

Graphic Features of Text-based Computer-Mediated Communication

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1. Introduction

This study will focus on some naturalistic data from L2 learners' Computer-Mediated Communication (henceforth, CMC) and discuss CMC's conversationality for the purpose of examining whether CMC shares conversational features. Participants add graphic elements to CMC maybe because they can avoid misunderstanding, convey what they really mean, and intensify their shared and common ground.

In CMC environment, it can be hard for participants to convey orality and visuality compared to FTF while doing text-based chatting. However, our subjects try to add their visuality and orality in CMC interaction. According to Fouser et al.(2000), there are three types of writing systems concerning orality and visuality in CMC environment –Semasiographic, Logographic, and Phonographic, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Examples of oral characteristics in CMC data. (from Fouser et al., 2000:54)

	Semasiographic	Logographic	Phonographic
Japanese	^. ^ ^^; --/	笑 ? !!!	バイバーイ ~~ ---
English	:) =) =D	m/f lol IMHO	hiya cya duz hehe

For example, ^^ (for Japanese) or :-) (for English) has a role of tentative facial expressions when you need to show your state of happiness. However even in CU-SeeMe, which makes it possible to send and receive pictures and see partners' faces, those visuality and orality are sometimes used. Therefore, the use of these features does not only come from addiction of paralinguistic cues, but also it can be regarded as in-group identity markers.

2. Data and Subjects

The subjects are Waseda University and Korea University students who participated in Cross-Cultural Distance Learning (CCDL) project in the academic years, 2000 and 2001. They engaged in synchronous CMC through the use of the software called CU-SeeMe. Although CU-SeeMe software enables the students to chat orally with microphone, all of them had a text-based chat due to their technical environment surrounded among them.

They had a weekly chat not in groups but on the basis of one-on-one communication. They met the same partners at their specified time and enjoyed chatting for the period of 45 minutes.

3. Data Analysis

3.1. Semasiographic

Fouser et al. (2000) defined that “semasiographic represents concepts independently of the structures of language. “ (2000:53). Therefore, facial marks in scripts are categorized as Semasiographic. The shapes of scripts express emotional nuances in their messages. In general, it is known as emoticons, which stand for emotion icons. We shall look at some examples of our subjects’ usage.

(Excerpt 1: Happiness)

Korea-E#4: Hi
Korea-E#4: Nice to meet you ^^
Waseda Ed#4: Hellow

Smiley in excerpt 45 shows happiness to meet each other. We shall look at the data below that Oya et al. (2000) pointed out.

Korea-E#6: have a good time with sungeun and see you next time.
Waseda Edu#1: Are you angry?
Korea-E#6: let’s talk about it through email..
Korea-E#6: Nope, I’m not angry...
Korea-E#6: ^ ^

(Oya et al. 2000:194)

This smiley above shows not happiness but it shows not being angry. The emoticon plays an essential role to avoid misunderstanding.

(Excerpt 2: Smiley: joking)

Waseda Ed#4: How did you feel the movie?
Korea-E#7: I can’t say
Waseda Ed#4: ok
Korea-E#7: because it doesn’t have any story... just love act with a man and a woman
Waseda Ed#4: i see, that there are nothing to tell..... ^^

We can assume that this smiley indicates a joke. We can also suppose that W mitigates the risk of threatening “face”, since W recasts K’s utterance.

(Excerpt 3: Sadness)

Waseda Ed#4: Is it common in Korea to spend the Christmas in couples?
Korea-E#7: Maybe ...T.T So I am so sad....

This emoticon shows sadness. Moreover, in this situation K may intensify her joke. K’s utterance here infers a great deal of nuances. It can be interpreted that “It may be common in Korea to spend the Christmas in couples. But I do not have a boyfriend to spend Christmas with. So I am so sad.

(Excerpt 4: Forced smile when feeling awkward)

Korea-E#5: how long do i sleep ?
Waseda Edu#2: yes.

Korea-E#5: hmm...yesterday, I went to bed 2;00am. ^-^;
Korea-E#5: so.. for 5hours..
Waseda Edu#2: very short
Waseda Edu#2: I can't stand it

The emoticon ‘^-^,’ , which represents sweating, is often used by our subjects. In Korean and Japanese culture, they appear to sweat at awkward moment. Therefore, in my understanding, this mark can be used as forced smile, “苦笑” in Japanese.

(Excerpt 5: Surprise)

Waseda Edu#6: my mother has been write letter to her penpal in the USA since she was in high school
Korea-E #9: ohh.....fantastic..!!! @.@
Waseda Edu#6: and some month ago, the penpal wrote her that she began emailing
Korea-E #9: I see....
Korea-E #9: do you have a penpal?
Korea-E #9: I had penpals when I was in high school, (Europe and Canada)

This emoticon can be a surprising mark. We know K intensifies the feeling of corporation and interaction.

3.2. Logographic

Fauser et al. (2000) defined that logographic can be visual expressions; the difference with Semasiographic is that Logographic is related to concepts of language itself. For example, the abbreviations of IMH, LOL, and BTW can be categorized as Logographic, which mean “In My Humble Opinion”, “Laughing Out Loud”, and “By The Way” respectively. Let us look at our subjects’ examples.

(Excerpt 6: Repetition of exclamation marks and spelling out with capitalization)

Waseda Edu#3: I can do a chat on next wennesday
Korea-E#6: OK...I see.. someday we can talk more another day..
Waseda Edu#3: I'll wait you at 15;30
Waseda Edu#3: Are you ok?
Korea-E#6: **OH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!** sorry I misunderstood...
Waseda Edu#3: What?
Korea-E#6: We can chat that day...!!!

(Excerpt 7: Repetition of question marks)

Korea-E#5: But women wear very short skirts, though they say it's really cold...
Waseda Edu#2: I see, sometime I wear short skirt
Korea-E#5: Really?????
Waseda Edu#2: It is joke
Waseda Edu#2: My lover wears it

Repetition of question or exclamation marks is frequently used by our subjects since the keyboard input of these marks is easy for them. These exaggerations aim to convey how they feel surprised or dubious.

(Excerpt 8: Acronym)

Waseda Ed#4: If mobile phones cause brain tumors, it is very dangerous.

Waseda Ed#4: But I can survive. (joking)

Korea-J#2: from brain damage or from mobile?

Waseda Ed#4: Yes,

Korea-J#2: (joking!!!!)

Waseda Ed#4: **O my god**

Korea-J#2: **OMG**

OMG is an abbreviation of “oh my god”. Acronym is often used in the network environment. It can be used not only for effort-reducing, but also in-group identity markers.

3.3. Phonographic

Fauser et al. (2000) defined that “phonographic writing system represents phonetic features of language” and the phonographic systems include those in which graphs represent syllables, segments of sound, and phonetic features of articulation, such as Hiya, C ya, hehe. Werry (1996) also mentions the non-standard spelling system. We shall look at some examples.

(Excerpt 9: Varying degree of loudness)

Korea-J #3: do you know bibimbab?

Waseda Edu#3: i **LOVE** bibimba!!!! (^0^)

Korea-J #3: that’s good..

Waseda Edu#3: yes!!!!

This is an interesting instance. Whereas the first pronoun “I” is not capitalized from effort reducing, which is typical on the Internet, positive evaluating word “LOVE” is capitalized and emphasized in order to intensify W’s interest in Korea. Our subjects tend to use this capitalization. We can assume that they try to convey loudness of words, as if they were talking to each other.

(Excerpt 10: Creating rhythm)

Korea-E#6: Hi!

Waseda Edu#3: Hello!

Korea-E#6: Sorry for making you wait **for a long time~~~**

Waseda Edu#3: It's OK. Never mind.

Korea-E#6: Thank you for understanding.

“~” is frequently used by Korean subjects, which can be interpreted as the marker that makes the word(s) prolonged. In excerpt 54, in which situation K gives apologies to W for being late, K may be trying to express their delicate nuances of apology.

(Excerpt 11: Oral accompaniments of speech : laughter, ‘hehe’)

Waseda Edu#1: yeah..subway lines in Tokyo is like web.. i sometime lost^^;

Korea-E#4: I knew something about japan..*.* **hehe**,..... I would like to visit Japan after earning enough money and learning japanese.....

Waseda Edu#1: oh^^ then you can contact me.. i'll take you some famous place in Tokyo or somewhere^^

Waseda Edu#1: ..(if i still live Tokyo then..^^;)
Korea-E#4: really thank you.....

(Excerpt 12: L1 Laughter: ‘hohohoho’)

Waseda Edu#6: umm, the Internet is a great tool

Korea-E #9: yes...right...So we can meet by CCDL.....^^ **hohohoho**

Waseda Edu#6: yeah, that's right!!^^

“Hehe” in excerpt 55 is a logographic laughter marker so that they would like to express their orality. “Hohohoho” in excerpt 56 indicates laughter. Hohoho is used by female subjects, not by male subjects.

4. Conclusion

So far, we showed a lot of examples of similarities between CMC and FTF interaction in terms of sharedness, unplannedness, interactiveness, expressiveness, visuality and orality. Although our subjects experienced CMC in a relatively short time, we found that they used a lot of conversational strategies in text-based CMC. There were also some differences since subjects can focus on typing mistakes and they cannot help using some graphic features in order to clarify their true intentions. Therefore, we shall conclude that synchronous CMC has features of both conversation and writing.

Although the development of communicative competence among our subjects is beyond the scope of this thesis, we found that many students communicate with their partners by using limited vocabulary and formulaic expressions. Therefore, we need to give them some instruction in order to enrich their active vocabulary and facilitate communication in English although all of our subjects can make themselves understood throughout CMC activities.

5. References

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