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EMOTICONS IN CYBERSPACE FACILITATE COMMUNICATION

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Abstracts: *Meaning is described as "the system of mental representations of an object or phenomenon, its properties and associations with other objects and/or phenomena." For human beings, meaning is reflected in the form of sensory information, images and concepts." (Bedny & Karwowsky, 2004). It is either denotative or connotative. Connotation basically includes: pragmatic and semiotic levels. Connotation and denotation are often described in terms of levels of representation or levels of meaning. Roland Barthes adopted from Louis Hjelmslev the notion that there are different orders of signification (Barthes, 1957; & Hjelmslev, 1961 in Herring, 2009). The first order of signification is that of denotation: at this level there is a sign consisting of a signifier and a signified. Connotation is a second-order of signification which uses the denotative sign (signifier and signified) as its signifier and attaches to it an additional signified. In this framework connotation is a sign which derives from the signifier of a denotative sign (so denotation leads to a chain of connotations).*

For most semioticians both denotation and connotation entail the use of codes. Structural semioticians who highlight the relative arbitrariness of signifiers and social semioticians who stress multiplicity of interpretation and the importance of cultural and historical contexts are hardly likely to accept the notion of a 'literal' meaning. The denotative meaning of a sign would be broadly agreed upon by members of the same culture, whereas 'nobody is ever taken to task because their connotations are incorrect', so no inventory of the connotative meanings generated by any sign could ever be complete, just because they are language specific. (Bamard, 1996 in Herring, 2009)

The present research paper relies on the social semioticians' concept with the null hypothesis that emoticons are interpreted in the cultural and historical contexts of any specific language.

Methodology is of qualitative research type and the technique favored for data collection is field notes and diaries.

Participants in the project included two post graduate candidates, each comprising 16 tech literate students. Students in group A were TEFL majored and those in group B were majored in Persian literature. They were asked to communicate through emoticons, while storing them in databases already developed to that end. Data elicitation was basically based on e-mailing system and the databases. The candidates were given positive feedback for developing novel, identifiable, comprehensive and mutually exclusive emoticons. This process was continued for one semester.

Number and exactness of emoticons saved in each candidate's database and the usage made out of them were effective factors in data analysis.

The qualitative analysis of the results, which were tabularized, significantly rejects the null hypothesis.

Discussion: Based on the finding, it is safe to say that the students' field of study does not affect the semiotic interpretation and understanding of the connotative meaning of emoticons. The performance

and databases of the candidates with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds were of the same ranking level. Hence, if language learning is a process of acculturation, the result of the present study seems not to confirm the null hypothesis.

Conclusion: Based on Motamadi's, (2009) technology and cyberspace have removed deep linguistic gaps and cultural differences; but further researches are needed to confirm the present finding.

Key words: *Emoticons, Semiotics, Cyberspace, databases*

I. LITERATURE REVIEW

Language learning is a process, which entails two indispensable concepts: language & communication. (Motamadi, 2009) The most neglected one is to motivate people to create a realistic situation to use language, either the mother tongue or the second / foreign language based on effective communicative values. So far, no single tool or strategy has proven to be the one to bring the cure to that communicative aspect of the task.

The advent of technology seems to have already paved the path to that end; although language teaching experts and specialists have concentrated on the value of face to face communication, computer mediated communication – CMC – has initiated a new horizon to come over that deficiency. It has been manifested in three modes: text, audio and video. The significance of the present study is to rely on a fourth mode, which has semiotico-pragmatic value. Emoticons are used in this study to share ideas between interlocutors as a unified means of communication with different linguistic backgrounds.

Studies from different disciplines on CMC have chiefly focused on the process approach, which seeks to settle on the effect of messages on people, and the uses as well as indulgences they put messages to (Fiske, 1990). Within linguistic studies, CMC has been widely studied under discourse analysis (e.g. Chun, 1994; Warschauer, 1996; Chech & Condon, 2004) and pragmatics (e.g. Gruber, 1998; Odeneye, 2007; Oni & Osunbade, forthcoming). In conversation analysis, the main focus is on talk-in-interaction—language in use, rather than the language system per se. In semiotic studies, which share the scholastic boundary between language and communication studies, CMC has only received attention from the historical perspective (e.g. Codognet, online). Elaborating on the issue, Cutler (1996) mentions that current literature surrounding CMC is almost entirely task-based and focused on cost, efficiency, and productivity, with little attention given either to the changes affected on people or to the social relations created from using the communication technologies.

In a CMC setting, texts disclose the participants' intentions and associations, and designate the nature of various social activities. While playing the role of mediators and within an overall cultural system, all texts realize at least two basic functions (Lotman, 1988a: 34-36): they can convey meanings adequately, and generate new meanings. Such a functional dualism involves what Wertsch & Toma (1991: 7) term univocal and dialogical functions. The univocal function is identified by the degree of univocality, which guarantees the text contents be adequately received and decoded in a system of communication. The dialogical function is achieved when the text stops to be a passive link in conveying some constant information between input (sender) and output (receiver), and, due to its internal heterogeneity, it becomes a thinking device, which creates new meanings and incites new thoughts. By analysing CMC from such a functional standpoint, it is possible to notice that this functional dualism seems to be displayed in all CMC-based messages like the two sides of the same coin: depending on conditions of production and/or reception, and on the nature of the communicative event, one side or the other will be more evident for consideration.

Many researches have recently studied the value of emoticons, avatars or cartoon-like characters in graphical worlds as examples of constructivists' model of production and negotiation in meaning representation through semiotic systems rather than verbal language. Such meaning representations have found their new roles in certain disciplines such as discourse analysis in general and pragmatics

in particular. By adjusting one's analytical perspective, one can find meaning potential outside the narrow scope of language as it is traditionally conceived (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, 2000, 2001).

Dialogism is an interdisciplinary approach with a broadened framework focusing on the social character of interaction through any symbol system(s) in a multimodal environment with key terms such as sequentiality, joint construction, and act-activity interdependence. Hence, dialogistically, terms such as collaboration, coordination, cooperation, and negotiation are used to describe the social character of communication processes, putting emphasis on the orientation towards the "other." Other-orientation in computer-mediated discourse (CMD) is probably no more frequent than in oral conversation. Users often address each other in synchronous chat environments via virtual worlds by initiating messages with a nickname followed by a colon; this feature is called addressivity (Werry, 1996). Addressivity in cyber context is as a strategy that helps pay off for the lack of visual cues that establish inter-turn coherence in face-to-face communication (Herring, 1999).

1.1. Settings in the present research

Following Murray's (1988), setting identification: electronic mail (e-mail) - as asynchronous messages, which can be sent to one recipient or to a mass mailing list was the first choice-being conscious to the deficiency of that non-real time form of communication, because immediate feedback cannot be fully guaranteed, we regarded it the least directly interactive CMC subtype. Mobile messaging and weblogs are other settings; the last, but not the least was reliance on synchronous messaging in chatrooms. These are the four main varieties of computerized communication. As Murray notices, professional computer users prefer this variety of communication which is the least planned and the most heavily interactive CMC type.

1.2. Materials, procedures and participants

Correlating materials, procedures and participants as interactants in communicative events suggests the possibility of interpreting their interrelationship by applying the tri-stratal analysis of social activity (Leontiev, 1981: 59-69). Activities are rendered into reality through a specific set of actions, which are genuinely not to coincide: one action can be instrumental in realizing different activities; conversely, one motive can give rise to different goals and, accordingly, can produce different actions. Hence, as soon as the user gets acquainted with the instrumental conditions, the equipment utilization becomes an automatic operation performed without much conscious effort. Accordingly, differentiation among contexts, however, may be better evidenced if we consider the other two levels of analysis (activities and actions). Then, by focusing on activities (motives), I would say that, broadly speaking, CMC is generally used in order to communicate. This need may appear either as an answer to an interior necessity of expression, or in response to someone else's appeals. In other words, this motive may have a spontaneous origin (as it seems to be the case in academic settings), or it may be caused by functional reasons (as in business settings). Anyway, this argument per se is not convincing enough to conclude that this mentioned activity is the only or the most important one shared by all CMC environments. However, although conceptually abstract, there is no reason to avoid placing communication among many other activities performed in whatever context we might take into account.

Given that few studies have addressed this issue, how meanings are produced and interpreted in the context of CMC as well as taking into account the cross cultural nature of the CMC interactions, we have decided, in this study, to engage in a structuralist/social semiotic approach. Therefore, against the relevant semiotic theories and content analysis of the selected instant messages of the students constructed mainly in Yahoo! IM program, the study aims to answer the following research question: have emoticons come out of English language? Secondly, are they understandable to EFL/ESL speakers?

The candidates' interaction was based on the null hypothesis that emoticons have been the semiotic convention, which lies in the heart of one specific language, namely English. The procedure continued for one semester while 16 of the participants were M.A. TEFL majored and 16 others were M. A. In Persian literature. Such a diverse discipline was based on the rational of communication, which is based on motives other than linguistic backgrounds and nonsupportive of the hypothesis that university students from diverse disciplines can not communicate freely in cyberspace via emoticons.

Data collection was performed at the end of the semester by referring to the type and number of emoticons & smileys, made through "Emoticon Makers" and imported to each candidate's database. Candidates had already received enough training to download smileys / free talking smileys/ audio type smileys/ cartoon & TXT smileys from Yahoo, Google and MSN smileys databases.

Tabularized Data driven from the candidates' databases were analysed qualitatively by tally system. Communication via informative smileys was the basis for reference making to the degree of the candidates' success in the task.

The finding of this study seems to lend support to the fact that cyber space has gone beyond specific text-related languages; and it can be concluded that semiotic smileys are becoming context sensitive language independent phenomena.

User friendly gadgets and applications have been used among university students; some majored in TEFL and some others with a Persian literature discipline as a lingua franca for a period of one semester

The present research on semiotic aspect of interaction has a number of limitations: One limitation is that most of the studies are of English CMC. Studies focusing on CMC in other languages and cultural contexts are needed. (Herring, 2009); A related limitation is the focus on textual CMC, CMC delivered through channels other than text, including VoIP, calls for systematic examination. (Jenks & Firth, in press, 2011); A third limitation is methodological. Social network analysis (Paolillo, 2001), automated analysis of language features (Hancock et al., 2005), and ethnographic analysis (Androutsopoulos, 2008), including the use of video technology to incorporate gestures and physical context into the analysis (Beißwenger, 2008) are needed to expand the study of CMC to larger corpora and situate it within its broader contexts of use; Finally, only few articles directly assess the relative degree of conversationality of different modes, especially nonverbal emoticons to shape computer-mediated interactions in ways that make them conversational (or not).

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