

How to Do Things with Emojis: The Pragmatic Functions of Emojis in Teacher-Student Interaction through Wechat

Cómo hacer cosas con emojis: las funciones pragmáticas de los emojis en la interacción profesor-alumno a través de Wechat

如何用表情符号行事：师生微信群聊中表情符号的语用功能

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Abstract: As efficient tools in online interaction, Emojis have attracted ample attention from researchers in diverse fields, stressing that its pragmatic values deserve further systemic exploration. Against this background, this paper investigates the pragmatic functions of emojis through retrieving interactive data between teachers and students in Wechat rooms. A total of 5 volunteers (4 teachers and 1 student) were invited to collect data from their teacher-student Wechat groups respectively. Forty-eight types of emoji in the corpus were described and analyzed, finally classified into 3 pragmatic functions: illocutionary function, interpersonal function and textual function. Specifically, emojis can: i) work as indicators of literal force (secondary illocutionary act) or indirect force (primary illocutionary act). ii) work as rapport management strategies to maintain or enhance the relationship between/among interlocutors. iii) work as structural constituents, which will contribute to the opening, continuing or closing of a conversation. Accordingly, these findings would contribute to the enrichment of theoretical studies of emojis, and the understanding of online discourse in mediated forms.

Key Words: emojis; online interaction; pragmatic function; Wechat.

Resumen: Como herramientas eficientes en la interacción en línea, los Emojis han atraído una gran atención de los investigadores en diversos campos, destacando que sus valores pragmáticos merecen una mayor exploración sistémica. En este contexto, este artículo investiga las funciones pragmáticas de los emojis mediante la recuperación de datos interactivos entre profesores y alumnos en las salas de Wechat. Un total de 5 voluntarios (4 profesores y 1 estudiante) fueron invitados a recopilar datos de sus respectivos grupos de Wechat, de profesores y estudiantes, respectivamente. Fueron descritos y analizados cuarenta y ocho tipos de emojis en el corpus y, finalmente, clasificados en 3 funciones pragmáticas: función ilocucionaria, función interpersonal y función textual. Específicamente, los emojis pueden: i) funcionar como indicadores de fuerza literal (acto ilocucionario secundario) o fuerza indirecta (acto ilocucionario primario); ii) trabajar como estrategias de gestión de relaciones para mantener o mejorar la relación entre o con los interlocutores; y iii) trabajar como componentes estructurales, lo que contribuirá a la apertura, continuación o cierre de una conversación. En consecuencia, estos hallazgos contribuirían al enriquecimiento de los estudios teóricos sobre los emojis y a la comprensión del discurso en línea en formas mediatizadas.

Palabras clave: emojis; interacción en línea; función pragmática; Wechat.

摘要: 作为一种高效的网络交流工具，表情符号正获得越来越多的关注。本研究尝试以师生微信群聊为例，分析网络话语互动过程中表情符号的语用功能。共有4名教师和1名学生参与了语料的收集。他们被要求在自己的师生群聊中自愿收集含有表情符号的语料。研究共分析48种表情符号，它们具有的语用功能可以分为三类：言语行事功能、人际关系功能和文本结构功能。具体而言，表情符号可以：1) 替代/强化具有言语行为功能的文字，从而表达说话人的直接意图或者间接意图；2) 替代/强化具有人际关系功能的文字，从而维系或者提升人际关系；3) 替代/强化具有文本结构功能文字或标点，从而保证会话的顺利进行。本研究在理论层面可以进一步补充表情符号的系统研究，同时对于进一步了解网络话语互动的特征，规范网络交际文明具有一定的参考意义。

[关键词] 表情符号；网络话语互动；语用功能；微信群聊

1. Introduction

Emojis can be defined as a popular set of digital pictographs used in social media, text messages, e-mails and other applications (Sampietro,

2019). While considered as the inheritors of ASCII emoticons which was first used by Scott Fahlman in 1982, the first set of emojis launched in 1999 by the Japanese company Docomo had enormous success and were imitated by the competitors. Even now, emojis have gradually replaced emoticons (Herring & Dainas, 2017) in both static and dynamic forms in online communication. Most of the studies on emojis give salient emphasis upon their emotional veins (Dresner & Herring, 2010). However, the recent studies indicate that emojis also have pragmatic functions in online interaction (Danesi, 2017: 100). For example, Dresner & Herring (2010) proposed that emojis might also signal the illocutionary force of the utterance they accompany in addition to the emotional content. Along the same path, Danesi (2017), when illustrating the pragmatic functions of emojis, analyzed the phatic and punctuation function of emojis. Moreover, some researchers have also noticed the link between emojis and politeness strategies (Calero, 2014). Although research on the pragmatic functions of emojis is growing, it is still in its infancy (Sampietro, 2019), especially regarding its functions in non-Western language-speaking scenario. As such, this paper aims to explore the pragmatic functions of emojis in online communication, specifically with the data collected from teacher-student interaction through Wechat. Accordingly, the paper mainly consists of six sections. While section one sketches out the introductory remarks, section two combs the prior literature for gaps to be patched in this paper. With section 3 spared for framework description and section 4 for methodology, section 5 gives a detailed discussion of the functions of emojis in teacher-student interaction, followed by a brief concluding remarks in section 6.

2. Literature Review

This section mainly focuses on literature reviews of the pragmatic functions of emojis. Through carefully combing literature review, we found that the most basic function of emojis is to add emotional tone while emphasizing a certain phatic aspects of communication (Danesi, 2017). Besides the emotional veins, emojis also have pragmatic functions, such as signaling the illocutionary force of the utterance (Dresner & Herring, 2010), rapport management (Li & Yang 2018), and managing the conversation (Sampietro, 2019). Considering about pragmatic functions of emojis, many researchers yield many different classifications. For instance, Yus (2014) proposed an 8-function taxonomy of emojis, including illocutionary force, propositional attitude, humor, irony, affective attitude, emotion, etc. Quite different from Yus (2014), Kelly & Watts (2015) classified the pragmatic

functions of emojis into conversational connection, playful interaction, and “uniqueness.” Likewise, Bich-Carrière (2019) suggested that emojis serve three main functions: a phatic function; an enunciation function, and a lexical function. To sum up, the pragmatic functions of emojis shot around three aspects, namely, illocutionary force (Dresner & Herring 2010), relational management (Walther & D’Addario, 2001; Golato & Taleghani-Nikazm, 2006; Maíz-Arévalo, 2015), and textual regulation (Danesi, 2017).

Dresner & Herring (2010) believed that emoticons not only work as emotion icon, but also work as speech acts with illocutionary force. They applied speech act theory to tease out the communicative function of emoticons in CMC, arguing that a general function common of many emoticons is textual indication of illocutionary force. Similarly, Yus (2014) proposed an 8-function taxonomy of emoji. Among the 8 functions, Yus (2014) mentioned emoji is used to: (1) signal the propositional attitude that underlies the utterance and which would be difficult to identify without the aid of the emoticon; and (2) to strengthen/mitigate the illocutionary force of a speech act. Likewise, Giaxoglou & Johansson (2020) also believed that emojis would contribute to the expression of stance. All these prior researches indicate that emojis can convey intentions, attitudes and illocutionary forces in online interaction.

Another important function of emoticons in online discourse interaction is to maintain interpersonal relationships. For example, Kavanagh (2010) found that emoticons could work as politeness strategies that facilitate the relational work. Maíz-Arévalo (2015) proposed that emojis could work as face-saving strategies. Li & Yang (2018) found that the frequent use of positive emojis, compared with the negative ones, may be attributed to social and psychological motives. Actually, this is also supported by Sugiyama (2018), who proposed that emojis allow Japanese teens to manage communication climate that involves their representation of aesthetic selves. In other words, positive emojis will contribute to the interpersonal relation. Considering that the use of discourse strategies to maintain face respect and mitigate face threats can help maintain or enhance the relationship between communicators and play a role in rapport management (Spencer-Oatey, 2000), emojis are believed to have the function of interpersonal management.

Some researchers believe that emojis used in online interaction have the functions of punctuation or phatic. For example, Provine et al (2007) mentioned that some emojis could have “punctuation effect” in website text messages. Danesi (2017) also mentioned the phatic and punctuation function of emoji in his research. The phatic function concerns about

how users employ emojis to open or end conversations. For example, the emojis used to open a conversation are always related to the addresser or addressee's identity. Some emojis (such as *kissing*) are used at the end of a conversation to ensure that the conversation is not ended abruptly. Moreover, emojis have taken on several of the functions of punctuation, such as "mood breakers" (Danesi, 2017:105). Therefore, it can be seen that emojis could signal the addresser's need to open, continue or end a conversation in online interaction, which serve as a textual regulator.

Even though there is a rich amount of studies on emoji, literatures still demonstrate gaps to be patched for a better knowing of emojis in mediated interaction. To be specific, two gaps are found: first, even though some researchers have noticed the pragmatic functions of emoji (Yus, 2014; Danesi, 2017), the studies on emoji's pragmatic function are far from adequacy. For example, power asymmetry and social distance are factors that may influence interpersonal communication (Hofstede, 1984). But literature reviews show that the present studies mainly focus on the online interaction in power-symmetric situations (Danesi, 2017), which will lead to biased understandings of emoji's functions. Second, the relationship between functions of emoji has not been discussed coherently. There may be overlaps between different functions of emojis. For example, Yus (2014)'s 8 types of functions are considered as the most complete functions of emoji (Li & Yang, 2018). However, Yus (2014) acknowledged that function 6 (to add a feeling or emotion toward the propositional content of the utterance) and function 8 (to communicate the intensity of a feeling or emotion that has been coded verbally) could not be distinguished clearly in some situations. Against this backdrop, it is necessary to reconsider the present classification of emoji's pragmatic functions. This is just where our paper will depart.

3. Framework of Pragmatic Function in Multimodal Context

As this paper aims to explore the functions of emojis in online discourse, the framework used in this paper is developed from Jakobson (1960) and Halliday (1994). The reason of using Jakobson's (1960) and Halliday's (1994) framework will be discussed as follows:

As is well known, Jakobson (1960) identified the functions as critical to understanding the overall nature of human interaction (Waugh, 1980; Baldi et al., 2016). The functions are connected to structural constituents of verbal communication. Jakobson (1960) discussed about six constituents, namely, addresser, addressee, context, message, context, code. Each of

these six factors determines a different function of language. Jakobson (1960) matched these constituents to six speech functions, and Danesi (2017) draw the relations between functions as in figure 1.

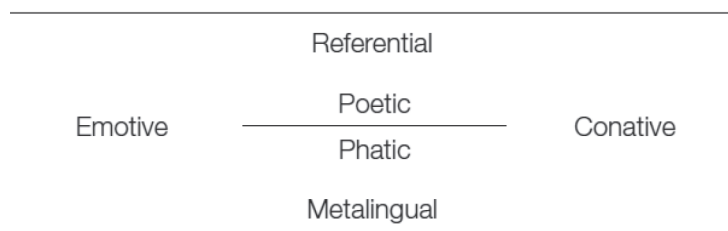


Figure 1. Jakobson's functions (Danesi 2017, p. 101)

In figure 1, the emotive function correlates with the addresser's intent in constructing the message. The conative function is the effect the message is intended to produce on the addressee. The referential function corresponds to the context in which an utterance is delivered, indicating that the message is constructed to convey specific information about something. The poetic function draws attention to the form of the message itself, producing an aesthetic effect, much like poetry. The phatic function is designed to establish, maintain, or assuage social contact. Finally, the metalingual function underlies messages designed to refer to the code used. The framework of functions by Jakobson (1960) is widely used in analysis of CMC interaction (Kulkarni, 2014), and will contribute to the understanding of emoji in online interaction. For example, the referential function could contribute to the understanding of illocutionary aspect of emoji (Janicki, 2018). The phatic function could explain why emoji work as opening or closing markers in online interaction (Kulkarni, 2014). But, there are limitations of this framework. For example, some of the functions are out the scope of linguistics, and cannot explain the phenomenon of language. Comparing with Jakobson's (1960) framework, Halliday's (1994) framework focuses more on the functions of discourse.

Another framework used in this paper is from Halliday (1994). Halliday (1994) put forward three metafunctions relating to the structures of discourse, namely, ideational function, interpersonal function and textual function. The ideational function is to convey new information, to communicate a content that is unknown to the hearer. The interpersonal function embodies all uses of language to express social and personal relations. The textual function means to organize messages in ways which indicate how they fit in with the other messages around them. The three metafunctions are in the scope of linguistics, which will overcome the deficits

of Jakobson's (1960) framework. Also, the framework can contribute to the understanding of functions of emoji in online interaction. For example, the interpersonal function could explain the relational aspect of emoji (Halliday & Hason, 1985). And, the textual function could explain the textual aspect of emoji studies (Provine et al, 2007). However, the three metafunctions still have deficits in explaining the functions of emoji in online discourse. For example, they can't explain the performance of speech acts, and the intention by using emoji as speech acts. But many researchers focus on the speech act domain (Spencer-otaey, 2000; Sampietro, 2009) or intention through speech acts (Jakobson, 1960).

Accordingly, this paper put forward a framework that would be suitable in a multimodal context. In this framework, the functions of emoji will be explained from three aspects, namely, illocutionary aspect, interpersonal aspect and textual aspect. The illocutionary layer, similar to Jakobson's (1960) referential function (Janicki, 2018), mainly focuses on how emojis work to signal the illocutionary force of the utterance (Jakobson, 1960; Dresner & Herring, 2010; Yus, 2014). Specifically, illocutionary layer concerns about how emojis work as literal force (secondary illocutionary act) or indirect force (primary illocutionary act) indicators. The former refers to situations where emojis are used to replace some speech acts. The latter refers to situations where one illocutionary act is performed indirectly through emojis. The interpersonal layer, akin to Halliday's (1994) interpersonal function, concerns the maintenance or enhancement of relationship between /among interlocutors by using emoji (Halliday, 1994; Kavanagh, 2010; Li & Yang, 2018). Emojis are used as rapport management strategies, which may mitigate FTA or express the addresser's politeness. Textual layer, similar to Jakobson's (1960) phatic function and Halliday's (1994) textual function, concerns the structural constituents of communication when using emoji (Jakobson, 1960; Halliday, 1994; Danesi, 2017). In online interaction, emojis would contribute to the opening, continuing or closing of a conversation.

4. Methodology

Inspired by the framework, this paper intends to answer the question: what are the functions of emojis used in teacher-student interactions through Wechat?

In order to answer the question, we collected data in Mandarin Chinese through Wechat that is an interactive multimodal platform where users send texts, audios, videos, photos, and other files. Specifically, the

data are collected from teacher-student interaction in Wechat for two reasons: 1) The use of language in the online contact is different from the face-to-face contact (Vincze & Joyce, 2018). For example, Walther (1996) believed that online interactions can exceed the potency of face-to-face interactions. Vossen et al (2017) proposed that people in face-to-face and online communication may respond differently with respect to expressing negativity to others. 2) In teacher-student online interaction, the two parties of participants, teachers and students, are of asymmetric power (Suwinyattichaiorn et al, 2019) where both parties will think more rationally about their linguistic and non-linguistic choices. In this case, the emojis sent by the teacher and student will be different from those in other kinds of online interactions.

The corpus was compiled between January 20th, 2020 and April 30th, 2020. It was collected from the author's colleagues and students. Participants were 4 teachers and 1 student in a college of North China. The teachers are between 30 and 45 years old, and the student is 20 years old. Informants were asked to send the log of the chats in teacher-student Wechat chatting rooms they were willing to share to the e-mail address of the author, giving their informed consent to participate in the research at the same time. Considering that the corpus was from group chat, all the users of emojis involved in the group chat were asked to send informed consent to a researcher's e-mail at the same time. As the focus of this paper is on the use of emoji and its approach is qualitative, we included in the analysis only conversations containing at least one emoji. Accordingly, 1,121 messages grouped into 139 conversations, were included in the corpus.

The selected conversations included a total amount of 256 emojis, with 48 different emojis. This shows that despite the variety of pictographs available, users typically rely on a small number of emojis. The most frequent emoji used were *facepalm* (🤦) (52 instances), *face with tears of joy* (😂) (37 instances), and *smiley face* (😊) (26 instances). In the ensuing section, we will further analyze the functions of emojis regarding their illocutionary, interpersonal and textual veins.

5. Functions of Emojis in Chinese teacher-student interaction through Wechat

According to the analysis of corpus collected from Chinese teacher-student Wechat group room, three pragmatic functions of emojis are found, which include illocutionary function, interpersonal function and textual

function. This section will discuss about the three functions in details with examples from the corpus.

5.1. Illocutionary Function

In online interaction, Emojis have function of signaling the illocutionary force of utterances (Dresner & Herring, 2010), which is called illocutionary function. The illocutionary function originates from Jakobson's (1960) referential function, which is widely used in understanding of illocutionary aspect of emojis (Janicki, 2018). The illocutionary function also comes from Thomas's (1995) three classifications of meaning, namely abstract meaning, contextual meaning and force. Abstract meaning is concerned with what a word, phrase, and sentence could mean. Contextual meaning is a combination between sense/reference and word/phrase/sentence. Force refers to the speaker's intention. The illocutionary function mentioned here is similar to a combination of contextual meaning and force. In online discourse, emojis are used to express literal force (secondary illocutionary act) and indirect force (first illocutionary act). In other words, emojis will replace several speech acts, and express the addresser's intention at the same time (Dresner & Herring, 2010). This section will discuss how emojis are used to replace speech acts, and then discuss how they are used to express addresser's intention.

First, emojis are used to replace several speech acts (such as requests, thanks, compliments) in teacher-student Wechat chatting rooms. In other words, the use of emoji in the process of online teacher-student interaction has the function of expressing literal force (secondary illocutionary act) (Sampietro, 2019), as in example 1.

Example 1: [Text: Teacher is asking volunteers to share experiences of using Yunbanke, a kind of online learning platform, and many students raised up their hand. Among the students, Ma Guo is the first student who raised up his hand.]

01 26.02.2020 13: 28 Teacher 1: 我给马国一个机会 把云班课经验提一提 如何

Wǒ gěi mǎ guó yī gè jī huì bǎ yún bān kè jīng yàn tí yī tí rú hé

Let me give Ma Guo a chance to share his experience of using Yunbanke. Ma Guo?

02 26.02.2020 13: 28 Student 1: ok

03 26.02.2020 13: 28 Student 1: 😊

04 26.02.2020 13: 28 Teacher 1: 👍

05 26.02.2020 13: 28 Teacher 1: 话题你们自选

Huàtí nǐmen zìxuǎn

Choose a topic by yourselves

06 26.02.2020 13: 28 Teacher 1: 现在四个人啦

Xiànzài sì gèrén la

Now, we got four volunteers

07 26.02.2020 13: 28 Teacher 1: 还有没有呀

Hái yǒu méiyǒu ya

Anybody else

08 26.02.2020 13: 28 Student 2: 🙋

Through the conversations between teacher and students in example 1, it can be found out how emojis are used as second illocutionary acts (literal force). In example 1, teacher 1 asked students to share their experiences of using Yunbanke (云班课, a kind of online teaching platform), many students responded. Among the students, student 2 used the emoji *raise up hand* (🙋) to replace the willing speech act and implied the willingness to share his/her experiences. The way of using emojis to replace some speech acts is widely used in WeChat chatting because of its simplicity. Nevertheless, emoji cannot stand alone, and it has to be used with other words, phrases and sentences. For example, the emoji *raise up hand* used by student 2 in example 1 can only make sense if they coordinate with teachers 1's words (requiring the students to work as volunteers to sharing their experiences of using Yunbanke).

Second, in addition to secondary illocutionary act, emojis can also work as primary illocutionary act (indirect force), which means emojis have the function of expressing the addresser's intention (Yus, 2014; Giaxoglou & Johansson, 2020). The statement is based on Austin's (1955) notion of illocutionary act. In the book *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin (1955) mentioned that illocutionary act means the intended act behind saying something (Searle, 1968), which implies that illocutionary act can convey some intentions of the addresser. When it comes to emojis, the previous studies have already proven that when replacing speech acts, the addressers have expressed some intentions (Dresner & Herring, 2010). This paper focuses more on how intentions are expressed in a teacher-student chatting context, as in example 2.

Example 2: [Context: teacher 2 misspelled student 3's name, and student 2 tried to remind teacher 2 about it].

01 05.03.2020 08:32 Student 3: 老师，你给我名字备注错了

Lǎoshī, nǐ gěi wǒ míngzì bèizhù cuòle
 sir, you have misspelled my name
 02 05.03.2020 08:32 Teacher 2: 好的 李涛 (化名)
 Hǎo de lǐtāo (huà míng)
 Got it, Li Tao (pseudonym)
 03 05.03.2020 08:32 Student 3: 😏😏😏

04 05.03.2020 08:32 Student 3: 没事，靓靓老师
 Méishì, jìng jìng lǎoshī
 It's all right, Mr. Liangliang
 05 05.03.2020 08:32 Student 4: 🙄😂

In example 2, student 3 teased teacher 2 (it's all right, Mr. Liangliang) because teacher 2 has misspelled student 3's name. Student 4 uses emoji *onlooker* (🙄) (disclaimer: no copyright infringement is intended when we use the emoji) to indicate that he is watching the conversations between teacher 2 and student 3 with a wait-and-see intention. Also, student 4 used *face with tears of joy* (😂) emoji to indicate that he is amused by the conversation between teacher 2 and student 3. It can be seen from this example that student 4 tried express his intention (wait-and-see) by replacing speech acts with emoji. Thus, one function of emoji is to express the emoji user's intentions when replacing speech acts.

It can be seen from the above two examples that one of the pragmatic functions of emojis in the process of online communication is illocutionary function (originates from Jakobson's (1960) referential function). In online interaction, the addressers used emojis not only to replace some speech acts (such as requests, thanks, compliments), but more importantly, they also to express the addresser's intentions (Yus, 2014; Giaxoglou & Johansson, 2020). The previous studies may have notices that the emojis were used to replace speech acts, or to express the addresser's intentions. But, they didn't realize their interrelations, for speech acts are tightly related to the addressers' intentions (Austin, 1955; Searle, 1968). In addition, the illocutionary function is not only one of the basic pragmatic functions realized by the emoji, and it is also the most important pragmatic function. After all, in an online communicative environment like teacher-student WeChat chatting, the use of emojis always has a specific communicative purpose.

5.2. Interpersonal Function

Interpersonal function concerns the maintenance or enhancement of relationship between /among interlocutors by using emojis. It originates

from Halliday's (1994) interpersonal function, which means that language is used to interact with other people, to maintain and establish relations with them. The interpersonal function of language has gained a lot of attention recently (Davis, 2010; Spencer-Oatey, 2000; Arundale, 2013; Maíz-Arévalo, 2015). For example, Davis (2010) mentioned the relational function of language which means language is used for securing cooperation and compliance. Spencer-Oatey (2000) believed that language can be used for rapport management, and she focuses on how different linguistic strategies (domains) are used for the construction and maintenance of social relationships in interpersonal interaction. Studies on emojis also demonstrate that emojis have interpersonal function. To be specific, emojis work as politeness strategies (Darics, 2010; Kavanagh, 2016) and face-saving strategies (Maíz-Arévalo, 2015). These literatures show that emojis are tightly related to interpersonal function. This paper will also discuss about the interpersonal function of emojis from how it is used to maintain or enhance the relationship between teacher and student in online interaction.

First, one of the functions of emoji is to mitigate the face threatening acts, or to reduce the imposition of words, phrases, or sentences, so as to build harmonious interpersonal relationship (Kavanagh, 2010). As Skovholt et al (2014) mentioned, emoticons could work as hedges or used as humorous, jokes/irony markers, which will avoid the possible face threatening actions. We could also find evidence to prove these statements in the data being collected, as in example 3.

Example 3: [Context: the p90 in this conversation is a kind of submachine gun. Student 6 always plays a computer game PUBG, and he is familiar with p90 in this game. Zhidao is a kin of online learning platform].

01 03.03.2020 8:01 Teacher 3: 同学们，这节课我们玩知到

Tóngxuémen, zhè jié kè wǒmen wán zhī dào

Hello class, we play Zhidao in this class

02 03.03.2020 8:01 Teacher 3: 上知到做单元测试

Shàng zhī dào zuò dānyuán cèshì

Please check in Zhidao and finish the unit test

03 03.03.2020 8:01 Student 5: ?

04 03.03.2020 8:01 Student 6: 咋玩

Zǎ wán

How to play

05 03.03.2020 8:01 Student 7: rua就行了

Rua jiùxínglè
Just rua
06 03.03.2020 8:01 Student 6: p90?

07 03.03.2020 8:01 Student 7: 哈哈小蜜蜂
Hāhā hā xiǎo mìfēng
hahaha a bee

08 03.03.2020 8:01 Student 6: 脑瘫吧你 😊
Nǎotān ba nǐ 😊
Are you in cerebral palsy disorder 😊

In example 3, after teacher 3 made an announcement of testing, many students teased teacher 3, and students also teased each other. One of the students, student 7 replied teacher 3 with “hahaha a bee”. Apparently, student 6 can’t understand what student 7 has said, and replied “are you in cerebral palsy disorder”. In daily communication, if one is called “cerebral palsy disorder”, it means the person is an idiot. So, “are you in cerebral palsy disorder” is an impolite expression. In order to soften the face threatening acts, student 6 used a *face with tears of joy* (😊) to achieve the purpose of rapport management.

Second, emojis also serve the function of enhancing the relationship between/among interlocutors, thereby establishing a benign interpersonal environment (Li & Yang, 2018). Many research have proven that, the addressers would use some emojis, such as rose, thumb-ups to give feedback or positive emotion effect (Wu et al, 2016; Petitjean & Morel, 2017). The statements could also be proven in example 4.

Example 4: [Context: teacher 4 shared the invitation code of Tencent Meeting, a kind of online teaching platform, in the chatting room, and many students thanked the teacher].

01 01.03.2020 19:56 Teacher 4: 明天的会议码
Míngtiān de huìyì mǎ

This is tomorrow’s invitation code

02 01.03.2020 19:56 Student 8: 收到~谢谢老师 🌹

Shōu dào -xièxiè lǎoshī 🌹

Got it, thank you teacher 🌹

03 01.03.2020 19:56 Student 9: 收到~谢谢老师 ❤️

Shōu dào -xièxiè lǎoshī ❤️

Got it, thank you teacher ❤️

04 01.03.2020 19:56 Student 10: 收到~谢谢老师 ☀️

Shōu dào -xièxiè lǎoshī ☀️
Got it, thank you teacher ☀️
05 01.03.2020 19:56 Teacher 4: 不客气 🌹
Bù kèqì 🌹
You are welcome 🌹

In example 4, teacher 4 provides invitation code for instruction in the Wechat chatting room (teacher 4 teaches English through the online platform Tencent Meeting, so he needs to share the invitation code required for class in advance). After seeing the invitation code, many students expressed their thanks to teacher 4 in succession. It can be seen from example 4 that the gratitude words are not used alone. Many of the words are accompanied with emojis, such as *rose*(🌹), *love*(❤️), and *sun*(☀️). These emojis can strengthen the gratitude of the students to the teacher and help maintain the relationship between them. Teacher 4 also responded to the students' expression of thanks with words and emojis (such as *rose*(🌹)), which further strengthening the relationship between them.

The two examples indicate that the goal of using emojis in online interaction is for relational purpose (Kavanagh, 2010). In the process of teacher-student Wechat chatting, emojis can be used as rapport management strategies, which will maintain or enhance interpersonal relationships, helping to establish a benign and positive interpersonal environment. Specifically, the use of emojis can mitigate the face threatening acts or impolite expressions (Kavanagh, 2010; Skovholt et al, 2014). Besides, the use of emojis can work as rapport enhancement strategies, which will maintain the emotional bond and enhance the relationship between teacher and students (Wu et al, 2016; Petitjean & Morel, 2017; Li & Yang, 2018). Thus, interpersonal function is considered as one of pragmatic functions of emojis in online interaction.

5.3. Textual Function

Textual function concerns the structural constituents of communication when using emojis in online communication. In other words, emojis will contribute to the opening, continuing and closing of conversations in online interaction. The textual function originates from Jakobson's (1960) phatic function and Halliday's (1994) textual function, which focuses on how messages are organized. Previous studies have found the textual function of emojis. For example, Danesi (2017) believed that the basic functions of emojis include phatic and punctuation functions. They are included in

pragmatic function because emojis contribute to the building of information structures in context (Danesi, 2017). In the corpus being collected, the authors could also find that communicators will use emojis for phatic and punctuation functions.

First, using an emoji is considered taking several of the functions of punctuation in teacher-student Wechat chatting. The punctuation function of emojis allows for what can be called “mood breaks” in the flow of the text and “mood finals” when used at the end of messages (Danesi, 2017; Holtgraves & Robinson, 2020). In the data being collected, we could also find evidence that emojis are used as punctuations, as in example 5.

Example 5: [context: teacher 1 finished the class too early and explained it to the students].

01 10.03.2020 09:36 Teacher 1: 我好像搞错了 咱们40才下课 对吧

Wǒ hǎoxiàng gǎo cuòle zánmen 40 cái xiàkè duì ba

It seems that I made a mistake. We should finish the class in 40 right?

02 10.03.2020 09:36 Student 11: 对

Duì

Yeah

03 10.03.2020 09:36 Student 11: 😊

04 10.03.2020 09:36 Teacher 1: 我还以为是35

Wǒ hái yǐwéi shì 35

I though it was 35

05 10.03.2020 09:36 Teacher 1: 不好意思啊同学们 老师糊涂了

Bù hǎoyìsi a tóngxuémen lǎoshī hútúle

Sorry, class, I was confused

06 10.03.2020 09:36 Teacher 1: 作业布置下去了 同学们记得完成

Zuòyè bùzhì xiàqùle tóngxuémen jìdé wánchéng

I have published the task. Remember to finish it

07 10.03.2020 09:36 Teacher 1: 😊😊咱们这次真的下课了😊😊祝大家周末愉快

Zánmen zhè cì zhēn de 😊😊 xiàkèle zhù dàjiā zhōumò yúkuài

Now, the class is over. Enjoy your weekend.

In example 5, the teacher finished the class too early, and tried to make explanation to the students, and wished everyone a happy weekend at the end of the conversation. Between “now, the class is over” and “enjoy your weekend”, teacher 1 used double *smiley* (😊) faces as punctuation

marks. In this way, the emoji can express the emotion of the teacher 1 on the one hand, and can also play the role of text pause on the other hand.

Emojis also have a phatic function (Sampietro, 2016) in teacher-student online interaction (Provine et al, 2007; Danesi, 2017). This section will focus on the use of emoji in openings and closings, which are frequently found in teacher-student online interaction (Danesi, 2016; Sampietro, 2016; Al Rashdi, 2018). Despite often being an optional section, openings and closings have an important role in different CMC settings (Lorenzo-Dus & Bou-Franch, 2013): at the beginning of a conversation the channel should be opened and communication established, while in closings the interaction should be concluded without producing any bad feelings. Emojis may be considered a creative way to make successful openings and closings in a conversation, as is shown in example 6.

Example 6: [Context: when the class is over, teacher 3 said goodbye to students, and students responded to teacher 3 in different ways]

01 11.03.2020 15:05 Teacher 3: 各位同学，下课，下周见

Gèwèi tóngxué, xiàkè, xià zhōu jiàn

Ok, class, class is over, see you next week

02 11.03.2020 15:05 Student 12: 老师再见

Lǎoshī zàijiàn

Goodbye, teacher

03 11.03.2020 15:05 Student 13: byebye

byebye

byebye

04 11.03.2020 15:05 Student 14: 老师再见

Lǎoshī zàijiàn

Goodbye, teacher

05 11.03.2020 15:05 Student 15: 🙋

In example 6, when teacher 3 announced that the class was over, many students said goodbye to the teacher. Here the way of saying goodbye is slightly different among the students. Some students use texted message, while others deploy emojis. For instance, among the students, student 15 used a *goodbye* (🙋) emoji to express goodbye. It is worth observing that in China, *bye*, is a common way to say goodbye to teachers. The *goodbye* emoji used here functions as goodbye marker and it reduce the workload of typing. Moreover, it also works to close a conversation, which should be treated as a phatic function.

It can be seen from the two examples above that emojis serve as textual sticker (Danesi, 2017). To be specific, the textual function of emojis could be manifested in two ways: 1) Emojis can replace some punctuation marks in online interaction, making the structure of a conversation in teacher-student Wechat room more complete (Lorenzo-Dus & Bou-Franch, 2013; Danesi, 2017; Sampietro, 2016; Al Rashdi, 2018); 2) Emojis can work as a phatic by opening or closing some conversations (Provine et al, 2007; Sampietro, 2016). The previous studies may have shed lights on the phatic function or punctuation of emojis separately, ignoring that they both will contribute to the textual structure of online interaction (Danesi, 2017) in a coherent manner. This paper found that emojis, when used for either phatic function or punctuation function, are for the purpose of opening, continuing or closing the conversation successfully.

6. Conclusion

Based on data collected from teacher-student Wechat rooms, this paper discussed pragmatic functions of emojis used in online discourse. As a result, three pragmatic functions are found in this paper, namely, illocutionary function, interpersonal function and textual function. To be specific, illocutionary function refers to situations where emojis work to express illocutionary force, which is manifested in using emoji as primary illocutionary act (indirect force) and secondary act (literal force). Interpersonal function concerns the maintenance or enhancement of relationship between/among interlocutors by using emojis as rapport management strategies. Last but not least, textual function concerns the structural constituents of communication in online interaction. Emojis are used for opening, continuing and closing a conversation. This paper systematically analyzes the pragmatic functions of emojis via using data from teacher-student interaction in WeChat rooms, which can further enrich studies of pragmatic functions of emojis. In addition, the findings of this research prove that the use of emojis in the process of online interaction has a positive effect, offering some reference for the construction of language civilization in virtual space. We admit that this paper did not give full consideration of the influence of asymmetric power between teacher and student in the use of emojis in online interaction. However, this may serve as the departure for ensuing studies that may shed more lights on the relation between asymmetric power and different types of emojis employed in online communication.

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