Turning face : Emoticons as reinforcers/attenuators

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This interdisciplinary study researches the trend of using visual cues known as emoticons as grading elements for reinforcement or attenuation (Paradis 2003, 2008). Traditionally emoticon usage has been a representation of an emotional sentiment. The aim of this corpus study is to highlight and describe the dual usage of the happy and sad face emoticons as also being modifiers of degree.

Emoticon: :)   happy   :(sad

It has been recognized repeatedly that on-line communication has exploded over the past decade (McEnery & Xiao & Tono 2006; Kivran–Swaine, Brody & Naaman 2013). Today we find many different languages being plied to a single online discussion where emoticon usage as a form of lingua-franca can help bring clarity by conveying different sentiments during these, at times, short and fast-paced conversations.

As an integral part of online communication, they have been extensively studied, not only as part of Sentiment Analysis / Data Mining (Pak & Paroubek 2010; Feldman 2013) but also within the area of Computer Mediated Communication (Dresner & Herring 2010, Vandergiff 2013). Sentiment analysis looks to understand the feelings, attitudes, and opinions that can be expressed by using both words and visual cues, e.g. emoticons (Rezabek & Cochenour 1998). However, emoticons also have another function that differs from its traditional sentiment usage, *reinforcement* and *attenuation*, where reinforcement is used to maximize and give emphasis and attenuation is used to reduce the strength of an expression almost akin to a hedge (Paradis 2003, 2008).

Sentiment example:	It's a :) day.	Equal to emotion:	It's a *good* day.
Reinforcer example:	It's a good day :)	Equal to reinforcer:	It's a *very* good day
Attenuator:	I'm sure :(	Equal to attenuator:	I'm *not quite* sure

Our data are taken from blogs, micro-blogs, chat-forums, and online discussions concerning the highly charged issue of the Coca-Cola advertisement commercial from the 2 February 2014 Super Bowl[1]. The texts were gathered from web-based streaming data and used to build a small corpus of more than 150,000 words that centers upon the dominant chatter found pre – during – and post game.

We begin by reporting on background studies of the traditional usages of the *happy* and *sad face* sentiment emoticons (Ahn, Park & Han 2011). Then we address the traditional usages of lexical reinforcers / attenuators (Biber, et al 1999, 2004; Paradis 2003, 2008). Finally, we use DuBois's evaluation - position – alignment framework (2007) of stance for close analysis of the data to compare actual contextual meanings and communicative functions of both usage types. The results support that, within certain contexts, the emoticons studied were not always employed primarily as sentiment, there were distinct instances where they are utilized in a similar way to replacements for traditional lexical reinforcers or attenuators (Paradis 2003, 2008). To further future studies, and to be able to identify emoticon usage as visual cues of reinforcers / attenuators as opposed to the traditional emoticon usage as representations of sentiment, we tentatively propose the name distinction, *degree emotionizers of stance*.

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[i] The issue being the languages other than English that were used in singing Katharine Lee Bates traditional poem turned song, America the Beautiful. Found at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=443Vy3I0gJs