



The Role of Emoji in Microblogs of Chinese Youth

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KEYWORDS Chinese Microblogs. Corpus. Language. Role of Emoji. Speaker. Speech

ABSTRACT This study aimed to investigate the role of smiles in the Chinese youth microblogs. Therefore, about 100 microblogs were considered from applications such as Wechat and Weibo in order to examine the role of smiles in Chinese microblogs. Thus, smiley features were viewed according to the posts that the Chinese leave in their feed on WeChat. All the microblogs studied were written in Chinese, and only those with smiles were used. Finally, the study revealed the most important functions of smiles in Chinese microblogs. According to the analyses, it was concluded that emoji, like during communication with the Chinese, can replace punctuation. Therefore, the point was replaced by a smile in sixty percent cases, a comma in thirty percent, a question mark in six percent and an exclamation mark in four percent cases.

INTRODUCTION

As a means of communication, any foreign language should be accompanied by learning cultural aspects of the country and its people. In addition, learning cultural, social, and economic life, history and ethnography of native speakers will foster understanding the specific uses of speech forms, semantic features, political, cultural, historical, and other similar characteristics of words and speech patterns (Dresner and Herring 2010; Galiullina and Yusupova 2016; Mazari and Derraz 2016; McConachy 2018).

Bloggging is a means of communication, self-expression, culture, news and so much more. The people who create blogs are typically ridiculously talented and effortlessly wear the responsibility of being a voice for their culture. It is a new idea that has just come about from the recent Internet explosion. Bloggging has become another popular means of online communication. Bloggging is a new process, and therefore, a word did not exist to correctly define it. Thus, it resulted in the formation of a new word (Brown and Woolston 2018).

Microbloggging is a form of bloggging that allows users to write short text notes (usually less than 200 characters) and publish them. Each message can be viewed and commented in the chat mode either by anyone, or by a limited group of persons that will be selected by the user. Then, these messages can be transmitted in various ways, including, instant messaging, e-mail, and using the World Wide Web (Kikin-Gil et al. 2016;

Khabibullina et al. 2017; Buechel and Berger 2018).

Weibo is a Chinese microbloggging service launched by Sina Corp on August 14, 2009. It is a kind of hybrid between Twitter and Facebook and also is one of the most popular sites in China. As of February 2013, the number of users of the service is more than 500 million people (Wu et al. 2015; Song et al. 2019). One other Chinese microbloggging service is WeChat. It is a Chinese multipurpose messaging, social media and mobile payment application developed by Tencent. It was first released in 2011, and became one of the world's largest standalone mobile applications in 2018, with over 1 billion monthly active users (Harwit 2019).

In the current study about 100 microblogs were considered from applications such as WeChat and Weibo in order to examine the role of smiles in Chinese microblogs. It should be noted that all the microblogs studied were written in Chinese, and only those with smiles were used.

Objectives

The current paper tries to investigate the role of smiles in the Chinese youth microblogs.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a linguistic analysis method, which includes linguistic observation, text analysis of Chinese microblogs, and a statistical method; that is, data collection and processing. Therefore, when the received data were processed,

they were analysed and thus the frequency of the use of the smiles in messages and microblogs were found.

Eye Square GmbH Company developed the method of the linguistic analysis in cooperation with the linguist, Wildgruber et al. (2007) from Humboldt Universität zu Berlin. According to the theory of signs by Sanders (1868), it is possible to examine any kind of communication in terms of the syntactic arrangement and distribution of its signs, the semantic format of its contents and thirdly, the pragmatic embedment in a context of action. The linguistic analysis method combines expert analysis with a user study (Sanders 1868).

In the expert analysis, the language on the website is reviewed at the three levels (Syntax, Semantic and Pragmatic). In addition, the overarching themes of the website such as its metaphors and narration are also examined. Subsequently, the text on the website is put to a user test so that actual users get the chance to evaluate the language. Problems identified in the expert analysis are also reviewed in the user study. Results will then serve as both input in formulating concrete steps to improve of the text layout and as guideline for its future development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Several important functions were discovered by studying the Chinese microblogging. The first function was the replacement of punctuation marks. One of the examples is the following microblogging that can be seen in Illustration 1 with the words:

“你最近好吗”

“Nǐ zuìjìn hǎo ma.”

Which can be translated as, “How have you been doing lately?” The question mark in this case is also not after the interrogative particle ‘吗’. It is replaced by the ‘sun’ smiley, which in this context is used to give a shade of warmth to the entire phrase. Actually, in this case, the ‘sun’ smiley performs the function of a punctuation mark, replaces the question mark, and transmits emotions along with the message.

Of course, all birthday greetings received in communications and microblogs included emoji, so that visual improvement of the greeting had become an essential option. In the next example (Illustration 2), the girl congratulates

her younger brother or, perhaps, a close friend on their birthday (as the 小哥哥 appeal applies to close friends).

“小哥哥...SURPRISE!! 祝你天天幸福快乐, 28岁永远青春”

“Xiǎo gēgē...SURPRISE!! Zhù nǐ tiāntiān xìngfú kuàilè, 28 suì yǒngyuǎn qīngchūn.”

“The younger brother... Surprise!! I wish you every day to be happy, in your 28 years, and eternal youth.”

In fact, she emphasises the congratulatory message with two exclamation marks and a sequence of emoticons. According to the pragmatic research emoticons, they can enhance the illocutionary power of statements (Dresner 2010). At first glance, the emoticon sequence in the presented microblog seems to perform the same function.

However, the user has already added two exclamation marks to her greetings, which act at the level of rhetoric, add emotionality to the message, and enhance its affective involvement (Ramos 2005). Although this remark indicates an accent, it also includes a sequence of different emojis with two envelopes, emoticons that send a kiss, alcohol, a sunflower, a cake and a balloon. Unlike text emoticons, emoji can be presented as a sequence. In conversations and microblogs, emoticon sequences are common either when participants want to express excitement (for example, when organising a party), or when they want to highlight greetings in a special way. Moreover, some of the added emoticons visually refer to the upcoming birthday party such as envelopes, balloon, cake and alcohol. This message is not actually only a birthday greeting (verbally expressed), emotionally, and rhetorically underlined by two punctuation marks, but it also carries a visual presentation that hints at the upcoming holiday and places the message in a party frame.

However, greetings are not always accompanied by smiles, sometimes they can be replaced by punctuation marks; a situation, which can be seen in Illustration 3:

“生日快乐我的何尔萌弟弟! 一切都是你的可能、而你只要健康快乐就好!”

“Shēngrì kuàilè wǒ de hé ěr méng dìdì! Yīqiè dōu shì nǐ de kěnéng, ér nǐ zhǐyào jiànkāng kuàilè jiù hǎo!”

“Happy birthday, my brother, Hermeng! Let everything be with you, and you only need health and everything will be fine!”

In this microblogging, congratulations with wishes for the birthday of the smiles were absent completely, but the emotionality was transferred due to the exclamation marks after each sentence in the text.

However, some studies conducted on the Internet showed that posts and microblogs in which smiles were used recruit much more views from statistics than those in which smiles were not used. There are many reasons for this; however, one of the main reasons may be that a person reads a set of emoticons much faster than even a few choppy sentences. In addition, it is possible that the text written with smiles, even if it was given only a split second, and it was not read completely, will not be forgotten by a person and he will remember it after a certain amount of time.

Many people still perceive smiles as something frivolous and adolescent. In contrast, a big business is using emoji in marketing for advertising campaigns and communicating with consumers. Today, advertising is as public as social networks, but it is more formal and costs much more. For this reason, companies have slowly but surely begun advertising on various social networks at a less cost, where it will be viewed more often than on television. Advertisers on the Internet also began to introduce smiles into their ads. However, most modern consumers, especially millennial, are fed up with provocative, impersonal advertising. In fact, they respond better to subtle advertisements presented in the form of personal and emotional messages. Advertising companies have learned that smileys, despite their size and lack of words, can really help communicate with their customers. For example, consider the following microblog (Illustration 4), which was written on the social network WeChat:

“欧莱雅2019新礼盒欧莱复颜抗皱光学嫩肤眼霜”

“Ōu cài yǎ 2019 xīn lǐ hé ōu cài fù yán kàngzhòu guāngxué nèn fū yǎnshuāng.”

“European Herbs 2019 New gift box anti-wrinkle anti-aging eye cream complex from European herbs.”

Three types of smiles were used in this ad microblogging, including money, a gift and a thinking smile. The purpose of the first two smiles is especially clear; they want to attract the attention of users who leaf through the social

network. The last smile says that customers should think about buying this one, as the author somehow exposes, of a particularly advantageous offer. It is probable that if the presented microblogging were full of smiles, it would not look so bright and bright even if it were all in exclamation marks and would attract a smaller number of potential buyers.

In another advertising microblog (Illustration 5), which deals with coloured contact lenses, smiles also played a great role as signals to attract the customers' attention:

“樱花棕。上新。一眼就美到心坎里的甜棕色。让整个人看起来元气慢慢”。

“Yīnghuā zōng. Shàng xīn. Yīyǎn jiù měi dào xīnkǎn lǐ de tián zòng sè. Ràng zhěnggè rén kàn qīlái yuánqì màn man.”

“Cherry colour. New. Your one look and beauty will reach the heart. Will allow all people to look full of vitality.”

As seen, there are two smiles here. The first smile is a flower, which is a reference to the petals of cherry blossom. This is at the very beginning of the text. In the middle of the text is a smile “eyes, look”, as it comes to contact lenses for eyes. Both smiles were also signs to draw attention to the advertising microblogging.

The following category found in the application is related to a certain category of smiles. This smiley depicts a bouncing penguin and is quite often met during communication with Chinese youth, and almost never during communication with representatives of the European nations. Its goal is to convey the joy, the excited state, and admiration of some event or subject. Indeed, it fit very well in this context (Illustration 6):

“谢谢你陪我过生日”

“Xièxiè nǐ péi wǒguò shēng rì”

“Thank you for spending my birthday with me.”

This smiley has a place to be here to express the unlimited joy of a man that his friends spent this significant day with him.

Another smile that can be interpreted in different meanings by Chinese youth and people from other cultures and nations can be seen in the following illustration (Illustration 7):

“开学第一次外出觅食。开心。强推他家酱汤”

“Kāixué dì yī cì wàichū mì shí. Kāixīn. Qiáng tuī tā jiā jiàng tang.”

“From the beginning of my studies, I have been not home eating for the first time. Very glad. Not without effort, he abandoned miso soup.”

Here, the smiley, sticking out the tongue and standing after the words “very happy,” is interpreted on many sites as a “stupid joke” or “the most stupid joke”. Among representatives of the Western culture, it is usually associated with discontent or mockery. For the Chinese, it means ordinary laughter. Thus, the person who wrote this microblog is very happy, and the smiley confirms this.

There is a category of smiles whose meaning the Chinese do not interpret as the Europeans. For example, a smile for people in Europe and Russia is a waving hand (Illustration 8), which can mean both a greeting and a farewell. However, in China, it means that the interviewee said something unreasonable and he should stop.

It should be noted that those born in the 1970s feel embarrassed to express feelings online, because their running emoji covers their mouths. This generation pays most attention to the part with updates from WeChat’s friends – the Moments section (朋友 圈 péngyouquān). In addition, the generation of the 1980s is interested in the affairs of state of China, spends all its strength in the work, and their beloved emoji smiles all the time. Moreover, children of the 1990s are more likely to use a laughing and crying emoticon. This emoji is popular all over the world. The smiley even became the Word of the Year 2015 by the Oxford Dictionary. Notably, the Chinese born after 2000 love the face-palm emoji, who cries with laughter. According to statistics, young people do not sleep much, as they go to bed late and get up early. They are more active after 10:00 PM, and compared to the previous year they began to buy two hundred percent more sweets, desserts, and cold drinks.

This study dealt with the role of smiles in the Chinese microblogs. According to the analyses, it should be concluded that emoji, like during communication with the Chinese, can replace punctuation. Therefore, the point was replaced by a smile in sixty percent cases, a comma in thirty percent, a question mark in six percent, and an exclamation mark in four percent. However, this phenomenon occurs much more often in microblogging in order to attract attention. Since the Internet sales are very popular in China, namely through social networks, a few microblogs devoted

to advertising were examined in the study. In general, they can be presented in the form of a sequence for a more vivid transfer of emotions that were embedded in the microblogging, but sometimes for that purpose they can be replaced by punctuation marks. In fact, smileys are used to attract attention in microblogs written for the purpose of advertising. Such microblogs gain a lot more views. Moreover, emoji can carry a hint at the upcoming event, as it was in the microblog congratulations on his birthday. They can personify the word written next to them; for example, a smile in the form of a pair of eyes is written in context with contact lenses. Finally, emoji can simply convey a positive friendly attitude of the authors of microblogging in relation to their audience. It is also important that Asian smiles are often used in communication with Chinese youth, sometimes even more than the European ones, but only European smileys are used in the Chinese microblogs. This may be due to the fact that the Asian text smiles are not as bright as the European in the form of a yellow face, so they will not be seen so clearly when viewing microblogging. However, there is evidence that some smiles have different meanings in the West and the East, but they look exactly the same. Furthermore, the most popular smileys used by people of different ages were mentioned.

CONCLUSION

As mentioned earlier, this study aimed to investigate the role of the smiles in microblogging of Chinese youth. It was found that smiles restore replicas and can enhance the meaning of the written by the writer as well as the recipient’s accurate understanding of a particular message, though their erroneous interpretations are still possible. In this regard, modern people are witnesses of how emoticons play the role of parents, because they serve to protect against misunderstandings that Plato feared would lead people away from the truth, and not towards it. In fact, they act as clarifiers of intent, providing the recipient with more information to increase the likelihood of a correct translation of the message. Emoji also serves as intermediaries for digital communication between people and groups. Moreover, they enhance personal characteristics and communication between senders and recipients, crossing time and

space. For all that, some smiles have a level of uncertainty or duality. In fact, when the appearance of emoticons becomes more invisible, the user immediately understands the very meaning that the smiley carries.

It should be noted that about 100 microblogs were considered from applications such as WeChat and Weibo in order to study the role of smiles in Chinese microblogs. The first has already been used to study the function of smiles in correspondence, but now it will be considered from the point of view of posts that the Chinese leave in their feed in WeChat.

According to a study conducted in the practical part of the thesis (in the third chapter), the role played by smiles in China's microblogging was revealed. Emoji during communication with the Chinese can replace punctuation marks. It was found that the point was replaced by a smile in sixty percent cases, a comma in thirty percent, a question mark in six percent, and an exclamation mark in four percent. However, this phenomenon occurs much more often in microblogging in order to attract people's attention. Moreover, since the Internet sales are very popular in China, namely the sales are conducted by social networks, a few microblogs devoted to advertising were studied. In general, they can be presented in the form of a sequence for a more vivid transfer of emotions that were embedded in the microblogging, but sometimes they can be replaced by punctuation marks for that purpose. In addition, smileys are used for attracting attention in microblogs written for the purpose of advertising. Moreover, these microblogs gain a lot more views. Emoji can carry a hint at the upcoming event, as it was in the microblog for "congratulations on his birthday". Furthermore, some evidence indicated that there are smiles with different meanings in the West and the East, though they look exactly the same. Finally, the most popular smileys used by people of different ages were mentioned.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study aimed to investigate the role of smiles in the Chinese youth microblogs. It is

suggested to have a fieldwork to compare the results of the current study.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study was conducted according to the Russian Government Program of Competitive Growth of Kazan Federal University.

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Paper received for publication in October, 2019

Paper accepted for publication in December, 2019