# INTERCULTURAL PRAGMATICS

## EMOTICON INDEXICALITY: DIGITAL MEDIA PRACTICES

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**Abstract:**
Emoticons represent the best materialization of the particular aspects the digital language features. The use of emoticons on the hand have been subjected to various kinds of analyses which have singled out their joint representation of both oral and written language. This article proposes, using the indexical sign theory to understand the emoticons not simply as combination of other types of language but as the innovative form of the digital language. Looking more at the poietics of the emoticon use and less at its poetic, the article distinguishes among the types of usage depending on types of texts and, at the same time, between two categories or digital language practice consumers who understand emoticons rather differently in terms of coding and usage.

**Keywords:** indexicality, emoticon, cultural practice, simultaneous and non-simultaneous communication, digital language

Among the multiple instances shaping computer mediated communication, there is no doubt that the linguistic component plays a significant role, both as a meaning bearer in itself, but mostly as an agent providing content in an environment in which information is exclusively built on the syncretism between text and image. From this point of view, by unifying the two perspectives on the linguistic component, scientific discourse is displays a double sided approach. At one end, there the influence the digital language has on the generated contest whilst at the other one there is the discourse on how the language has been changed when used in the online medium. The analysis tools, however, as is the case of all



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humanistic fields focusing on assessing the digital media, are burrowed exclusively from the the analysis of the offline, basically ricocheting the offline techniques into the online. But it is not only the techniques that belong to the offline world – which function in most cases – but also the concepts, the cultural forms and their physiologies which, belonging to the offline, prove their limits or even their uselessness in certain situations.

Keeping the subsidiary of this state of fact, this paper proposes a new way of interpreting the emoticon, the essential component of digital language, by updating the concept of indexicality which leads to understanding the emoticon more as a socio-cultural practice (Danet and Herring 2007, Garrison and Remley 2011) and less as a linguistic sign.

Used for the first time in 1982 by Scott Fahlmann in the form of a string of characters and not as a pictogram, the emoticon, by the very nature of the word, points to its two components „emotion" and „icon", thus comprising the semantics of the symbol image of an emotion. Its definitions are constructed both on the use of design techniques, as well as on meaning. For David Crystal, emoticons `are typed in a sequence on a single line, and placed after the final punctuation mark of a sentence (Crystal 2001:36). On the same line, Dresner and Herring (2010: 251) sum up a set of definitions of this particular type of pictogram as clues to or markers of emotions, as hieroglyphs in the ASCII code of an emotional experience or a combination of keys meant to duplicate the features of an emotion.

The reason we have selected these definitions is to highlight (starting with David Crystal, author of the first systematic research on the aspects involved in using language in the digital world) the emoticon's nature as the doublet of emotion, in both its forms, either as a pictogram, or as a string of symbols. From this point of view, the emoticon turns into the hyperonym of visual signs of emotions materialized into different forms of expression.

On the other hand, similar to a linguistic sign, the graphic design of the emoticon becomes a sign of the emotional experience separated from the arbitrary nature as described by Saussure, by representing physiological reactions of the emotion, and not the emotion in itself. But treating the emoticon as just a sign of converting an emotional experience is an abbreviated sample of language, represented only in one of its possible materializations.

Form the point of view, of integrating the sign in anthropologic discourse, similar to Tom Boelstorff who used the system in order to define



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digital anthropology, a much more useful clarification of the concept may be made by replacing the arbitrary sign with the indexical sign, taking over Charles Pierce's conceptualization (Boelstroff 2010: 51). The indexical sign, as Boelstroff goes on, must not be strictly connected to the idea of the existence of a word, according to the linguistic tradition, even if the examples he uses for initial explanations are from this field. The essential element of indexicality implies taking into account the idea of context. Remaining in the linguistic area, Alessandro Duranti notes that the message is intimately connected to the existence of what he calls 'the imaginary arrow', which indicates, even explicitly in some situations, a set of circumstances familiar both to the transmitter of the message, as well as to its receiver, thus pointing to the socio-cultural context of the message (Duranti 2007: 18). Consequently, if in the case of the arbitrary sign, the context helps clarifying the message, in the case of the indexical sign, the coherence of the meaning is exclusively constructed within the contextual limits.

In other words, treating emoticons indexically implies constantly adapting them to the different contexts in which they are produced and which, in turn, they produce. The idea of the context analysis of the emoticon is not a linguistic discourse novelty, being done either by direct relation to the context, or by the observation that its lack may alter the message containing emoticons (Dresner și Herring 2007, Derks et al. 2007, Danet and Herring 2007). Thus, the indexicality of the emoticon becomes absolutely essential in decoding it during computer mediated communication.

But, the strict dependence of the utterance on the context implies, every time, a new form of semantic integration of the emoticon, which results in a fluid, adaptable, reorganization nature of the message and, most of all, of the utterance. At this point, bringing forward indexicality is far from clarifying the nature of the emoticon, all the more so as it is its contextualisation that has led to a series of quite opposite conclusions in analytic discourse.

It is important to remember the capacity of the emoticon to adapt to the context and the versatile character of its contextual meaning which implies developing other meanings, complementary to the basic meaning it holds as a graphic sign of a reaction to an emotion. Adaptation also implies a restructuration of the meaning of the message, thus leading to a shift in the initial logic specific to the moment the emoticon was created. Although it is



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characterized by maintaining a meaning imposed by its very graphic design, autonomous in its essence, the emoticon represented as a whole which integrates meaning becomes, in turn, with each contextualization, integrated into a whole which can be interpreted as a superstructure This way, the emoticon becomes the indexical sign of `a new species of communication` (Crystal 2001: 48) different both from written and oral communication, which, according to the same author, could be represented by speech, writing an electronic media (Crystal 2001: 48). Defining this new type of communication by this combination of elements which are useful for the anatomy of this new type, becomes completely useless when analysing the ways in which it is updated, as the elements specific to each of the three constituents will constantly surface in the individuality of specific forms and not in the unitary model of the new type of communication. This is why, perhaps, the interpretation of this new type of communication as a whole, and not according to its constituents, represents the main purpose of digital language analysis. Digital language, whose materialization is represented by the emoticon, is constructed on a grammar which is impossible to explain from the perspective of written or oral norms, but exclusively by a new grammar, of its own, which, without a doubt, borrows elements from the other two.

Interpreting the emoticon as an indexical sign of digital language determines that all the theories and the analyses surrounding it to cancel its alterity to both the writte and the oral forms of the language. Its assimilation with nonverbal elements, its interpretation as a punctuation mark of the internet language, its different use in heterogeneous age or gender groups, its multiple functionality, the problems of usage as a centrifugal trend compared to standard language and, last but not least, cultural practices which set the norms regarding its use become identity markers of a newly build form and not markers of the differentiation from the forms imposed by previous uses. This type of language built by mixing verbal elements and icons forms what Crystal calls Netspeak, a third channel (Crystal 2001: 48). But the fact there is a combination of oral and written elements and markers of the electronic medium does not form digital language as it has been regarded up to this point. What transforms this type of language into digital language, keeping in subsidiary McLuhan's theory



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according to which the medium is the message, are the communication practices individualized by its localization, its functionality, and its use.

Usage represents the particular way in which these elements are transformed, much more than emoticons, which become an epitome of the entire digital language system. Deprived of their online context, the signs lose their characteristics, becoming just pictograms which transcend to scripturality. It is the example of the most commonly used emoticons, :) or :(, in their different forms, which can also be identified outside digital media (Provine et al. 2007: 305-6).

On the other hand, usage receives different forms of interpretation as cultural practice according to the particular communication type in which digital language is used. Once generalized, the first uses of these pictograms are exclusive to simultaneous communication via instant messaging applications, private, or public, which involve a type of dialogue in which lines alternate in a framework of synchronicity. Thanks to technical developments which have led to increased connectivity through numerous devices, but mostly to mobile communication which enables both voice and text messaging, simultaneous updating of digital language has become an almost generalized reality. But it is not only instant communication that represents the way to use digital language and its entire range of practices, but also other communication forms, asynchronous, such as forums, blogs, comments, social network posts, to name just the most common ones. To a greater or lesser extent, these forms too imply dialogue, but this type of dialogue is no longer subject to the rules of simultaneity, thus affecting digital language functionality in at least two aspects.

Firstly, digital language has been interpreted by experimental psychology as having a socially diminished nature, a characteristic which results mainly from the abolition of co-presence which acts as a constraint of dialogue in digital media: `media allows less social presence and create more psychological distance` (Derks et al. 2007: 844). There is no doubt that both co-spatiality as well as co-temporality shape social interaction, but for a certain type of communication, such as the digital one, for which internet connection means abolishing any space references, co-presence can be reinterpreted as an immediate succession of lines in digital dialogue, without being necessary for the speakers to be present in the same space, at the same time. From this point of view, assimilating the emoticon as an



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aiding element which `to compensate for the lack of nonverbal communication cues` (Skovholt et al. 2014: 781) may be useful only for analysis conducted on instant messaging or texting.

For other forms of asynchronous digital dialogue, the value of turning emotions into pictograms fades away. This way, the emoticon transcends its simple form of compensating for an emotion as a sign marking the change in the state of the transmitter. (Amaghlobeli 2012: 348). In asynchronous dialogue, the emoticon encodes a completely different reality than the emotional one, specific to cultural contexts known only to those within the group.

In fact, the semantic and functional meaning of the emoticon has been reduced by Dresner and Herring (2010) to three main function categories: `(a)emotion, mapped directly onto the facial expression, (b) non-emotional, mapped conventionally onto the facial expression, (c) illocutionary force indicator that do not map conventionally onto facial expression` (Dresner și Herring 2010: 263). All these three functions can be simultaneously found in digital communication forms previously mentioned, but their ratios differ, which conveys differentiated status to emoticons.

Secondly, the asynchronous character of digital communication allows for the emoticon to be interpreted not only as a compensatory form, but also as a bearer of meaning from the perspective of the *poietics* of the digital message, strictly dependent on the context. The process of message construction on the principles of coding into a pictogram information stripped of the transparent conventionality previously described, enables to introduce the layers of enciphering and coding through which the focus shifts from use to user. Discussing teenagers' cultural practices materialized by and in texting, Moise (2013) brings up the degrees of opacity of the analyzed texts by treating the code as a cipher. The cipher quality of coded messages in digital language can be found at all levels of communication, noticing that, if in the case of teenage texting the cipher system gains coherence in the coding and decoding relations specific to a code which can transcend the digital medium, in other forms of digital language, the coding problem is no longer solved by excluding those not belonging to the group, but as exclusion of (self)initiation in codes specific to virtual language. From this point of view, cultural practices mediated or exercised by the digital



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language no longer represent an exclusion based on meaning criteria, but an exclusion created outside the code and punctual coding and inside the medium.

The analyses on the inconsistency of digital language use propose gender criteria as an identification element, developing the theory that emoticon use is a mainly feminine practice, preponderantly justified by the cliché of hyperemotivity. (Amaghlobeli 2012, Dresner and Herring 2010, Tossell et al. 2012). Such an approach, useful only for statistics purposes, is completely irrelevant from the perspective of digital practices. An analysis based on the age criteria is much more significant in what the digital medium inclusions or exclusions are concerned.

For the digital native (Prensky 2001), opposed to the digital immigrant, the practices are similar to those of learning one's mother tongue, acquired by socializing in one's own group. On the other hand, the immigrant corresponds to the foreign language student, who acquires the language after the mother tongue. But the digital immigrant is also an inconsistent owner of communication skills, depending on his/her involvement in the digital media. Just as in the case of foreign language learning, access to codes and laws specific to digital languages is obtained either by immersion, learning within the medium specific to the language, or far away from the specific space of that language. The three learning methods of this new type of language correspond to an enculturation process (in the case of the digital native) as well as to an acculturation one (in the case of the digital immigrant), with significant effects on the degree of ability in using digital language resources. The digital behaviour of the individual involved in an acculturation process, at least for those who do not acquire abilities by immersion, will always correspond to a model of understanding digital medium in general and computer mediated communication in particular as a translation of practices by using a dictionary in which offer decontextualized meanings, stripped of the information specific to digital medium use.

But the relations developed by the two types of digital individuals with the medium in which they function are not the only relevant aspect of the discussion. Equally, we also need to bring forward the variable of the relation with the information which this medium contains, not only from the perspective of coding and decoding but especially from that of how this information is absorbed. If, in most cases, the immigrant's role is only that



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of consumer of digitally mediated information, the native enters the paradigm of digital prosumerism. Filip and Ciurea (2015: 454) rediscover the typology of prosumerism according to the meaning Alvin Toeffler gives to this combination between 'produce' and 'consumer' as an incentive for interaction and individual contribution.

To this end, the use of the emoticon in digital messages places the native into a double perspective in relation to it. On the one hand, the native is a consumer of the message poetics, being, on the other hand, a producer in its poiesis. The difference between the prosumer and consumer of the digital medium at the level of the communication act can also be useful from the perspective of the emoticon indexicality. Thus, for the digital native involved in prosumerist practices, the emoticon is the indexical sign of the digital language, whilst for the digital immigrant, the emoticon indexicality materializes as a constant perception of the fracture between speech and text.

A key understanding on the poietics of the message which contains emoticons is offered by interpreting it in multiple instances such as: punctuation mark specific to digital language (Provine et al. 2007, Vandergriff 2013), meaning bearing entity (Garrison și Remley et al. 2011) or modifier of social relations (Skovholt et al. 2014).

However, besides the construction techniques of the digital message, the emoticon as a structural unit of this type of language materializes in different ways, depending on the degree of the user's familiarity to this type of language. Amaghlobeli (2012: 350) reproduces Jacques Anis's classification system of emoticons as graphemes to which she adds an eloquent set of examples taken only from digital language of texting, which are also useful, as the economy of typographic signs is a ubiquitous characteristic of computer mediated communication forms. The groups Anis proposes, taking into account the degree of similarity of the generated image to the object it designates are: alfphagrams - 'distinctive units representing the centre of the heart system' – topograms – 'distinctive significative units with [parallel] to the syntagmatic and eninciative structure of the graphic chain' – and logograms – represented by acronyms or logos.

The conclusion Amaghlobeli draws is useful for our discussion. For the author, `standard graphemes are used with a non-standard significance` (2012:350). This contrast between standard and non-standard is coherent



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only in the case in which the analytic discourse regards the emoticon as belonging to the outside of the digital language. The significance of letters or punctuation marks is standard as long as the system to which we report is the system of the written language. On the other hand, the standard for digital language represent, in fact, the capacity of the graphemes not to be subject to any system of unitary rules, but, by combination valences, to manifest centrifugal trends by which semantization becomes coherent only relationally, at the level of digital interaction.

This tendency to set apart from the standards is relevant to interpreting the emoticon as poietics of digital message integration and not as a characteristic. Integrating these signs inside the message conveyed by the digital language actually represents semantic flexibility which individualizes digital cultural practices. The same emoticon, regardless of the class it belongs to, retains, with each use, a meaning which derives from the intention it is used with, meaning which, for digital natives, at least in the context of informal contexts, can be interpreted by decrypting this intention. In these situations, interpreting the emoticon in the sense assumed by its own etymology is not only useless, but also completely abnormal because the attempt to search the emotion conveyed by the emoticon in communication practices cancels the semantics of that particular message.

In other words, besides the indexicality of the digital, the emoticon intrinsically contains an indexicality of the intention, since it 'informs on the expected impact' (Walter and D'Addario 2001: 327). Coding the intention, placed outside the message, acquires an importance which is also significant at the level of the receiver's decoding. Since both parties of the communication have the codes, digital communication, similar to the non-digital one, works without interruptions. There might be problems if the intentionality of the message implied by using the emoticon is not decoded by using the same coding system as the transmitter. This kind of situation can occur if those taking part in computer mediated communication belong to different groups according to the way in which language is acquired, either by acculturation or enculturation. Thus, in this particular case, context becomes synonym with the way in which one gains access to the digital medium.

The prosumerist intentionality of the emoticon, the most significant one for this analysis, implies a much wider range of interpretations than just converting emotion into a graphic sign. Amaghlobeli (2012: 351-2)



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identifies six uses of the emoticon which, in line with our discussion so far, might correspond to six types of intentions which the author indirectly identifies, from the use of the emoticon, and not directly by questioning the transmitter. On the other hand, a real setback of the author's identification endeavour is to bring up only emoticons which can be assimilated to smileys, that is to those emoticons whose main meanings are intimately connected to communication emotions.

Thus, the range of uses which have been indentified comprises of: ' the addition of paraverbal elements' representing, in fact, a complement of the message, 'redundancy' for which she identifies a direct or indirect correspondence between the text of the message and the emoticon, 'antiphrasis' or the use of the emoticon opposite to the text content, 'complete turn`, when the emoticon used individually represents, in fact, the entire materialization of a verbal reaction and, in the end, the 'syntactic marker' value or the punctuation marker.

In the end, another attempt at classifying the use of the emoticon implies reading it from the perspective of communication functions. Interpreted as a pragmatic modifier, the emoticon has the function to organize social relations as a marker of solidarity (Skovholt et al. 2014:792).

In short, the indexicality of the emoticon is must be understood as a double approach, on the one hand pointing to the digital language, on the other to intentionality turned into socio-cultural practice. On the other hand, the emoticon, becomes an epitome of digital language which develops its own grammar and which relegitimates the understanding of the medium as message. As a space of actualization, the emoticon develops different functionalities in the sense of the two complementary types of digital dialogue – synchronous and non-synchronous – but also different uses and understanding resulting from the two types of digital language learning as enculturation or acculturation.

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