

**FROM “GENUINE SMILE” TO “MASK SMILE”: THE VARIOUS MEANINGS OF
THE SMILEY FACE EMOJI**

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1 INTRODUCTION

Compared with face-to-face communication, the lack of non-verbal cues such as facial expression, intonation, body gestures in CMC(Computer-Mediated Communication) can affect the transmission of information (Archer & Akert, 1977). To address this problem, emoticons¹, emojis and a set of expression symbols came into being.

Emojis are “picture characters” that originated for mobile phones in Japan in the late 1990s. Emoji characters include not only faces, but also concepts and ideas such as weather, vehicles and buildings, food and drink, or activities such as running and dancing (Pavalanathan & Eisenstein, 2015). With the booming internet and the advent of digital communication, emojis are widely adopted in instant messaging, emails, social network services, and many other forms of CMC (Dresner & Herring, 2010) and are of high frequency, functionality and efficiency (Li & Yang, 2018).

Facial emoji are prone to multiple interpretations because of the complexity of the gestures they depict (Luangrath et al., 2017). The smiley face emoji can express rich meanings according to contexts and sometimes even cause ambiguity. However, very limited scholarly attention has been paid to this.

To find out the meanings and functions of the smiley face emoji, we collect data in WeChat conversations to give a detailed description of its various meanings and functions in authentic contexts of use. We classified the contexts it occurs in into six types and distinguished four kinds of usages compared with smiles in daily life. We found that at least four aspects of contexts (i.e., propositional content of tweets, the structure of discourse, the illocutionary force² and affective direction) should be considered in emoji interpretation. Last, the study attempts to construct the path of meaning extension of the emoji to account for its negative connotation generated in recent years.

2 BACKGROUND

The meanings and sentiments of emoji vary according to specific context (Hu et al., 2017; Gawne & McCulloch, 2019). Many emoticons may be misunderstood (even non-understood) without the aid of the propositional information provided by the text to which these emoticons are attached (Yus, 2014). Their diversity of semantics and flexibility of interpretation may lead to ambiguity when using them (Jaeger et al., 2019). All these statements point to the importance of contexts in emoji interpretation. However, some research studies emojis or emoticons independently (Pavalanathan & Eisenstein, 2015; Miller et al., 2016; Jaeger & Ares, 2017), which view meaning as residing solely in the emoji icons themselves, rather than in emoji-in-use. While other research study the emoji-in-use, some fail to distinguish different aspects of contexts during data analysis (Dresner & Herring, 2010; Yus, 2014; Cramer et al., 2016; Hu et al., 2017; Li & Yang, 2018), some only focus on one aspect of context, for instance, the illocutionary force (Dresner & Herring, 2010; Li & Yang, 2018), the discourse structure (Gibson et al., 2018), which lack a systematic description of the meanings of emojis.

¹ Emoticon is short for “emotion icon”, for instance, :-), is a pictorial representation of a facial expression using characters—usually punctuation marks, numbers, and letters—to express a person's feelings, mood or reaction, or as a time-saving method. (I did not use them interchangeably. The reason is that I cite some research whose subject are emoticons. And I believe they can shed some light on the study of emoji.)

² Illocutionary act is about intentions of the speaker regarding what act they intended to perform (e.g., stating, inviting, requesting and asking) by means of making that utterance, which express the illocutionary force. Searle (1979) classified illocutionary acts into five categories: assertive illocutionary acts (e.g., state, boast, complain), directive acts (e.g., command, request), commissive acts (e.g., promise), expressive acts (e.g., thank, welcome), and declarative acts (e.g., christen). Speech acts can be directive or indirective. In direct speech acts, the illocutionary force is the canonical illocutionary force for that form. For example, declaratives canonically have the illocutionary force of a statement. In indirect speech acts, there is a mismatch between the linguistic form and the illocutionary force. For example, declaratives can be used to make requests (Birner, 2012: 186-192).

“Slightly Smiling Face” is popularly known to be ambiguous. Emojipedia comments that it can suggest “positive”, “happy”, “friendly”, “patronizing”, “passive-aggressive” and “ironic” sentiments (Violaris, 2020). This emoji can be used to express even contradictory meanings, e.g., positive meanings in genuine smiles and negative meanings in mask smiles. Therefore, receivers need to make an inference about the intentions and beliefs of senders according to context. However, despite its rich meanings and potential ambiguity, little scholarly attention has been paid to it. Previous studies (Dresner & Herring, 2010; Yus, 2014; Cramer et al., 2016; Hu et al., 2017; Li & Yang, 2018) mainly focus on the sentiment and meanings of a group of emojis or emojis as a whole. For instance, they proposed several meanings or functions of emojis: signaling attitude/emotion, enhancing attitude/emotion intensity, modifying illocutionary force, expressing humor, expressing irony, expressing intimacy, describing content, taking/ giving turns, to name but a few. However, their general description of emoji meaning or function fails to capture the fine-grained meaning or function of the smiley face emoji.

3 METHODS

3.1 Data collection

The data consists of naturally occurring WeChat conversations taken from the author’s WeChat chat history. After searching this emoji in the author’s WeChat chat history, 498 instances¹ of the usage of the smiley face emoji were collected. With careful examination, we excluded 26 ambiguous instances or instances that are hard to determine. Finally, we got 472 valid instances.

3.2 Procedure

Based on the assumption that the meanings of emojis are contextual (Walther & D’Addario, 2001; Yus, 2014; Hu et al., 2017; Jaeger et al., 2019; Gawne & McCulloch, 2019), we first come up with an annotation scheme of the context by its illocutionary force after repeated reading and re-reading of the data. The contexts include the sentence the emoji attached to (some tweets may have been part of a larger series of tweets meant to be read in sequence) and the interaction to which the emoji relates, as well as the emoji itself.

Then we compare the use of the smile in face-to-face communication (Ekman & Friesen, 1982) with the emoji and classify the emoji into four groups by its intention (the emotion the sender intends to show)² and see what kind of smile we would wear in the classified contexts. This step sheds light on the intention and affective direction (positive or negative) of senders and contributes to the illustration of its meanings and functions in the following step in that receivers infer from the contexts the meaning of the emoji based on its usage in daily life.

Next, we look at how the emoji works in the classified contexts and expound on its various meanings, functions and path of meaning extension.

4 THE CONTEXTS THAT THE EMOJI OCCURS IN

After analyzing a subset of data, we classified the context into six types and subsequently scaled this up by annotating all of the data. The data was classified by its illocutionary force proposed by Searle (1979), since, according to Birner (2013), the illocutionary force is expressed by the corresponding illocutionary act, which is about the intention of the speaker regarding what act they intended to perform.

¹ I got my old iPhone back, which has been used for 4 years and saved a lot of chat history.

² Sending emojis that represents a facial expression to express emotion can be considered as “iconic” function of emoticons.

In indirect speech acts, there is a mismatch between the linguistic form and the illocutionary force (the illocutionary force is something other than the force canonically associated with that form). For example, the form of the utterance “Would you be so kind as to come to my room and fetch my book?” is interrogative, the illocutionary force is a request. Searle (1975) notes that Grice’s Cooperative Principle, mutual knowledge, and “general powers of rationality” are all that is needed to allow the hearer to interpret an indirect speech act. This means that indirect speech acts are a subtype of conversational implicature, and the hearer’s inference to the indirect speech act is a subtype of conversational inference based on Grice’s maxims (Birner, 2013: 195). That’s to say, receivers need to make full use of contextual information to correctly interpret the illocutionary force of the utterance.

Contexts this emoji occurs in	illocutionary force
The interlocutors express/ respond to positive attitudes or feelings	thank, welcome, greet
The sender states something that is unpleasant/ undesirable	report
The sender jokes about an (unpleasant) situation	joke
The conversations include (potential) face threatening acts	request, command
The sender blames things (on somebody)	complain
The sender makes an ironic statement ¹	sarcasm

4.1 the classification of the context and its illocutionary force

The remaining section justify the classification with examples. We only focus on the verbal content and do not consider the meanings or functions of the emoji here.

4.1 The interlocutors express/ respond to positive attitudes or feelings

In some conversations, the sender would express or responds to positive attitudes such as praise, complementing, greetings, best wishes, thanks, agreeing, kindness, solidarity, or positive feelings, such as happiness, towards the receiver.

郑献勇	早上好 😊	Good morning 😊
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Example 1

高博	我怎么邀请参会者到 Zoom 呢?	How can I invite other participants to the Zoom meeting?
王肖群	我等会把链接发给你	I will send you a link later.
高博	好的, 谢谢 😊	Okay, thank you 😊

Example 2

小沸	祝旅途顺利 😊	Have a good trip 😊
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Example 3

In example 1, the sender is greeting friends. In example 2, the sender is expressing thanks. The sender in example 3 expresses her best wishes to the receiver. As we can see, these tweets convey the sender’s positive attitudes or feelings through the interaction of interlocutors. The illocutionary act of these examples is expressives (Searle 1979: 15), whose illocutionary point is to express the psychological state about a state of affairs specified in the propositional content.

¹ Ironic speech acts, as Searle and Austin believe, are parasitic since they do infect normal speech acts and could be non-ironic speech acts in different contexts and sarcasm is the most direct form of irony (Amante, 1981). Based on our data expressing irony, we use “sarcasm” as its illocutionary force.

4.2 The conversations include (potential) face threatening acts

In this class of context, the sender usually makes a request, a demand, a suggestion, a warning, an announcement, correcting beliefs or asking a question and seeking an answer. In most cases, the sender wants to get the receiver to act by command, request, etc. or make changes in beliefs or knowledge (correction, announcement). Therefore, these acts may violate the receiver's positive or negative face.

Aurora	这段话没有必要放在这里，建议删去 😊	There is no need to put this paragraph here. I suggest that it be deleted 😊
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Example 4

Aurora	若玉，把你论文的 Word 版发给我 😊	Ruoyu, send me the Word version of your paper 😊
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Example 5

R	谁把垃圾扔到了我宿舍门口？	Who threw the rubbish in front of my door?
	要扔扔自己门口啊，放别人门口被抓住是要挨揍的 😊	Why not put the rubbish in front of your own door? If you get caught, you will get beaten 😊

Example 6

吴琪	邓宇老师，请问如何加入线上会议呢 😊	Teacher Deng Yu, could you tell me how to join the online meeting 😊
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Example 7

Examples 4-7 involve speech acts of suggestion, request, warning and answer-seeking, respectively. The face threatening potential of request involves the hearer's negative face, since the hearer is expected to conform, as well as the speaker's positive face, since the speaker is trying to have his/her own way. The face threatening potential for suggestion involves the hearer's negative face since a hearer may feel obliged to comply with a suggestion in order not to hurt the feelings of the speaker, who thinks favourably of the act, as well as the speaker's positive face, since persons who express that they know better are not liked and this applies especially in the case suggestions that have not been asked for (Kallia, 2005).

4.3 The sender states something unpleasant or undesirable

等等	宜家的配送费太高了	IKEA's delivery fee is too high
	我才买 20 块东西 结果运费就要 15 😊 窒息	I only paid 20 for something, and it cost 15 for delivery 😊 suffocated

Example 8

顾咕咕	我住在我之前租的房子里的时候，有一天在厨房柜子里摸到一团软软的东西。我没戴眼镜，看不清是什么，戴上之后发现是三四只小老鼠 😊	When I lived in my rented house, I found a soft lump in my kitchen cabinet one day. I didn't wear my glasses, so I could not see what it was. After wearing my glasses, I found what had been felt were three or four small mice 😊
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Example 9

米老鼠	我只想找个吃的	I want to find something to eat
	为什么商店都不开😞	Why are all the stores closed?

Example 10

In example 8, the sender states that the delivery fee is exorbitant. The sender tells the receiver an unpleasant experience of touching mice in example 9. In example 10, although the sentence with the emoji is interrogative, the intention of the sender is not to ask questions but report an undesirable situation: I am hungry and I want to find something to eat. Unfortunately, all the stores are closed.

In these examples, either the unpleasant situation becomes a fact or there seems to be no solution to the unpleasant situation. The sender can do nothing but accept it.

4.4 The sender jokes about an (unpleasant) situation

Dionysus666	怎么又有打广告的	Why there is (a stranger) sending ads again?
lizzz	这个人混进了好多群，太能加群了	This person joins lots of chat groups secretly. It's amazing.
	真想问问她我还漏了什么重要的群没加😞	I want to ask her whether there is any chat group which is important that I should join😞
长佳	哈哈哈哈哈笑死	Hahahahahaha, I almost laughed myself to death.

Example 11

Jessie	刚收到 Stanford 的拒信	I got a letter of rejection from Stanford a moment ago
Triplet	要是拿 offer 的手有摸牌的手就好了~😞	If only our fortune in getting an offer was the same as that in card games~😞

Example 12

In this type of context, someone, more often than not, reports an unpleasant situation. The sender jokes about this situation instead of making complaints. In most cases, the intention of joking is quickly identified by receivers who would reply with “Hahaha” and the alike.

4.5 The sender blames things (on somebody)

Kevin	网页链接：某个学生投稿到北理的文章被抄袭了	Website link: The submission of a student to BIT (Beijing Institute of Technology) has been plagiarized
王鹏羽	垃圾北理😞	BIT is trash😞

Example 13

Shaw	我被 b 站额外收费了，而且还不能退款	I was overcharged by Bilibili (a video website). What's worse, I cannot get a refund.
	就离谱😞	That's far-fetched😞

Example 14

Aya	我昨天遇到了一个装逼的人	I met a pretentious man yesterday.
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	我讨厌装逼的人！自己心里没点逼数吗？	I hate pretentious men! Is there any fucking idea in his mind?
	呵呵，自私自利😏	hehe, so selfish😏

Example 15

江超民	为什么明星吸毒总是在朝阳区被抓？	Why celebrities are always caught on the spot when they are taking drugs in Chaoyang District?
	千万别惹朝阳警方，能让 人身败名裂	Don't ever screw around with the Chaoyang police. Otherwise, you will be utterly discredited.
李卓凡	不是别惹警方，是不要违法犯罪，傻逼😏	It is not "don't ever screw around with the police". It is "don't break the law", you idiot😏

Example 16

Like the last type of context, there is often a description of an unpleasant situation and someone would blame things on some person, thing, place, idea or state related to this situation. The blame is verbally coded, as can be seen from "trash" "far-fetched" "so selfish" "you idiot". In some cases (e.g., examples 13 and 14), a third party is blamed for the cause of the unpleasant situation. In other cases, there is a direct confrontation between the interlocutors. Example 16 even contains ad hominem attacks.

4.6 The sender makes an ironic statement

Mercury	我以前还去医院查过抑郁症	I went to the hospital to see whether I had depression
	结果说我没病	It turned out I was not sick
	后来一想也是	Then I thought it was true
	得抑郁症好像都是有钱的	It is rich people who get depression
大如如	?	?
	哇你真的好棒😏	Wow, you are amazing😏

Example 17

Lucaluca110	Ah 超市是不是只能刷荷兰本地银行卡呢？	Is the Netherland local bankcard the only choice of payments in the Abert Heijn supermarket?
jhondio	是的	Yes
Lucaluca110	AH 付款通道这么少，还能做到荷兰最大也是励志😏	The means of payment of Abert Heijn supermarket is too limited. It's encouraging that they are the biggest supermarket in Netherland😏

Example 18

顾咕咕	我对酒精过敏，不能喝酒	I cannot drink because I am allergic to alcohol.
	一般大家也不敢让我喝酒	People usually would not invite me to drink.
成政睿	没事，可以喝，我会陪你到 ICU	It's okay. We can drink together. I will accompany you to the ICU.
Lucaluca110	我谢谢您😏	Thank you so much😏

Example 19

An ironical utterance typically implies that the speaker believes the opposite of what was said, but this is neither the meaning nor the point of the utterance (Wilson & Sperber, 2012). Examples 17-19 are sarcasm, the most direct and blatant form of irony (Amante, 1981). The sender of example 17 says “Wow, you are amazing”. It is “amazing” and the “?” that bear negation and what the sender meant is that “You sucks.” Likewise, the intended meaning of “it’s encouraging” and “thank you so much” in examples 18 and 19 is opposite to their literal meaning.

4.7 The frequency of the contexts that the emoji occurs in

Context	Frequency	affective direction
The interlocutors express positive attitudes or feelings	242	positive
The conversations include (potential) face threatening acts	56	neutral
The sender states something that is unpleasant/ undesirable	136	passive negative
The sender jokes about an (unpleasant) situation	16	passive negative/ neutral
The sender blames things (on somebody)	18	negative
The sender makes an ironic statement	4	negative

4.2 the frequency of the contexts that the emoji occurs in

The smiley face emoji most frequently occurs in the context of the interlocutors expressing positive attitudes or feelings. The context of the sender states something unpleasant/ undesirable ranks in the second place.

In daily life, when we feel happy or want to show kindness to others, we would smile (at someone). We tend to smile to soften the tone when we make a command or request. Also, we smile in the face of unpleasant situations about which we do not intend or can do much. These three contexts that the emoji occurs in cover most cases. Their affective direction is positive, neutral and passive negative, respectively. That’s to say, the emoji most frequently occurs in non-aggressive contexts. The results suggest that in socio-emotional setting, people tend to frequently use positive emojis to create positive atmosphere to boost group rapport (Miyake, 2007; Li & Yang, 2018).

5 FOUR KINDS OF SMILES

Emoticons are iconic, in the sense that they visually resemble facial expressions, to a greater or lesser extent (Yus, 2014). The expression of emotions in computer-mediated communication, by use of emoticons, is similar to the expression of emotions in face-to-face communication (Derks et al., 2007). Yuasa et al. (2011) shows how these graphic emoticons activate the area used in emotional discrimination and also the area that is typically activated when seeing a human face, although to a lesser degree (as cited by Yus, 2014)¹. Ekman & Friesen (1982) describes distinctions linked to measurable differences² in appearance for three smiles: felt, false and miserable smiles. We found that the use of the smiley face emoji on WeChat parallels that of smiles in daily life. Our classification follows the classification of Ekman & Friesen (1982), except that we treat the two subtypes of fake smiles—phony³ and mask smiles independently. It is understandable

¹ This should not be taken to suggest that there is no difference between facial expressions and the smiley face emoji. Smiles in daily life are sometimes produced involuntarily, while all emojis are typed consciously.

² Five aspects of facial movement (classification of action units, intensity of action unit involved in a facial movement, laterality of each action unit, the precise moments in time of each action unit begins and ends and the timing of onset, apex and offset) can be measured to distinguish between genuinely felt smiles and mask smiles in face-to-face communication.

³ Phony smiles are a subtype of fake smiles, I change the name to polite smiles.

that Ekman & Friesen (1982) put phony and mask smiles under the same category, namely, fake smiles, since there is no measurable difference between the two, and the intention behind those smiles are intuitively different. Since our classification is based on the intention of these smiles, the mask smiles and polite smiles (i.e., phony smiles in Ekman & Friesen's work) are two intentionally different types.

5.1 Genuine smiles

In daily life, we have spontaneous smiles when experiencing or reporting positive emotions. These positive emotions include: pleasure from visual, auditory, gustatory, kinesthetic, or tactile stimulation; amusement and delight; contentment and satisfaction; beatific experiences; relief from pain, pressure or tension; and enjoyment of another person (Ekman & Friesen, 1982).

5.2 Miserable smiles

Most often, miserable smiles occur when someone is distressed. The negative feeling is apparent. Miserable smiles acknowledge the negative feeling, making clear to the self and others that the response to the misery is contained: although I am feeling bad, I would not cry, curse or take any action.

5.3 Polite smiles

In a polite smile, nothing much is felt but an attempt to appear as if positive feelings are felt for the consideration of politeness.

5.4 Mask smiles

Unlike miserable smiles, whose negative feelings are intended to convey to others, mask smiles are deliberately made to convince others that positive emotion is felt when it isn't. Therefore, mask smiles are sometimes misleading since people wear this kind of smile to conceal their negative feelings. In reality, intonation and body movements provide cues to speakers' true intention behind smiley faces. However, on internet communication, such cues are not available. Our data suggest that mask smiles are closely related to the contexts of (potential) confrontation: (1) the sender blames things (on somebody) (2) the sender makes an ironic statement. That is, the contexts that the emoji occur in indicate the senders' true intentions.

5.5 Smiles in different contexts

Contexts this emoji occurs in	Classification of smiles	affective direction of smiles
The interlocutors express/ respond to positive attitudes or feelings	Genuine smiles	positive
The sender states something that is unpleasant/ undesirable	Miserable smiles	passive negative
The sender jokes about an (unpleasant) situation		
The conversations include (potential) face threatening acts	Polite smiles	neutral
The sender blames things (on somebody)	Mask smiles	negative
The sender makes an ironic statement		

5.1 classification of smiles and the pragmatic meanings/ functions of the emoji

It suggests that the types of smiles are not one-to-one correspondence with that of contexts. For instance, people wear miserable smiles (i.e., nothing-I-can-do smile) in contexts of stating something unpleasant and joking about an unpleasant situation. People wear mask smiles (i.e., feeling-opposite smile)

in contexts of blaming things and irony. The intention and affective direction (positive or negative) behind the different types of smiles can partly explain the meaning and functions of the emoji.

6 RESULTS: THE MEANINGS AND FUNCTIONS OF THE EMOJI

In this section, we rely on the contextual information discussed in section 3 and the intention behind smiles in section 4 to interpret the meanings and functions of the emoji.

We will discuss the meaning and functions of the emoji occurring in the six types of contexts separately.

6.1 The meanings and functions of the emoji in context 1

In context that the interlocutors express/ respond to positive attitudes or feelings, people use this emoji as genuine smiles in daily life.

The emoji is used in the phatic context that interlocutors express positive attitudes or feelings. It can be an indicator of joy or show a state of happiness. Therefore, it serves to emphasize or add a positive attitude towards the propositional content of the tweets and thus strengthen the expressive speech acts.

Grice's quantity maxim (Grice, 1975) suggests that one tries to be as informative as one possibly can, and gives as much information as is needed, and no more. The slightly smiley face emoji does not occur in contexts where interlocutors express a high level of positive emotions such as ecstasy. Interlocutors tend to use grinning squinting face emoji 😏 or rolling on the floor laughing emoji 🤣 to convey a high intensity of happiness.

6.2 The meanings and functions of the emoji in context 2

When conversations include (potential) face threatening acts, for instance, command, request or warning, the emoji expresses kindness and suggests that the tweet should not be taken as a request or demand. The sender uses the smiley face emoji, which is normally associated with positivity (Burgoon et al., 1996: 142), to mitigate illocutionary force. Examples 4 and 5 are conversations between an adviser and her student. There is a power disparity between these two, so the adviser avoids making a bold request by using the emoji to soften the illocutionary force of the tweets as a request. Sometimes a sender does not think it necessary to continue the conversation on the topic at issue by responding with a smiley face as a conversation closure.

6.3 The meanings and functions of the emoji in context 3

The emoji occurs in the context where the sender states something that is unpleasant/ undesirable. The emoji here helps signal the propositional attitude that underlines the utterance and which would be difficult to identify without the aid of the emoji. Propositional attitudes are important for successful interactions, since they introduce an additional metarepresentational level of information beyond the explicit content of the utterance (Yus, 2014). In examples 8-10, the sender conveys a sense of helplessness, frustration and an attitude that nothing can be done about it in the face of an unpleasant situation. It suggests that although in distress, no tears, attacks or screams would be made. The emoji indicates the passive negative attitude, otherwise, the tweets would have been one of mere assertion or report.

6.4 The meanings and functions of the emoji in context 4

When senders make jokes about an unpleasant situation, things are a bit different. The jokes, similar to dark humor, are humors related to miserable states. The content of jokes shows the propositional attitudes of the tweets. The emoji serves to specify the attitude of the tweets or communicate a higher level of a propositional attitude (frustrated but nothing can be done about it) as well as emphasizing the jesting nature

of the tweets, that is, the sender is not serious about the tweet.

6.5 The meanings and functions of the emoji in context 5

In contexts of the sender blaming things, the negative emotion has been coded verbally, e.g., “trash” “far-fetched” “hehe, so selfish” and “idiot”. The mask-smile usage of emoji here does not help to mitigate the illocutionary force of the utterance in that the negative feelings are either towards some third party outside the context or explicitly conveyed by contexts. In examples 13-15, the target of what the sender blames is irrelevant to the receiver, so it has nothing to do with the receiver’s face. In example 16, one even makes ad hominem attacks. People can infer from the context that the emoji conveys negative connotations despite that it looks calm. In specific contexts, receivers infer that the sender is speechless and does not intend to continue the annoying topic at issue. Or the sender intends to express dismiss, disdain, contempt, speechlessness, etc.

6.6 The meanings and functions of the emoji in context 6

In the case of irony, some information from context is inconsistent with the literal meaning of the tweets, which triggers a search for the underlying ironic meaning. The emoji accompanying tweets is thus interpreted as mask smiles: being happy on the outside while feeling opposite inside. In example 17, the sender says: “Wow, you are amazing”. We can infer from the context that the tweet is sarcastic. Therefore, the emoji at the final position of the tweet should be interpreted as a mask smile instead of a genuine smile.

When the negative connotation of the emoji is somehow conventionalized by frequency, this emoji provides a cue to the interpretation of irony. It is the context not the emoji that convey irony. As Dresner & Herring (2010) point out, ‘sarcastic’ emoticons seem to have no self-standing content on their own, but rather contribute to—indeed, provide a vital cue as to how to interpret—the linguistic content of messages.

Contexts this emoji occurs in	Pragmatic meanings/ functions
The interlocutors express/respond to positive attitudes or feelings	emphasis or to add a positive attitude towards the propositional content of the tweets; strengthen expressive speech acts
The sender states something that is unpleasant/ undesirable	signal the propositional attitude that underlines the utterance which would be difficult to identify without the aid of the emoji; indicate the passive negative attitude
The sender jokes about an (unpleasant) situation	specify the attitude of the tweets or communicate a higher level of a propositional attitude (frustrated but nothing can be done about it) and emphasize the jesting nature of the tweets
The conversations include (potential) face threatening acts	mitigate illocutionary force; conversation closure
The sender blames things (on somebody)	despite the strong negative feelings in heart, the sender looks calm for consideration of politeness and manner; the sender is speechless and does not intend to continue the topic at issue
The sender makes an ironic statement	provide a cue to the ironic interpretation

6.1 classification of smiles and the pragmatic meanings/ functions of the emoji

7 DISCUSSION

7.1 The role of context in emoji interpretation

The possible meanings of emoji are always contextual (Gibson et al., 2018). In Walther & D'Addario's (2001) study of emoticons, e-mail messages containing emoticons did not generate different interpretations than did messages without emoticons. Emoticons' contributions were outweighed by verbal content.

From chart 3.2, we can see that contexts determines the interpretation of the emoji. Verbal message content prevailed over the emoticons' contributions. The emoji here either function as a cue or add/ specify an attitude. Its presence does not affect the content or the sentiment of the contexts. However, this should not be taken to say that the emoji is useless at all. With the aid of emojis, receivers can interpret utterances more accurately and easily.

7.2 Four aspects of contexts

Our results suggest that when interpreting emojis, four aspects of contexts should be considered. The propositional content (locutionary acts: what people say) of an utterance is the most important since it is the most informative and is the basis for the other three aspects. The illocutionary force¹ of an utterance manifests senders' intentions. Besides, the sentiment (affective direction) conveys by the utterance is another importance aspect. For instance, when the affective direction of the context is positive, like It's amazing 😊, the emoji here is associated with a positive attitude. When the affective direction of the context is negative, the utterance "It's amazing 😊" conveys irony. This shows that the affective direction of an utterance can affect the interpretation of emojis. The discourse structure of the utterance² (the ways that convention of speech manifests in people's talk), e.g., sequential placement and turn-taking, helps find out the functions of emojis. Although this aspect of context is not prominent in this paper: we only discussed the function of conversation closure of the emoji, we believe that other functions such as conversation opening could be attributed to the emoji if larger data corpora are available.

8 CONCLUSION

Emojis should be studied in context since they play a vital role in emoji interpretation. After carefully examining the context that the emoji occurs in, we annotated it into six types and established the meanings and functions of the emoji under each context: (1) emphasis or to add a positive attitude towards the propositional content of the tweets; strengthen expressive speech acts (2) signal the propositional attitude that underlines the utterance which would be difficult to identify without the aid of the emoji; indicate the passive negative attitude (3) specify the attitude of the tweets or communicate a higher level of a propositional attitude (frustrated but nothing can be done about it) and emphasize the jesting nature of the tweets (4) mitigate illocutionary force; conversation closure (5) despite the strong negative feelings in heart, the sender looks calm for consideration of politeness and manner; the sender is speechless and does not intend to continue the topic at issue (6) provide a cue to the ironic interpretation.

The results show that four aspects of context (propositional content, illocutionary force, affective direction and discourse structure) are at play in emoji interpretation.

9 FURTHUR DISCUSSION

¹ We have justified this at the beginning of section 4: indirect speech acts are a subtype of conversational implicature (Searle 1979).

² This is the focus of CA (conversational analysis). CA attempts to establish the meaning of an utterance for participants by looking at how interlocutors respond to each other's actions, and to explore the demonstrable interpretations that they display (Gibson et al., 2018).

9.1 The origin of its meanings

Why, among other smile emojis, do users pick the slightly smiley face emoji and associate it with those meanings mentioned in the last chapter? Almost all smiley face emojis can also be interpreted as genuine smiles varying in degree of intensity. However, only a small part of smiley emojis can represent polite, miserable and mask smiles. This has something to do with the visual characters of the emoji. The presentation style of emoji on different operating system platforms will affect users' preferences for emoji or even lead to misunderstanding and divergence in terms of emoji's emotional and semantic interpretation during cross-platform use (Bai et al., 2019). The presentation style of the emoji on WeChat platform, with a controlled, slight upward tilt of the lip corners and empty, emotionless eyes looking down, gives people the impression that this smile is forced and contrived, which lends itself to the best candidate for miserable and mask smiles. When we smile politely, our lip corners are slightly lifted. Therefore, the emoji can also be polite smiles.

9.2 Semantic extension

The specific meanings that users want to express by emoji may be different from their official definitions, resulting in different interpretations of the same emoji (Miller et al., 2016). The emoji has been used as genuine and polite smiles since its invention. Only in recent few years, the emoji has been widely used with negative connotation on internet communication among the young generation (Qin, 2020). This explains why the frequency of genuine-smile usage of the emoji is much higher than that of mask-smile usage .

The features of the emoji mentioned in section 4.1 can partly explain the negative connotation of the emoji. When it occurs in the contexts of stating something unpleasant or blaming something at the early stage, its negative meanings are inferred. With a high frequency of use of the emoji in these contexts, the meanings of the emoji become more or less conventionalized, which associates the emoji with a negative connotation—smile on the outside when it is not true/ one feels the opposite. A negativity effect appears: any message containing a negative verbal or graphic element is more negative than any message with no negative elements (Walther & D'Addario, 2001). This explains why young people nowadays feel uncomfortable with it regardless of the contexts it occurs in.

The semantic extension (viz., the negative connotation of the emoji) of this emoji has caused semantic ambiguity. For example, suppose you receive a WeChat message from your boss: "Come to my office this afternoon 😊", or a WeChat message from your mother: "I want to talk to you 😊". Or imagine that you ask your girlfriend: "How is your new boss?", and she replies: "😊". It's hard to tell whether this is a polite/genuine smile or a mask smile. Therefore, we need more contextual information to disambiguate these usages.

We attempt to construct the path of semantic extension of "mask smiles" as:

Negative feelings inferred from the context > negative connotation conventionalized through frequent use > negativity effect > ambiguity between usages (genuine/ polite smiles VS. mask smiles)

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