

The Use of Emoticons in Polite Phrases of Greetings and Thanks

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Abstract—This paper shows the connection between emoticons and politeness in written computer-mediated communication. It studies if there are some differences in the use of emoticon between Czech and English written tweets. The assumptions about the use of emoticons were based on the use of greetings and thanks in real, face-to-face situations. The first assumption, that welcome greeting phrase would be accompanied by positive emoticon, was correct. But for the farewell greeting are both positive and negative emoticons possible. The results show lower frequency of negative emoticons in this context. There were also quite often found both positive and negative emoticon in the same tweet. The expression of gratitude is associated with positive emotions. The results show that emoticons accompany polite phrases of greeting and thanks very often both in Czech and English. The use of emoticons with studied polite phrases shows that emoticons have become an integral part of these phrases.

Keywords—Computer-mediated communication, emoticons, politeness, Twitter.

I. INTRODUCTION

EMOTICONS are widely spread on the whole Internet. They have become naturalized in so different cultures like European, Japanese, or Korean, in general, in both Western and Eastern cultural background. Each of them has its own emoticons: Western are created mainly through colon, hyphen and brackets, they read sideways (with turning one's head 90 grades), Eastern through caret symbol and read without the need to turn one's head. Because of large range of emoticons, this paper focuses only on Western emoticons in Western cultural background, specifically in Czech and English-written tweets.

The main aim is to show the connection between emoticons and polite phrases of greeting and thanks in written computer-mediated communication (CMC). This paper tries to answer the question if there were some differences in the use of emoticons between Czech and English written tweets. Czech people are said to be introverted and quite calm to strangers; this should be presented in publicly available tweets through lower frequency of emoticons. The assumptions about the use of emoticons were based on the use of greetings and thanks in real, face-to-face situations. The first assumption is that welcome greeting phrases are accompanied by positive emoticons more often than farewell greetings. The second assumption is that emoticons follow gratitude expression more frequently than greetings. These assumptions are deduced from the observation that some greeting situations are not

pleasant, especially at the end of a conversation, and then negative or sad emotions (and emoticons) occur, while thanking people prefer to express their positive feelings and emotions. But there is also another assumption that positive emoticons will be much more frequent than negative or other types of emoticons.

II. LINGUISTIC BACKGROUND

CMC is often discussed as a new way of communication between written and spoken modes. Besides keeping some features from both traditional modes, it brings also something new like acronyms, emoticons, creative use of punctuation marks, or repetition of letters. The main aim of these discursive strategies is to transfer a coded text to the recipient with as much intended interpretation of the text as possible. Although the repertoire of words available in one's lexicon differs, generally, understanding, feelings, emotions, and attitudes stay almost the same. However, our cultural background can influence our attitudes and behavior, too.

Emoticons are one of the most typical features of CMC, although they can be noticed in written or printed text already. The term emoticon (short for "emotion + icon") refers to a string of keyboard characters that shall represent a face expressing a particular emotion or a motion connected often with this emotion. According to their original cultural background, we distinguish between Western (e.g. :-)), and Eastern (e.g. ^_^) emoticons. Another categorization considers the process of producing, thus there are typographic (which consist of recognizable keyboard characters) and graphic (which present a picture, mostly colorful, which can be also animated) emoticons. Users prefer a relatively small set of emoticons despite the large numbers of emoticon types and variants (e.g. the prototypical happy emoticon :-)) can be modified by other characters for its mouth, like] 3 >) [1].

In the field of linguistics, emoticons are still primarily viewed as emotional markers, e.g. [2], [3]. But they also "provide information about how an utterance is supposed to be interpreted" [4]. They can also substitute punctuation [5] and in this way they become a new type of text separators. A new classification of pragmatic functions of emoticon is given by [6]. However, emoticons can express more functions at the same time and then it is very hard to distinguish them clearly. Therefore the analyses in the second part of this paper do not take the classification in [6] into account and it operates only with a rough classification into positive and negative emoticons. There are also emoticons, which do not express an emotion but a motion connected often with some emotion, like winking emoticon ;-)) is often used as a symbol of irony or

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joke. These emoticons are divided into separate group because they are very context-dependent and their meaning is often unclear without larger context.

The gender differences are a much discussed topic not only in linguistics, but also in psychology, e.g. [3], [7], and [8]. Women are much more connected with expressing emotions and talking about them, which should be resulted in the higher frequency of emoticons. This opinion is also very deeply embedded in the Western society [9]. But there are many other researches which did not confirm any gender differences or even reject them (e.g. [8]). Although the gender topic is very interesting, this paper does not pay it much attention because of data collection without any respect to author's gender.

III. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The data in the present study consist of a total of 600 tweets which were gathered from public profiles on Twitter. Both Czech and English tweets were collected at the same day.

The group of greetings includes both welcome and farewell, i.e. *ahoj* and *čau* in Czech, *hello* and *bye* in English. Because both Czech greeting phrases can be used for both welcome and farewell, they had been annotated according to their function at first. The subgroup of welcome greetings includes 100 Czech phrases and the same number in English. Otherwise the subgroup of farewell greetings consists of 100 Czech and 100 English phrases.

The group of thanks contains 100 tweets in both languages. The Czech phrases *děkuji* varies in the ending: both *-i* and *-u* are acceptable in all types of communication and communication settings.

All data were manually annotated according to the following parameters: 1) gender of author, 2) a number of used emoticons, 3) positivity, or negativity of emoticons, 4) the position of emoticons in a tweet, 5) the position of emoticon in relation to other emoticons in the same tweet. An overview of the data is presented in Table I.

TABLE I
DATA OVERVIEW

| Phrase Type | Language | User's Gender | | Nr. of Emoticons | Phrase Position | | |
|-------------|----------|---------------|------|------------------|-----------------|------|-----|
| | | Female | Male | | Begin. | Mid. | End |
| welcome | CZ | 69 | 31 | 266 | 89 | 7 | 4 |
| | ENG | 67 | 33 | 235 | 71 | 24 | 5 |
| farewell | CZ | 78 | 22 | 294 | 21 | 24 | 55 |
| | ENG | 60 | 40 | 246 | 26 | 33 | 41 |
| thanks | CZ | 47 | 53 | 210 | 42 | 33 | 25 |
| | ENG | 71 | 29 | 243 | 44 | 28 | 28 |

The distribution of emoticon use in Czech (CZ) and English (ENG) tweets and the proportion of tweets according to user's gender. The column called *number of emoticons* shows the absolute frequency of all emoticon units in all tweets without any relation to a welcome or thanks phrase. There is also number of emoticons connected to a phrase and the phrase position in a tweet (beginning, middle, and end).

Because of direct searching for selected phrases, the analyses do not consider the context of previous or following tweets. Each tweet including the studied phrase is analyzed separately as one unit.

IV. DATA ANALYSES

A. Greeting Phrases

A greeting is a formal and polite word of welcome or recognition. In informal environment, it may acquire many modifications according to the strength of the relationship of both communication partners. Using greetings in online discussions or chats is, in general, facultative, but polite. In contrast to face-to-face communication, the omission of greetings is more tolerated [10], which could be seen from a lack of verbal penalization by other communication partners.

TABLE II
EMOTICON USE IN GREETING PHRASES

| Greeting Type | Language | Nr. of Emoticons Connected to Phrase | Only Positive | Only Negative | Both | Other |
|---------------|----------|--------------------------------------|---------------|---------------|------|-------|
| | | | (%) | (%) | (%) | (%) |
| welcome | CZ | 60 | 86.6 | 8.3 | 3.3 | 1.6 |
| | ENG | 57 | 80.7 | 10.5 | 8.8 | 0 |
| farewell | CZ | 86 | 80.2 | 5.8 | 10.5 | 3.5 |
| | ENG | 77 | 44.2 | 39 | 10.3 | 6.5 |

The third column (called *number of emoticons connected to phrase*) shows a number of emoticons which follow the phrase in a tweet. In case of emoticon situated right at the beginning of a tweet (or after addressing) and then the phrase comes, this emoticon does not be supposed to be connected to the phrase.

1. Welcome Phrases

This type of greeting phrases is in almost 80 % (of both Czech and English tweets) situated at the beginning of a whole tweet. Tweets in the sample usually respect a common form for an initial chat conversation, i.e. greeting followed by addressing. Emoticons follow in a half of the sample right after the welcome phrase or the phrase connected with the name of the addressed person. The other cases include an emoticon at the end of the whole initial sentence, in the case of final punctuation after that.

Table II presents the distribution of emoticon use within a tweet, with regard to positivity or negativity. Both Czech and English samples prove almost the same proportion, in general, the welcome phrase strongly tends to positive emoticons. The interpretation of a co-occurrence of both positive and negative emoticons is complicated because of pulling the tweet out of the conversation, e.g. *hello austin :) (: or HI HI HI HI HI HI HELLO HELLO from the phil hereeee. :(:))))))))) !!!!!!!!!* However, it indicates that emoticons transmit other non-verbally expressed information which are unclear for this conversation observers.

The Czech sample consists of two phrases: *ahoj* and *čau*, but there were not found any differences in their collocability with emoticons. These phrases differ only in the number of their variants: *ahój, ahojja, ahojky* vs. *čáu, čauvéc, čauky, čus*. The most frequent variants are in the sample the basic ones.

2. Farewell Phrases

The situation related to farewell greetings is complicated, because of differences between Czech and English tweets (see Table III). The farewell phrases do not need to be right at the end of a tweet. It may be situated also at the beginning or in

the middle, followed and preceded by the given text. 34 % of all Czech phrases are connected with an adverb *tak/takže* [so] or *zatím* [already, yet], e.g.: *D já bych si šla lehnout :(vstávat ve 2, to mě zabíjí:D užij si to ve škole:D já jdu na bus, tak ahoj:D [:D I would go to bed :(get up at 2 kills me:D enjoy the school:D I go to bus, so bye:D]*.

The farewell phrases show a great difference between both languages (see Table II), which could be explained by several reasons, e.g. the English tweets were written by native, but also non-native speakers, while the Czech tweets rather come from native speakers. Another reason could be a different proportion of women and men. The Czech sample consists of more women's tweets and the number of used emoticons is higher. It may be interpreted that women tend to use more emoticons, but that assumption should be based on larger sample.

The Czech sample of farewell greetings is more coincident with the welcome phrases; there is a strong tendency to positive emoticons following the greeting. The co-occurrence of positive and negative emoticons is for both languages the same and greater than in the welcome phrases. Looking at the data, this co-occurrence presents the weakening sadness of the ending conversation, e.g. *i need to go now. bye :) :(*.

B. Thanks Phrases

Expressing gratitude does not differ, in general, from face-to-face or written communication. Although the written CMC offers many variants of canonic phrases for gratitude, especially shortened words or acronyms like *thx*, *dik(y)*, *TU*, this paper focuses only on full phrases. Despite the unrestricted object of the reference, pronouns occur more frequently than nouns (mainly first names and nicknames).

The emoticon distribution in the immediate context of a phrase exceeds 90 % in both languages (see Table III), so the presumption about a strong connection between a polite phrase of thanks and positive emoticon occurrence is confirmed. The absence of negative emoticons situated right behind the phrase supports the idea that Czech and English writing users show rather positive emotions while thanking. The co-occurrence of both positive and negative emoticons was found in those parts of tweets, where the users express their mixed feeling relating to something unpleasant, e.g. *AWWW thank you!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! :() or Big to ♥♥♥ děkuju ti moc za ochotu i když nebudu moct jít!!! :() ♥♥♥ [Big to ♥♥♥ Thank you very much for your kindness even if I can not go!!! :() ♥♥♥]*.

TABLE III
EMOTICON USE IN THANKS PHRASES

| Language | Nr. of Emoticons Connected to Phrase | Only Positive (%) | Only Negative (%) | Both (%) | Other (%) |
|----------|--------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|----------|-----------|
| CZ | 56 | 92.9 | 0 | 5.4 | 1.7 |
| ENG | 71 | 95.8 | 0 | 4.2 | 0 |

V. CONCLUSION

The assumptions about the use of emoticons in publicly

available tweets were based on the use of greetings and thanks in real, face-to-face situations. Generally said, both two assumptions were confirmed, as the data analyses shows.

The first assumption that welcome greeting phrases are accompanied by positive emoticon was correct. But for farewell greeting both positive and negative emoticons are possible, which is presented in English-written tweets, the proportion of only positive and only negative emoticon occurrence is nearly the same. However, Czech-written tweets including farewell phrases do follow the tendency noticed in welcome phrases. The explanation would require a detailed analysis, a broader context of conversation, or better sampling (e.g. according to gender).

The expression of gratitude is associated with positive emotions. The collected data do not contain any co-occurrence of thanks and only negative emoticon. The second assumption about gratitude expressions accompanied more frequently by a positive emoticon than greetings was also correct. Even though positive emoticons predominate in both context, the emoticons which express irony (e.g. :-p) also occurred, but they were rather random.

Although the data were not analyzed with respect to gender differences, this problem should be summed in the data collection. The proportion of female and male author is almost the same only for welcome phrases. The sample for farewell phrases differs between both languages in the absolute number of tweets, but the female predominance stays. However, it does not apply for the sample of English thanks phrases, where male authors predominate. Considering these differences, the disproportion between positive and negative emoticons in farewell phrases is supposed to be not based (only) on the gender disproportion.

The results show that emoticons accompany polite phrases of greeting and thanks very often both in Czech and English. The use of emoticons with studied polite phrases shows that emoticons have become an integral part of these phrases. The publicly available CMC are not a good candidate for politeness comparison among languages either.

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