “Roommate #1” loves ann” (supporting information). Here, the use of emoticons as punctuating devices suggests that emoticons appearing in the middle of utterances clarify the placement of the main idea in the utterance. The kinds of punctuation for which emoticons are employed in IM are considerably larger in size than the punctuation evident in SWE (for example, eight keystrokes for a 0:-) rather than two keystrokes for a comma). The use of emoticons as punctuation in a communicative medium that privileges brevity of expression and abbreviated print-linguistic forms appears to counter this characteristic of IM. As a representational form, emoticons are more concise than print-linguistic text, but emoticons increase the rhetorical value of punctuation by adding pathetic meaning to it. By breaking the phrase structure of conversational turns and indicating pathos, emoticons extend the possibility of punctuation within a CMC medium.

Finally, although this point may be tangential in regard to the overall scope of our analysis, it seems important for us to understand our situated knowledge as users of IM and the effect of this knowledge on our treatment of the data. As, Strauss and Anselm (1987) notes, the analysts’ experiences bring theoretical sensitivity to the treatment of data, thereby allowing for a more nuanced conception of the data than less well-versed researchers (p. 11).
7. Conclusion

Our investigation of the emoticon within a corpus of authentic IM conversations indicates the emoticon is a largely conventionalized feature of IM discourse and more integral to the communicative act that is IM communication than previously thought. Our study confirms the emoticon is a paralinguistic feature of IM discourse, as instances similar to the examples above illustrate, but the paralinguistic nature of IM does not imply that emoticons must be compensatory. In instances where the emoticon appears “alone”, the nature of the emoticon clearly allows it to function as an utterance on its own. In this way, we argue that paralinguistic features of IM should not be understood as secondary to the role of print-linguistic text in IM discourse. Similarly, our data suggest that users of IM discourse may choose to employ, and often choose to within our data set, an emoticon rather than type full print-linguistic utterances. Because emoticons appear visually (that is, they look fundamentally different than print-linguistic text), the image of the emoticon seems to perform more rhetorical work as an utterance than the print-linguistic text alone. If researchers begin to recognize emoticons as important semiotic units within a discourse structure, researchers will approach emoticons not as compensatory to language but as contributory to the conversation itself.

Our analysis, then, suggests that in order to understand the linguistic nature of emoticons within IM, further research must suspend the notion that paralinguistic features of text are secondary to (and, consequently, work only in service of) print-linguistic features of the discourse. The choice to employ emoticons within their IM exchanges signals that IM users are aware (either explicitly or implicitly) of this conventionalized function of emoticons, and they employ them in response to the technological parameters of IM programs.

This study further demonstrates a continued need for scholars and practitioners to investigate language phenomena as they occur in and outside the classroom to inform their understanding of language use and variation as it exists currently. Specifically, the proliferation of IM as a social practice indicates that its conventions ought to be studied toward an understanding of the different forms of writing with which large portions of the population communi cate and interact. We, as literacy scholars, need to appreciate the impact such conventions have on often marginalized groups who struggle when outside language varieties are not valued in a school setting as a form of valid communication and evidence of the groups’ varied literate practices.

This research further contributes to an ever-growing corpus of writing pedagogy by calling attention to the use of composing technologies to create emoticons and their implementation as a semiotic tool. Our data express an inherent ability for language users to function within the affordances and constraints of software programs, like IM programs, to communicate. The emoticons used in these naturally occurring transcripts reveal a creative and complex understanding of communication and demonstrates a certain rhetorical flexibility these language users possess. Instruction that draws on these principles can begin to make important explicit connections for students to bridge their understanding of language use as a lived, literate practice to discussions of language in the academic arena and elsewhere. This instruction can include discussions of rhetorical uses of emoticons, asking students to review their own archived IM conversations (or those furnished by the instructor) to articulate how emoticons are employed for certain purposes. An awareness of the conventionalized practices of the emoticon and its use as a rhetorical device may help students understand potential rhetorical value of different emoticons in various rhetorical settings. In linking some emoticon use to punctuation, this discussion might help students better understand, as well, the semiotic and rhetorical value of traditional forms of punctuation. Students come to us with knowledge of how to employ a variety of systems of representation. IM is a part of many of our students’ already-formed literate practices and linguistic capabilities. Engaging them in discussions of conventionalized uses and rhetorical value of these practices may help students think more critically about their own practices and technologies that affect them.

Given the observed conventionalized uses and apparent rhetorical functions of emoticons, a number of ideas for further research emerge from this study. Specifically, further research into the conventionalized nature of IM practices might attempt to examine the following questions:

1) To what degree are the “frequency” and “placement” of emoticons conventionalized among different populations of IM users?
2) How are emoticons employed in other Internet discourses, and to what degree do they assimilate our findings?
3) What other linguistic and literate attributes of IM discourse may be conventionalized?
4) What are the rhetorical functions of emoticons across various forms of CMC?

It is important not to continue to think about CMC as either writing or speech or some kind of hybrid between the two. Such a perspective limits the ways researchers can approach study of CMC literate practices. Our study opens the door to newer perspectives that allow CMC research to move beyond the simple dichotomy of standard versus non-standard forms of discourse. Instead, recognizing that standards and conventions arise out of contextualized practices of CMC discourse will help researchers and teachers examine how language conventions evolve along with literate practices.

:-)

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References


