6

Emoticons and Illocutionary Force[1*]

Eli Dresner and Susan C. Herring
Tel Aviv University and Indiana University

1. Introduction

The term 'emoticons'— a blend of 'emotion' and 'icons'— refers to graphic signs, such as the smiley face, that often accompany textual computer-mediated communication (CMC). The addition of graphic signs to printed text made its debut in CMC in 1982, when the rotated smiley face :-) was first proposed— along with a 'frowny' face :-(—by a computer scientist at Carnegie Mellon University, Scott Fahlman, as a means to signal that something was a joke (or not) in messages posted to a computer science discussion forum (Krohn, 2004). Since this early stage in the history of CMC, hundreds if not thousands of similar signs have developed, many of which have been catalogued in dictionaries (e.g., Godin, 1993; Raymond, 1996) and on websites (e.g., Netlingo, n.d.; Wikipedia, 2009b).

The prototypical emoticons are facial-expression icons, and the discussion that follows focuses on the Western-culture variants of these, as used in English CMC. The term 'emoticon' reflects how these signs are typically conceived today, both in CMC research and in popular culture: They are construed as indicators of affective states, the purpose of which is to convey non-linguistic information that in face-to-face communication is conveyed through facial expression and other bodily indicators. In textual computer-mediated interactions, these valuable channels are missing, the argument goes (cf. Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984), and therefore a

replacement for them was created in the form of emoticons.

This line of analysis seems to account for some uses of facial emoticons, and, indeed, may partially apply to all uses. Moreover, it seems plausible that some mechanism of compensation is responsible for the widespread introduction of these signs into interactive textual communication, and the suggestion that they are doing something that is performed through non-textual means in everyday, face-to-face communication is reasonable. However, as we argue in this essay the term 'emoticon' misrepresents this function, at least with respect to many common and important cases. In such cases, the primary function of the smiley and its brethren is not to convey emotion but rather pragmatic meaning, and thus this function needs to be understood in linguistic, rather than extra-linguistic, terms.

2. *Emoticons as Emotion Icons*

Emoticons are almost universally conceived of as non-verbal indicators of emotion. This view is given explicit expression throughout the CMC literature. Thus Walther and D'Addario (2001) quote (and accept) the definition of emoticons suggested by Rezabek and Cochenour (1998: 201) as "visual cues formed from ordinary typographical symbols that when read sideways represent feeling or emotions." Wolf (2000: 828) cites the *Hackers' Dictionary* definition of an emoticon as "an ASCII glyph used to indicate an emotional state," noting that this is "the generally accepted definition" of the term. The Wikipedia (2009a) defines an emoticon as "a textual face of a writer's mood or facial expression" (n.p.). Even linguists, such as Crystal (2001: 36), describe emoticons as "combinations of keyboard characters designed to show an emotional facial expression", and Baron (2000: 242) refers to them as "emotion markers".

This conception is reflected in the questions and hypotheses that have been raised with respect to emoticons in recent research (e.g., Derks, Bos, & von Grumbkow, 2007; Provine et al., 2007; Walther & D'Addario, 2001; Wolf, 2000). For example, the significance of emoticons in Walther and D'Addario (2001) is presumed to be affective—either positively or negatively so—and the hypotheses of the study were formulated to find out how the affective value of emoticons combines with the linguistic messages to which they are attached.

The belief that women express affect more than men do, coupled with the as-

sociation of emoticons with affect, has also led researchers to examine the relationship between emoticon use and gender. Two studies of asynchronous public discussion forums—Witmer and Katzman (1997) and Wolf (2000)—found that women used emoticons more often than men did, although in Wolf's study, men used emoticons more often to express sarcasm. Similarly, Baron (2004) observed that the overwhelming majority of emoticons in her corpus of synchronous private Instant Messaging were produced by women, and Herring (2003) reported that women in the public Internet Relay Chat channels she observed typed three times as many representations of smiling and laughter (including emoticons) as men.

However, as we now turn to argue, the conception of emoticons as expressing affect is incomplete at best, since it leaves out of the picture important aspects of their use. For one thing, as a quick look at any emoticon dictionary shows, many facial emoticons do not seem to express a single emotion, or indeed any emotion at all. Is a face with the tongue sticking out—e.g., ;-p—a sign of a specific emotion? Various sources attribute to it the meanings of teasing, flirting, and sarcasm, all of which may be associated with emotional states, but which are not emotions per se. Or consider the familiar winking face ;) : Conventionally, it indicates that the writer is joking, but surely jokes are not associated with a single emotive state. People may joke when they are happy or sad. Finally, we turn to the smiley face itself: Its function is not only to express happiness or any other single emotion. Wolf makes a similar point in discussing her finding that males used smileys for the purpose of expressing sarcasm more often than females did. "While it can be argued that sarcasm and teasing, for example, derive from or comprise different emotions," she writes, "whether they constitute an emotion is debatable" (2000: 832). Emoticons, then, seem to express not only emotions, but other things as well. Are these attitudes? Intentions? Previous research on emoticons does not offer an answer to this question.

A related deficiency of the conception of emoticons as emotion icons is that it depicts the contribution of emoticons to computer-mediated interaction as independent of language. According to this conception, our interpretation of the nonverbal channel may influence our understanding of the linguistic one, but the two have meaning independently of each other. This conception seems to be at odds with some of the observations made above, however. Consider the use of smileys as indicating sarcasm. Should not this function be accounted for by relating smileys to the linguistic channel? As opposed to, for example, confidence or stress indicators, 'sarcastic' emoticons seem to have no self-standing content on their own, but rather contribute to—indeed, provide a vital cue as to how to interpret—the linguistic

content of messages. When used this way, emoticons seem to be a part of the text, on a par with punctuation marks, which can also signal sarcasm. (Consider, e.g., 'Oh, great!' vs. 'Oh, great.'—the former conventionally expresses enthusiasm, while the latter may imply just the opposite.) The current construal of emoticons seems not to be able to accommodate this aspect of their use.[2]

Emoticons, then, do not always function as vehicles for emotive expression, and their meaning is sometimes more closely tied to language than what is allowed for by their construal as emotion icons. At the same time, it is clear that emoticons do not comprise new lexical or morphosyntactic constituents of English. Thus what is required is a theoretical framework that situates emoticons (or, rather, some of their uses) between the extremes of non-language and language.

We argue that the theory of speech acts can provide such a framework (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969, 1979). In particular, the thesis of this essay is that in many cases emoticons are used not as signs of emotion, but rather as indications of the illocutionary force of the textual utterances that they accompany. As such, they help convey the speech act performed through the production of the utterance. These uses of emoticons do not contribute to the propositional content (the locution) of the language used, but neither are they just an extra-linguistic communication channel indicating emotion. Rather, they help convey an important aspect of the linguistic utterance they are attached to: what the user intends by what he or she types.

3. Communicative Functions of Emoticons: From Emotion to Illocutionary Force

The following examples and discussion focus on the most frequently-used emoticon types, as reported in the literature: smiles, winks, and to a lesser extent, frowns.[3] We identify and illustrate three ways in which emoticons function: 1) as emotion indicators, mapped directly onto facial expression; 2) as indicators of non-emotional meanings, mapped conventionally onto facial expressions, and 3) as illocutionary force indicators that do not map conventionally onto a facial expression.

First, emoticons are sometimes used to express or perform emotion, where the emoticon iconically represents an emotional facial expression. Two examples of this use occur in the following excerpt from an instant messaging (IM) conversa-

tion between the second author and one of her doctoral students about an upcoming Association for Internet Researchers (AoIR) conference. (The IM client both are using automatically converts ASCII emoticon sequences into their graphical counterparts.)

> Student: just wanted to let you know that [jason] found me a place to stay at AoIR, so it looks like I'll be going ☺
>
> [...]
>
> Professor: I wish I could be at AoIR.
>
> Professor: ☹

The smiling face in the first instance seems unproblematically to express the student's happiness that he could attend the conference. The frowning face in the second instance expresses sadness or regret, consistent with the professor's comment, "I wish I could be at AoIR." These examples constitute expressive acts, according to Searle's (1979) taxonomy.

Many other uses are less straightforwardly affective, however. Consider the use of the winking smiley, which is often used as an indicator that the writer is joking, teasing, or otherwise not serious about the message's propositional content (e.g., Wolf, 2000). Clearly, joking is not an emotion—one could joke while being in a variety of distinct affective states. Rather, joking is a type of illocutionary force, something that we do by what we say. (This is as opposed to being funny, which might be described as a perlocutionary force [Austin, 1962], on a par with being persuasive.) In the following public email post to the AoIR mailing list, the winking smiley is used to indicate that the utterance that immediately precedes it is not intended as a serious summons of the (deceased) media scholar Marshall McLuhan, but rather as a joke:

> Paging Mr. McLuhan.... ;)

The winking emoticon here is best conceived of as a sign of the force of what has been (textually) said, rather than as an indication of emotion.

One could argue that this usage represents a facial expression—a physical wink also conventionally signals that the speaker is not serious about what s/he is saying—even if it does not express an emotion *per se*. Thus, it could be considered to be iconic, rather than pragmatic, in nature. Not all uses of the winking icon indicate joking, however; some indicate other illocutionary forces. Consider the winking face at the end of the following example, a message posted to the same AoIR mailing list in response to a contributor's recommendation for a way to remix YouTube

video that involves an extra step:

I would like a non-circumventing solution ;->

Here the writer is serious about the propositional content of the preceding message; he would truly prefer a non-circumventing solution to his video remixing problem. The winking emoticon indicates that the message should not be taken as a request or a demand, as its form ("I would like") otherwise suggests. Instead, the winking icon seems to downgrade the utterance to a less face-threatening[4] speech act, a simple assertion of the writer's preference. (According to Searle's [1979] taxonomy, the emoticon can be described as indicating that the force of the sentence preceding it is assertive rather than directive.) This usage neither expresses emotion nor does it mimic a physical wink; its sole function seems to be to indicate the utterance's intended illocutionary force, which it does through mitigation of face threat.

Similarly, consider the use of the standard smiley, which also often serves mitigating functions. In the following private email example, a student uses a smiley to mitigate her request to the second author for assistance:

I wonder if you could recommend me some good readings related to conversational data. We just collected some IM data and are about to conduct some analysis on it. Since I've never worked on this kind of data before, I am writing for some suggestions.:)

It would be odd in this context to interpret the smiley as indicating happiness or some other positive affective state; if anything, the student is anxious about imposing on the author. Thus, in contrast to the previous example, here the emoticon functions not to help the reader of the message identify the general type (or category) of the illocutionary act performed, but rather to modulate an already identifiable act.

One might argue that people smile in face-to-face communication when they are anxious, too, and that this usage, if not emotive, at least maps more-or-less directly onto the way facial expressions function in physical space. To argue thus is to acknowledge that facial expressions do not always represent emotions—that they are associated with other meanings, some of them partially or entirely conventional (such as the polite but bored smile used to disengage from an uninteresting conversation at a cocktail party). Nonetheless, it is difficult to imagine the writers physically smiling when they produced the following electronic examples. In these messages, the smileys indicate that the intended meaning of the preceding utter-

ances is not as it otherwise appears—in effect, that the utterances were intended as one kind of speech act, rather than another. In each case, the smiley downgrades a strong complaint to something else.

> JKingsbury : GUIDE> have you ever made a home page on aol?
>
> Guide ASH : JK, yes and I can't get rid of the stupid thing! :)

In the above example, posted to a help chatroom on the Internet service provider AmericaOnline (AOL), the guide appears to make a strong complaint that is not a helpful response to the user, JKingsbury's, query about how to make a home page on AOL. The smiley at the end alters the pragmatic meaning of the utterance, however: Rather than being a rude, selfish gripe, it becomes a mild, humorous complaint that demonstrates a friendly attitude towards the user. Under no reasonable reading is it possible to construe that the guide is happy that he cannot get rid of his home page, as a smile literally suggests.

Another clear example is the following message, posted recently to a Yahoo! fibromyalgia support forum:

> i'm 23 with CFS/FMS[5] and some other things. i was diagnosed about 3 years ago, but i've been ill much longer than that. i'm sick of the crying and moping too. i was actually in a really down mood and decided to get on to see if anyone had posted. i've been inactive for awhile. i'm in a pretty bad flare-up right now, and that def. affects my mood. I am very sensitive and cry easily, and gets even worse when i feel awful :)

The writer is obviously not happy about the conditions she describes; she explicitly states that she has been "crying," "moping," and feeling "down"—affect opposite to what a smile usually indicates. Claiming that the smiley indicates positive emotion in this case would be perverse. It seems rather that the smiley functions to mitigate what otherwise could be read as a self-pitying list of complaints, suggesting the interpretation that the author is not complaining, but rather merely asserting or describing her situation. (Whether the smiley has that perlocutionary force, or effect on the reader, is a separate question.)

4. Discussion

In the previous section, we illustrated the applicability of our theoretical frame-

work to examples of actual emoticon use. In this section, we discuss several further issues and questions that our account gives rise to.

First, it should be clear that the account presented here does not rule out an iconic mapping between the function of emoticons and some bodily and facial movements. It is not the case that the received view of emoticons that we have been critiquing retains such a mapping, while our account does not. Rather, what has been described here with respect to emoticons applies, mutatis mutandis, to bodily gestures as well, and coheres with a large body of research that ties gesture to language. As McNeill (2005:4) writes: "It is profoundly an error to think of gesture as a code or 'body language', separate from spoken language. (...) (G)estures are *part* of language" (italics in the original). The meanings expressed by gestures are conventionalized to varying degrees, like those expressed by emoticons. Moreover, Kendon (1995) claims that some gestures function as illocutionary speech acts, making visible the implications of what is being said. Our account of emoticons resonates with this outlook, and may be viewed as lending support to it, by pointing to expressions of (facial) bodily movement in text.

Second, the loose connection between emoticons and the speech acts they sometimes help carry out—such that there appears to be no simple one-to-one mapping between any of the commonly-used emoticons discussed in this paper and a particular illocutionary force—is in accord with the general relation between textual markers and speech acts. The relationship of markers such as sentential mood and utterance-final punctuation to pragmatic force is quite loose, and according to some views, may not be amenable to complete regimentation and conventionalization. This state of affairs should not be taken to falsify the widely accepted conception of such structural apparatuses as indicators of illocutionary force, nor should it be taken that way vis-à-vis emoticons. In all cases, contextual interpretation is involved, which the textual markers contribute to rather than make redundant.[6]

The question of context raises a third issue: What factors condition the use of emoticons and the ways in which they are used? Although we have argued on a conceptual level for a shared function of commonly-used Western-style emoticons in English CMC—as a textual indicator of illocutionary force—the forms and meanings of emoticons vary considerably in actual use, as the examples discussed above of smiling and winking faces illustrate. Technological considerations motivate emoticon production in the first place, in that typed (especially sideways) emoticons are native to CMC. It should be evident from our analysis that the functions of emoticons extend beyond substituting for facial and gestural 'cues filtered out' in textual CMC; at the same time, technological factors influence the extent

to which emoticons are used and which ones are used in different CMC modes. Thus, for example, efficiency considerations, which are more pertinent to synchronous CMC than to asynchronous CMC, should affect users' decisions to employ emoticons, if we consider emoticons to be shorthand substitutes for longer textual expressions of intention. In support of this view, emoticons tend to be found more frequently in synchronous chat than in asynchronous discussion forums (but cf. Baron, 2004). In addition, the availability of graphical emoticons—for example, via pull-down menus in some IM clients—should promote the use of more diverse (and less commonly-used) emoticons; this is supported by the findings of Provine et al. (2007).

Finally, our analysis of emoticons as illocutionary force markers can shed light on a fourth issue: the apparent paradox that emoticons mimic (often non-intentional) facial expressions, although they are intentionally produced. In Goffman's (1959) terms, facial expressions are expressions *given off* rather than expressions *given*. Emoticons, in contrast, are always produced consciously and intentionally, on a par with other aspects of written language. The use of emoticons as emotion indicators seems difficult to explain in this respect. Non-intentional 'expression given off' is usually taken to be a more reliable cue to interpreting other people's emotive states than intentional 'expression given.' It follows that the representation of a bodily channel that in some cases involves involuntary expression in the intention-governed domain of textual expression should be detrimental to its perceived value as an indicator of emotion, and the apparent success of this representation is left unaccounted for.

The construal of emoticons as indicators of illocutionary force partially obviates this paradox. The illocutionary force of an utterance is part of what a speaker means by the utterance, part of what he or she intends to convey by making it. Force is fully within the domain of the intentional—it is expression that is given. Thus the appearance of intentional indicators of force in CMC, possibly replacing some non-intentional indicators in face-to-face communication, does not present any theoretical difficulty, and it is not necessary to assume that users are unaware of the switch from non-intentional to intentional expression or find it problematic. The question of whether and how similar considerations might be invoked in order to address the problem of emotive uses of emoticons remains; we leave this as a topic for future research.

(Endnotes)

1   * This paper essay is a shortened version of Dresner, E., & Herring, S. C. (2010). Functions of the nonverbal in CMC: Emoticons and illocutionary force. *Communication Theory, 20,* 249-268.

2   Provine et al. (2007) draw a parallel between what they call the "punctuation effect" of laughter placement in speech and signed language and the placement of emoticons in written CMC, but they do not suggest that emoticons function like punctuation.

3   These examples are drawn from the second author's archives over the last 10 years, and include private email, private chat (Instant Messaging), public chat (AOL chat; Internet Relay Chat), and public discussion forum postings. This sample is not systematic, and no attempt is made to advance claims about the frequency of occurrence of any usage based on it.

4   On face threats and speech acts, see Brown and Levinson (1987).

5   CFS/FMS=Chronic Fatigue Syndrome/Fibromyalgia Syndrome.

6   See Sperber and Wilson (1986) for an account of the way context helps determine the speech act performed through the production of a given utterance.

References

Austin, J. 1962. *How to Do Things With Words*, 2nd edition. J.O. Urmson and M. Sbisá (eds). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Baron, N.S. 2000. *Alphabet to email: How Written English Evolved and Where It's Heading.* New York: Routledge.

Baron, N.S. 2004. See you online. Gender issues in college student use of Instant Messaging. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 23(4): 397-423.

Brown, P., Levinson, S. 1987. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Crystal, D. 2001. *Language and the Internet*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Derks, D., Bos, A., and von Grumbkow, J. 2007. Emoticons and social interaction on the Internet: The importance of social context. *Computers in Human Behavior* 23: 842-849.

Godin, S. 1993. *Smiley Dictionary: Cool Things to do With Your Keyboard.* Berkeley, CA: Peachpit Press.

Goffman, E. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Herring, S.C. 2003. Gender and power in online communication. In J. Holmes and M.

Meyerhoff (eds), *The Handbook of Language and Gender*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 202-228.

Kendon, A. 1995. Gestures as illocutionary and discourse structure markers in Southern Italian conversation. *Journal of Pragmatics,* 23: 247-279.

Kiesler, S., Siegel, J., and McGuire, T.W. 1984. Social psychological aspects of computer-mediated communication. *American Psychologist,* 39(10): 1123-1134.

Krohn, F. 2004. A generational approach to using emoticons as non-verbal communication. *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication* 43: 321-328.

McNeill, D. 2005. *Gesture and Thought*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Netlingo, (n.d.). *Smileys and Emoticons.* Retrieved March 29, 2009, from http://www.netlingo.com/smileys.php

Provine, R.R., Spencer, R., and Mandell, D.(2007. Emotional expression online: Emoticons punctuate website text messages. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 26(3): 299-307.

Raymond, E.S. 1996. *The new Hacker's Dictionary*, 3rd ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Rezabek, L., and Cochenour, L. 1998. Visual cues in computer mediated communication: Supplementing text with emoticons. *Journal of Visual Literacy*, 18: 201-215.

Searle, J. 1969. *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Searle, J. 1979. *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Sperber, D., and Wilson, D. 1986. *Relevance*. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell.

Walther, J., and D'Addario, K. 2004. The impacts of emoticons on message interpretation in computer mediated communication. *Social Science Computer Review* 19: 324-347.

Wikipedia. 2009a. *Emoticons*. Retrieved October 19, 2009, from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emoticon.

Wikipedia. 2009b. *List of Emoticons*. Retrieved October 19, 2009, from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_emoticons.

Witmer, D., and Katzman, S. 1997. On-line smiles: Does gender make a difference in the use of graphic accents? *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication, 2.* Retrieved

May 5, 2008 from http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol2/issue4/witmer1.html.

Wolf, A. 2000. Emotional expression online: Gender differences in emoticon use. *CyberPsychology and Behavior* 3: 827-833.

Authors' addresses
Eli Dresner
Tel Aviv University
P.O. Box 39040, Ramat Aviv
Tel Aviv 69978
Israel
dresner@post.tau.ac.il

Susan C. Herring
Indiana University, Bloomington
10th St. and Jordan Ave.
Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 47405
U.S.
herring@indiana.edu

About the authors