

# A Analysis of the Functions of Emoji in the Messenger App from the Perspective of Rapport Management

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**Abstract:**Emoji is not only one of types of digital graphical icons, but also can be seen as a new virtual language. Especially with the development of technology, it is widely used in online communication around the world. Hence this critical essay tries to explain the functions of emoji from the perspective of rapport management among four persons from different cultural backgrounds. The data show emoji not only has textual functions (expressing feelings, stressing the tone of speech acts and emphasizing the contents of speech acts), but also has social functions (mitigating face-threatening acts, achieving interactional goals and managing communicative flow), which eventually helps people to build and maintain good relationships.

**Key words:** Functions of emoji, Rapport management, Online communication, Cultural difference

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## 1.Introduction

There are four individuals who form a trans-cultural study group. Among them, one girl (Sarah) and one boy (Adam) are from Australia whose first languages are English, and the other two girls (Echo and Iris) come from China whose first languages are Mandarin. In order to communicate with each other more timely and conveniently, a chat room in Messenger App has been set up. After looking through all messages, I find that both Chinese and Australians like to use emoji in their personal communications, which dramatically arouses my interests. Hence, this critical research essay focuses on the functions of emoji in online trans-cultural communication, especially concerning the functions of emoji in the aspects of apologies and closing conversations. In addition, research questions are answered on the basis of rapport management.

The critical research essay begins from literature reviews of emoji and rapport management. And then research question (the functions of emoji in the aspects of apologies and closing conversations in online trans-cultural communication) are discussed from the perspective of rapport management with four examples extracted from Messenger App. In the end, main points are summarized. Besides, limitations of the essay and the direction of future research are proposed.

## 2.Literature review

### 2.1 Emoji

Emoji is not only one of types of digital graphical icons, but also can be regarded as a new virtual language used in online communication (Alshenqeeti, 2016; Danesi, 2016). The first set of emoji was invented by one Japanese communication company in 1999, which acquired a great success and was later imitated by many companies (Blagdon, 2013). After that, the use of emoji has spread all over the world, because of the rapid development of globalization and computer-mediated communication (Blagdon, 2013).

Emoji is a way of expressing emotions initially, which is widely used in online communication, including mails, text messages and so on (Danesi, 2016). But then under the real communicative conditions, emoji has more and more textual functions, such as strengthening the tone of speech, emphasizing the specific information in the conversation, expressing illocutionary meanings, opening or closing a conversation (Alshenqeeti, 2016). These findings are also supported by Ge and Herring (2018) in one study about the use of emoji on Sina Weibo.

Besides textual functions, emoji also provides social functions. On the one hand, the use of emoji damages the good relationships among individuals. Because since emoji has carried special cultural connotations, it is possible that people misinterpret the meanings of emoji in computer-mediated communication, especially for interlocutors coming from different cultural backgrounds (Danesi, 2016). For this reason, Danesi (2016) further proposes that it would be better if people around the world share the same lexical rules of emoji, meaning that it'd better if each emoji corresponds with one unique meaning. However, from my personal experience, this idea perhaps is

not feasible, since there already have existed so many different types and norms of emoji around the whole world. What's more, Gibson et al. (2018) show that even if the interlocutors have the same natural identity, they still have different understandings of the same emoji, meaning the interpretations of emoji is not only related to cultural backgrounds, but also situated in contextual conditions.

However, on the other hand, Alshenqeti (2016) and Agnese (2019) think that emoji can help people build or maintain rapport, because it expresses information in a more moderate way by mitigating face-threatening acts and it even can help speakers to stress or emphasize their feelings or contents of speech acts. Hence, this critical essay focuses on the functions of emoji in online conversation among people from different cultural backgrounds, especially analyzing the functions of emoji in apologies and closing conversations.

## 2.2 Rapport management

Rapport management is a framework proposed by Spencer-Oatey (2000; 2002; 2010), describing that social relationships can be built, maintained and threatened by languages. According to Spencer-Oatey's statements (2000; 2002; 2010), there are three major interconnected components of rapport management, namely face management, social rights and obligations and interactional goals. Face management includes the management of the positive face (a recognition of one's dignity and identity) and the negative face (a desire for autonomy). Social rights and obligations can be explained from two main principles: equity and association. Equity means that people want to be treated equally, and also treat others equally, while association emphasizes that the extent to how to interact with others or express feelings. In terms of interactional goals, it means whether the purpose of having a communication is achieved or not, influenced by social and contextual environments.

In addition, Spencer-Oatey (2000; 2002; 2010) further states that there are five domains of rapport management, including illocutionary domain, discourse domain, stylistic domain, participation domain and non-verbal domain. Illocutionary domain is primarily dealt with by Brown and Levinson in 1987, which concerns how to perform speech acts, including the degree of directness or indirectness and the number or type of upgrades or downgrades. Discourse domain concerns the contents and structures of speech acts, such as the choices of topics and the organization of information. Stylistic aspects of speech acts are stressed in stylistic domain. For example, whether the tone of the speech acts is serious or relaxing. Besides, participation domain is about the speaking rules of speech acts (e.g. turn-taking norms) and the participants, while non-verbal domain includes any other behaviors occurred in speech acts (e.g. eye contacts, gestures), except the verbal behaviors. From this perspective, the use of emoji can be involved in non-verbal domain and can be analyzed from three main components of rapport management.

## 3.Data analysis

### 3.1 The emoji used in apologies

Extract 1

Echo: Do you want to start discussing our assignment?

Sarah: Hi! Sorry I'm busy right now 😞

The background information is that Echo wanted to discuss the assignment with the other three classmates together, however, Sarah had no time. In the short conversation presented above, Sarah uses 😞 (unhappy) at the end of the sentence to show her apology. From the perspective of face management, if Sarah refuses to accept Echo's request about discussing the assignment, then to some extent, she threatens Echo's face and perhaps damages the harmonious relationships between them (Spencer-Oatey, 2000; 2002; 2010). Hence, in order to mitigate the behavior of threatening face, Sarah tries to express her bad feelings and stress her tone of apology by using the emoji 😞 (Alshenqeti, 2016; Ge & Herring, 2018). Besides, since the emoji 😞 can be interpreted as unhappy, the use of it in the end of a sentence can be seen as a strategy for Sarah to achieve her interactional goals (Agnese, 2019), expressing that she also wants to have a discussion about the assignment, but she can not do that due to other reasons. In this way, it also shows that Sarah doesn't want this unexpected thing to damage the harmonious relationship between her and Echo.

Apart from the emoji 😞, the emoji 😭 (joy with tears) can also be used in an apology which is more frequently used by two Chinese girls in the trans-cultural study group. It is shown below in extract 2.

Extract 2

Iris: Sorry, I just notice the messages. The app haven't given me a reminder. 😭

Echo: No worries, what's your idea about questions?

Iris: Sorry, I don't have ideas, and I thought maybe I have misunderstood the questions. 😂

The background information of extract 2 is that Iris didn't notice the messages about the discussion of the assignment until one day later. And when she found that the assignment questions have already been discussed, she showed her regrets. It can be seen that though Iris directly apologizes with the word "sorry" in both sentences, she also uses the emoji 😂 in the end. In this case, the emoji 😂 perhaps is used to express Iris' feelings that she is also unsatisfied about the absence of the discussion. Besides, the uses of both the word "sorry" and the emoji 😂 can help her stress the tone and emphasize the contents of speech acts that she really feels sorry about the situation (Alshenqeeti, 2016; Ge & Herring, 2018). What's more, the emoji 😂 can also be seen as a strategy for Iris to achieve her interactional goals (Agnese, 2019). More specifically, it can help her maintain the relationship with others rather than leaving a bad impression that she doesn't want to collaborate with other members in the study group.

From the extracts discussed above, the use of the emoji is good for mitigating face-threatening acts and achieving interactional goals by expressing feelings, stressing the tone and emphasizing the contents of speech acts, which eventually is conducive to maintain good relationships.

### 3.2 The emoji used in closing conversations

Extract 3

Sarah: We can study and come back to talk about unsolved questions.

Echo: I think it's OK. Enjoy your time. 😘

Extract 4

Iris: Thanks.

Echo: It doesn't matter.

Iris : Have a nice day.

Echo: 😘

In both extract 3 and extract 4, Echo uses the emoji 😘 (kiss) to close conversations, though extract 3 includes verbal contents and extract 4 only has the emoji. From the perspective of interactional goals, it is normal that people always want to build or maintain good relationships rather than leave bad feelings when they close a conversation (Lorenzo-Dus & Bou-Franch, 2013), while the use of the emoji 😘 is just a good way to show the happiness of having the current conversation and can also be regarded as a signal for looking forward next communication. In this way, the bridge of constructing or maintaining the relationships is built through the use of the emoji 😘. In addition, it can also help interlocutors manage the communicative flow by giving the floor of conversation to other people (Agnese, 2019). When used in this way, the current speaker is respecting other individuals' rights of continuing or stopping the conversation, which eventually achieves a interactional success among all speakers (Pavlidou, 2010).

Therefore, according to the views discussed above, the use of the emoji 😘 is benefit to achieve interactional goals and manage communicative flow by expressing feelings and obeying turn-talking norms of communication.

### 4. Conclusions and limitations

The critical research essay discusses the functions of emoji used in Messengers App by four members from one trans-cultural study group. It especially focuses on the functions of emoji used in apologies and closing conversations from the perspective of rapport management. In accordance with the discussion presented above, the use of emoji not only has textual functions, such as expressing feelings, stressing the tone of speech acts and emphasizing the contents of speech acts (Alshenqeeti, 2016; Ge & Herring, 2018), but also

has social functions, like mitigating face-threatening acts, achieving interactional goals and managing communicative flow (Alshenqeti, 2016; Agnese, 2019), which eventually helps people to build and maintain good relationships.

There are several limitations for the critical research essay. At first, it only focuses on two types of speech acts, while there are a great number of speech acts which are also worthy of discussing and analyzing, such as requests, greetings and so on (Gibson et al., 2018; Agnese, 2019). In addition, the samples used in the critical essay are too small to be regarded as a common view about the functions of emoji in the computer-mediated communication. Hence, in the further research, in order to get more reliable findings, a great number of samples are needed and the functions of emoji used in other types of speech acts are also needed.

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