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Emoji and communicative action: The semiotics, sequence and gestural actions of 'face covering hand'

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses conversation analysis to explore the communicative functions of one emoji in a mobile reading community in China. In contrast to semiotic approaches to emoji that focus on their cultural signification, or that treat them as reflections of users' inner intensions, we analyse emoji as communication phenomena by exploring their relation to other textual actions in the production of text-talk. The emoji analysed here functioned as a laughter token, and performed specific interactional work related to laughter. We conclude that conversation analysis offers an important corrective to abstracted semiotic analysis and a useful resource for exploring the demonstrable meaning of emoji for interlocutors. However, we also emphasise the importance of capturing the process of composing messages, the challenges of dealing with the variety of forms that emoji take and their relation to gestural and other actions in face to face communication.

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1. Introduction

Emoji,[1] like emoticons, GIFs and other 'graphicons' (graphical icons, Herring & Dainas, 2017) are often said to be useful for helping to clarify the meaning of written text (Thompson and Filik, 2016), or to 'add' meaning to it (Alshenqeeti, 2016; Derks et al., 2007). Some researchers have characterised the interactional function of emoji in terms of the 'emotional work' that they perform in enhancing social relationships, and as displays of interlocutors' feelings (Riordan, 2017) or 'emotive tone' (Danesi, 2016; Kaye et al., 2016). (We will return to these arguments later). However, while emoji may have communicative purposes, substantial research has shown that there are often significant differences in the ways that people interpret their meaning (Cramer et al., 2016; Jaeger et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2016; Sugiyama, 2015). Miller et al.'s (2016) survey of users based in the USA showed that the 304 recruited participants only agreed on the meaning of emoji in 25% of cases. Researchers have also shown that there are differences in how people from different backgrounds use graphicons, with age, gender, levels of experience in using text-based communication, and of course cultural background all being said to impact on how people use them (Alshenqeeti, 2016; Baron, 2004; Lo, 2008; Markman and Oshima, 2007; Nishimura, 2015; Sampietro, 2016a).

It seems, then, that there is something of a paradox with emoji: i.e. that they are interactionally useful for helping people to express themselves, but that people are not always in agreement about exactly what is intended when they are used. Our research explores this paradox by analysing how one particular emoji was used in a mobile chat reading programme in China.

One of the starting points for the analysis in this paper is that the possible meanings of emoji are always contextual; that is, when interlocutors encounter emoji they are faced with what Stark and Crawford (2015: 3) call the 'hermeneutic impulse' of interpreting the author's intent *in this particular context*. This is a re-framing of an old question in sociolinguistics, which is, as Kress puts it, 'how does this signifying object work here' (Kress, 2010: 1). Emoji have a rich socio-semiotic history, which creates a complex domain of potential meanings (Moschini, 2016; Sampietro, 2016a): they were first developed in Japan in the mid-1990s where a telecom company created them as a new communication form for pager users. Since then, the Unicode consortium[2] instantiated a set of standardised characters that form a cross-industry coding standard for emoji representation. At the point of writing this, there

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[1] Consistent with the Japanese usage, we use 'emoji' as both a singular and plural noun. We do not refer to 'emojis', for example, although some of our quotations from other literature do include this grammatical form.

[2] The Unicode consortium oversee the development of unicode, which is the international standard for coding written text in different languages, and which allows different platforms and operating systems to display text in the same way.

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are 2666 emoji (www.emojipedia.com), with more characters regularly being added (Riordan, 2017). Moschini suggests that emoji represent "a marker of the mashing up of Japanese and American cultures in the discursive practices of geek communities, now gone mainstream…" (Moschini, 2016: 9). Emoji signification has roots in the semiotics of Japanese manga cartoons, American 1960s counter-culture, the 1980s/90s acid house movement and, before all of that, an internal marketing campaign of a life insurance company in Massachusetts (Danesi, 2016; Moschini, 2016; Stark and Crawford, 2015).

This paper focusses on analysing the face covering hand emoji. In WeChat, which is the chat application used by the participants in our study, when users select an emoji the meaning is displayed in Chinese on the screen (see Fig. 1) – this emoji is defined as 'chuckle' (偷笑 – touxiao). However, there are many other complex cultural associations with this icon, and one important source for such meanings is emojipedia (www.emojipedia.com), which is a popular internet source for emoji meaning. There, the emoji is defined as 'laughing when you shouldn't', 'laugh quietly' and 'you are going to puke'. There are more culturally specific connotations in the context of Chinese culture. For instance, there is an idea that people should be euphemistic (含蓄 – hanxu) in how they talk, avoiding the display of feelings and opinions too obviously or directly. Further, that 'laugh/smile without showing the teeth' (笑不露齿 – xiao-bu-lu-chi) is a traditional way of being for Chinese women (Mai et al., 2011), and a 'cultured and well-educated' woman might be expected to follow rules of 'being proper', which might include 'laugh without showing the teeth'.

The rich spectrum of associated meanings along with the seeming ubiquity of emoji use has led some researchers interested in semiotics to make grand claims about their potential. Danesi's (2016: vii) study poses the idea that "emoji code might well be the universal language that can help solve problems of comprehension that international communications have always involved in the past". In a different publication Danesi (2017:1) notes that "Emoji have become an ipso facto universal language". Similarly, Alshenqeeti (2016: 56) claims that "there are universal meanings to Emojis" and that "as a language form, emojis may be able to contribute to increased cross-cultural communication clarity".

There are problems with this hyperbole. Kerslake and Wegerif (2016) point out that in order to decode emoji people need cultural competence, which is of course not universal but relative to cultural background. Further, as Stark and Crawford (2015) make clear, all semiotic work is contextual, and 'meaning' is not an abstract issue for participants, but a pragmatic concern with getting some interactional work done. The 'hermeneutic impulse' in the interpretation of emoji is of course the same kind of impulse that drives people in all of their interactions as they try to understand why any gesture, utterance, body posture or glance is used and what its meanings might be (Sacks, 1992). As conversation analysis puts it, the question that drives us as participants in ordinary life and as analysts is 'Why this, now?' (Silverman, 1998). Our analysis in this paper moves away from an abstracted, decontextualized semiotics to explore the sequential orders within which textual action takes place.

1.1. Emoji and communicative action

One of the common ways that emoji and other graphicons are analysed is in terms of how they scaffold textual communications. This general idea is framed in numerous ways by researchers: for example, some talk about graphicons as 'representing emotions' (Sampietro, 2016b), or as helping "the calibration of emotional states" (Jackson, 2016: 75), to give 'attitude clarification' (Yus, 2014), or to understand the tone or 'illocutionary force' (Dresner and Herring, 2010). In this section, we review some of the assumptions embedded in these various claims.

1.1.1. Gesture, emotion and sequential order

A common way to analyse emoji is to regard them as expressions of inner emotions (Hancock et al., 2007). As Alshenqeeti (2016: 56) puts it, "emojis are filling the need for adding non-verbal cues in digital communication about the intent and emotion behind a message". There are several problems with this idea. First, we do not know if our interpretation (as researchers or as ordinary text users) fits with how authors feel. Second, the idea that graphicons can be mapped onto feelings ignores the cultural practices surrounding the expression of emotion. As with any communicative device, emoji are not always a good guide to 'what is going on inside', but are often a reflection of cultural preferences about the kinds of emotional displays that are appropriate (Hochschild, 2012). Third, and central to the arguments of this paper, graphicons have communicative functions that act independently of any emotional indexicality that they may or may not have; to put it somewhat crudely, the sets of social norms and practices that make up the 'interaction order' (Goffman, 1983) operate irrespective of how people feel about them.

A further common way to analyse graphicons is to treat them as comparable to how gestures function in co-presence communication (Alshenqeeti, 2016; Danesi, 2016). Tolins and Samermit argue that GIFs are stand-ins for contributors' own bodily acts and are "demonstrations of affective non-verbal expressions" (Tolins and Samermit, 2016: 77). There are several issues that make the comparison of emoji and gestures complicated. First, one of the clear pragmatic differences between the use of graphicons and physical gestures relates to their sequential placement. In spoken

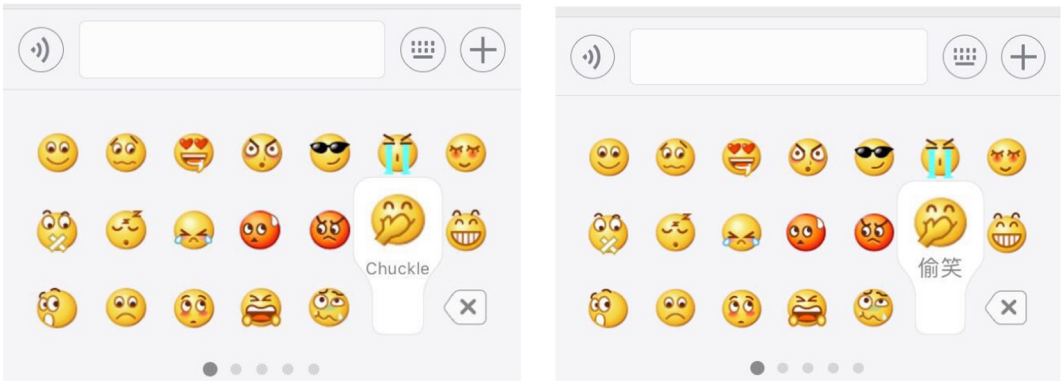

Fig. 1. Emoji meaning as displayed in WeChat (shown in English and Chinese).

interaction, people use gestures/facial expressions/gaze/body posture while they talk, but in online text-chats graphicons are delivered as, or as part of turns, and they land in particular sequential spaces within a string of other turns (Garcia and Jacobs, 1999).

Second, the way in which the sequential organisation of turns works in online textual interaction is different to how turns works face-to-face (Petitjean and Morel, 2017): as Schonfeldt and Golato (2003) argue, in online chat, participants do not have access to the process of message creation and this changes radically the nature of the communication, which is comprised of specific sequential orders (Baron, 2010; Jones and Schieffelin, 2009) and is frequently described as substantially more 'disorderly' and as lacking in coherence (Degand and van Bergen, 2016; Herring, 1999; Petitjean and Morel, 2017). Graphicons are a part of this 'disorder' and can result in the same types of 'misplacement' phenomena common to text, such as 'phantom adjacency' (Garcia and Jacobs, 1999) where contributions land in sequentially adjacent turns and look like they have a sequential relationship when they do not.

Third, while gestures may become embodied and be produced pre-reflexively as 'modalities of being' (a fidget, someone who is attentive, a grumpy-person – much of which is displayed in people's bodily comportment), graphicons are 'deliberative' in the sense that they are composed rather than 'emanated'. As Derks et al. (2007) and Yus (2014) have both put it, emoticons are used more 'consciously' than gestures are. While people develop embodied styles of writing that may include a more or less frequent use of graphicons, this is distinctive to the continual and unavoidable 'signs given off' (Goffman, 1959) that people 'emit' when they are physically in each other's company.

The presence of distinctive sequential orders of graphicons and gestures does not undermine the idea that there is a close relation between gestural actions and emoji, as the latter do often depict physical gestures that may have a relevance to the interpretation of textual action. However, in this paper we analyse emoji not as substitutes for gestures but as communicative actions in their own right. We will, however, return to the question of their relation to gestures in our conclusions.

1.2. Conversation analysis and online communication

Conversation analysis (CA) is concerned with the demonstrable construction of meaning in interaction and offers an important tool for the analysis of written textual interaction. While historically CA has been mostly used to analyse spoken conversation and physical interaction, researchers have recently turned attention to the achievement of social order in online textual actions (Giles et al., 2015; Paulus et al., 2016). The strength of this approach is that it treats all questions about authors' intensions as empirical questions that can only be answered through a close investigation of communication praxis. The distinctiveness of this framework can be illustrated by contrast with speech act theory (SAT), which remains a common way for authors to approach the study of online interaction. SAT assumes a difference between the things that people say (locutionary acts) and their intended meanings or their 'illocutionary force'. When they interact, people draw on 'inferencing rules' to define what was really meant by what was said (Curl and Drew, 2008). SAT treats graphicons as displays of internal feelings, in the way we described earlier by, for example, hedging, displaying irony, or by showing how an utterance was intended (e.g. Herring & Dainas, 2017; Skovholt, Grønning, & Kankaanranta, 2014; Yus, 2014).

One of the criticisms that has been levelled at SAT is that it relies on the idea that meaning has an internal origin; as Rosaldo puts it, "...[SAT] does not comprehend the sociality of individuals who use its "rules" and "resources" to act" (Rosaldo, 1982: 204). SAT assumes that meanings originate inside speakers and attempts to identify the relation between talk and the inner realm of origin. CA, in contrast, pays attention to the orderly properties of speech as an 'interaction order', and the ways that conventions of speech manifest in people's talk. People's understandings of social conventions are visible within their speech, so that talk and text become domains for exploring questions about the structure of society as a locally ordered accomplishment. It is beyond our remit to provide a thorough overview of CA and its relation to online communication (See Giles, Stommel, Paulus, Lester, & Reed, 2015; Paulus, Warren, & Lester, 2016 for discussions): our aim is to use this framework to analyse the communicative uses of one emoji.

2. Methods and background of the study

The data for this research comes from the analysis of an online reading programme organised by a private company based in China called 'Panda Academy'. The programme aimed to encourage native Mandarin speakers to read by creating a community who would work through pre-set readings and discuss those readings through WeChat (an online mobile-based chat app). All texts and conversations were in Mandarin. The programme lasted for ten months during which time learners read sections of 40 books and were encouraged to spend 15 minutes reading each day.

We sent out a call for participation to registered adult Panda Academy users. 111 people replied, and we recruited 55 of them for our study, and divided them into two groups. The remaining 56 users were discounted from the study because they did not consent to participate, or because of data errors such as mistakes in their contact details. In our data, we label the participants by the initial number that they received when they registered interest; so, participant 103 was the 103rd person to reply and is represented simply as 'P103' in the data extracts. Two native Chinese researchers acted as moderators for the chats and they are referred to as R1 and R2 in the data extracts. Following a presentation of the research aims and process by the researchers, all participants gave written approval for their data to be captured by screenshots from the researchers' mobile devices.

Table 1 shows the entire data set that we collected for the two groups over an eight-month period in 2016/17. The analysis presented here is drawn from a selection of data that was translated into English for analysis by the wider research team, which included a non-Chinese speaker. We translated data for 7 weeks of discussion for each of the two groups.

Table 1
Size of entire data corpus and frequencies of emoji use.

	Number of turns	Number of face covering hand emoji	Number of total emoji use	The percentage of face covering hand in total emoji use	Number of turns using face covering hand emoji	Number of turns using any emoji	The percentage of turns with face covering hand in total turns with any emoji	Number of participants (excluding moderators)
Group 1	1676	64	485	13%	44	321	14%	27
Group 2	1502	89	383	23%	68	305	22%	28
Total	3178	153	868	18%	112	626	18%	55

The translation process was extremely challenging and involved making value judgements about how best to translate idiomatic phrases. It also involved judgements about where to grammatically place emoji and other graphicons in the newly translated texts. The process was highly iterative involving numerous drafts and re-drafts of the translations.

We chose the face covering hand emoji as our analytic focus because we wanted to explore the use of smileys rather than iconographic emoji such as objects or images (Alshenqeeti, 2016). The face covering hand emoji was a particularly commonly used one in our data set, between 13% and 23% of all emoji used (see Tables 1 and 2), although its selection was largely arbitrary and not based on criteria beyond its frequency of application.

Our analysis began by choosing segments where this emoji was used and producing analytic descriptions of the interpretive function of the emoji in each case. This process involved close discussion between the research team. The data was also presented at several conferences where feedback on the interpretations as well as the translations was solicited from and incorporated into the final analysis presented here.

3. Analysis: emoji, meaning and sequential placement

3.1. Emoji and cultural meaning

In Extract 1, R2 mentions a previous discussion where R1 had brought up a particular author and asks a question to the group to provide some more examples. R1 responds with a turn that starts with a laughter token (haha), which could be treated as a way of addressing the previous turn as carrying a possible compliment of R1 (See Golato, 2005 on compliment responses), but which also projects that their own turn is something that is in a humorous key. As it follows a direct question, the turn could be seen as an example of turn misplacement (Garcia and Jacobs, 1999) as R1's turn does not address the question but involves re-stating the argument that she had made earlier. The turn also works as an expansion move to elaborate on their earlier contribution (not shown in transcript). R2's next turn begins with the face covering hand emoji, followed by a statement that offers a further negative evaluation of the author being discussed (that his work is reminiscent of horoscopes). In this way, the turn aligns with the 'misplaced' expansion turn from R1 by elaborating on R1's critique.

When the emoji is treated as a laughter token it can be seen to replicate the same general structure of R1's previous turn, reproducing the humorous key. Together with the text, the emoji demonstrates an understanding of the previous turn's purpose not as an answer turn, but as an expansion turn. This interactional work is not a function of the semiotic properties of the emoji, but of its specific use as a laughter token at this particular juncture.

If one invokes the broader semiotic interpretations that we described as pertaining to this emoji then a number of alternate readings become available. For instance, it could be seen as an indicator of politeness, and as mediating implied criticism. In speech act theory this would be characterised as a good example of a form of 'softener', and an example of how emoji work to 'illocutionary force' (Dresner and Herring, 2010). Further, if we take the meaning to be associated with the gender performances of laughing in some Chinese contexts, then the communicative action might relate more to the participant's own gender work than to the act of criticising.

The analytic problem faced here is that there are few resources available to make clear that the emoji is doing any work beyond that described in the penultimate paragraph. In other words, it is difficult to demonstrably ground these more abstract readings in actions within the text. This shows a tension, then, between specific associations and instances of use, where common associations may appear to be contextually irrelevant or, as in this case, hard to ground in a close reading of the broader textual actions. A further example can serve to illustrate the point.

In Extract 2 P15 has been discussing psychology and makes reference to the concept 'dark-consciousness'. In the next turn one of the moderators uses the discourse marker 'wow', and then repeats 'dark-consciousness', which makes the term accountable as an epistemic device (Smith, 1998). In their next turn, P15 states that 'dark-consciousness' was not a term that they had read, but one he had invented. 'I invented that' serves to clarify the origin of the term and to make an epistemic claim to it. As we saw earlier, one of the associations of this emoji in a Chinese cultural context is to see it as indexing a preference to show emotion in an understated way. i.e. the association of hiding one's teeth when smiling

Table 2
Size of data corpus that was translated into English.

	Number of turns	Number of face covering hand emoji	Number of total emoji use	The percentage of face covering hand in total emoji use	Number of turns using face covering hand emoji	Number of turns using any emoji	The percentage of turns with face covering hand in total turns with any emoji	Number of participants (excluding moderators)
Group 1	246	12	81	15%	8	58	14%	27
Group 2	536	33	164	20%	30	134	22%	28
Total	782	45	245	18%	38	196	19%	55

R2	Speaking of pseudo-psychology, I remembered @R1 talking about Le Jia's colour psychology theory. Can anyone think of more cases?
R1	Haha he plagiarised other's ideas and took them as his own.
R2	🤔 I feel his kind of psychology is like horoscope.

R2： 说起伪心理学，我想起来上次@R1 讲到乐嘉的色彩心理学。大家还能想到哪些例子？

R1： 哈哈 那是他抄别人的点子 还说是自己的。

R2： 🤔 觉得色彩心理学和星座差不多的。

Extract 1.

P15	People who have read The Three-Body Problem all know that maybe the formation of the Earth is incidental.
	We know little about the universe, let alone minds.
	The psychology we know today might be overthrown one day.
	Freud developed subconsciousness, maybe we will find a dark-consciousness and subvert subconscious. So which is pseudo- psychology? Hell knows.
R1	Wow, dark-consciousness
P15	🤔 I invented that.
R1	I like the concept.
	Dark-consciousness.
	like the little demons in people's hearts.
P30	😁 😁
P15	看过三体的人都知道，也许地球就是偶然形成的。
	对于宇宙的探索我们知之甚少，更不要说对心灵了。
	我们现在所知的心理学也许不知哪一天就会被颠覆。
	弗洛伊德发现了潜意识，也许我们会发现一个暗意识，把潜意识也给推翻了。所以谁是伪心理学 呢？鬼知道。
R1	哇，暗意识。
P15	🤔 我编的。
R1	我喜欢这个概念。
	暗意识。
	像是人性深处的小魔鬼。
P30	😁 😁

Extract 2.

as a component of a demure attitude. This reading bears a 'family resemblance' to the visible meanings of the text, and because of this, there may be a case for suggesting a pragmatic fit with that particular interpretive frame and the surrounding text.

Another way to interpret the text, which is not necessarily mutually exclusive to the previous reading, is that 'I invented that' is a dis-preferred response that could be treated as breaching the expectation that the participants talk about concepts from the readings rather than inventing their own. In this case, the previously discussed 'demure attitude' reading becomes much less relevant as a framing, and something closer to 'embarrassment' (which is also one of the associations with this emoji) is perhaps invokable. Critically though, the reading of the emoji substantially depends on how one interprets the text itself. In both cases, the communicative work undertaken by the emoji is nebulous and fleeting, as is often also the case with verbally produced laughter tokens. Again, a key point is that the resources available to ground one reading over another are extremely scant, so it is hard to make substantive claims about the relevance of one reading over another.

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. Continuing with Extract 2, R1's next three contributions are 'I like the concept' 'dark-consciousness' and 'like the little demons in people's hearts'. The positive affiliation of the first of these can be taken in several ways. Most obviously, the turn is readable as a kind of compliment token, providing praise to P15 who has now taken ownership of the term being discussed. Further, R1's turn mitigates any implied dis-preferred actions by disattending to them. The repetition of 'dark-consciousness', followed by a description of it reiterates and expands the topic that they themselves had introduced. Of course, this tells us nothing about the emoji itself, but it gives an indication that R1 is treating P15's turn as an admission of authorship, rather than, say, as an admission of guilt. This reading could have relevance to either the interpretations of a demure attitude or embarrassment, but neither of those interpreations are made explicit.

The point to emphasise here is that in these instances there is, at best, an ambiguous relation between the emoji's communicative function and their possible meaning. Extracts 1 and 2 illustrate that it can be difficult to create a clear argument for the preference of one set of readings over another. Given the difficulties of substantiating such readings, we suggest that a more productive approach is to examine the communicative *actions* that emoji perform, which we turn to in the next section.

3.2. Emoji and communicative actions

Prior to the data shown in Extract 3, P30 had told the group that she enjoyed the book, mentioned a character called Nico, and introduced the concept of 'learned helplessness'. She said that illness had prevented her from achieving some things (this segment is not shown in extract). At the start of the extract, R2 aligns with the positive review and ends the turn with a direct question to P30, who answers in the next turn slot. Following this, R2 aligns with the answer, stating that they have similar feelings. In their next turn, R2 produces a turn which is phrased as a question 'I would like to know whether Nico takes psychology as her major later' followed by three face covering hand emoji.

Laughter tokens in spoken and written contexts are commonly used to display that the questions they follow are ironic (Frank, 1990) and, as we have seen, this is one of the most commonly described purposes of emoji in online interaction (e.g. Herring & Dainas, 2017; Skovholt et al., 2014; Yus, 2014). This is the most obvious reading of the emoji in the penultimate line, which display

R2	I like the book we read this week as well. @P30 It makes me feel at ease. 😊
	Happiness depends on our values. In terms of the learned helplessness, gradually it could become an illness. Do you think like that because recently you haven't felt well @P30?
P30	Probably.
R2	When I don't feel well, I tend to think like that as well.
	I would like to know whether Nico takes psychology as her major later? 🤔 🤔 🤔
P30	Hahaha, after I finish reading the book in the original I will let you know Ha.

R2	我也觉得这周书特别好看。@P30 看了就觉得舒心 😊
	幸福取决于我们的价值观。关于习得性无助，我觉得久而久之会发展成一种心理疾病。你是不是因为最近身体不太好才这么想的 @P30 ？
P30	可能吧。
R2	遇到身体不适我也容易这么想。
	我想知道后来妮可有没有去学心理学。 🤔 🤔 🤔
P30	哈哈哈等我看完了原著再告诉你哈。

Extract 3.

that the question is not designed to elicit a response, but to make a joke. Importantly, the text itself reveals this meaning too, as the absurdity of the question (proposing a hypothetical future for Nico) is sufficient to see it as a non-serious question. In their response, P30 begins their turn with a different laughter token ('hahaha'), displaying that they treat the previous turn in the way we have read it, and their phrase 'I will let you know when I finish reading the original book' continues in the ironic frame introduced by R2. A question emerges here as to whether the two laughter tokens perform different work or whether they are largely interchangeable. We suggest that they are entirely interchangeable, as our following extracts will further illustrate.

Prior to the text shown in Extract 4, P30 had asked the group if anybody had suggestions for good presents within a certain price bracket to buy for teachers. P103 makes the suggestion of a hard disk, and R1 suggests a gift card which P30 rejects 'but it is not an appropriate gift for teachers' followed by a smiley emoji. P30 continues by rejecting P103' suggestion of a hard drive, which uses the phrase, 'high-end, generous and superior' (高端大气上档次 – gaoduan-daqi-shangdangci). This reply ends with the face covering hand emoji.

If we approach these emoji as generic laughter tokens we can see that they play interactional work typical of these types of actions. For instance, the first emoji follows a rejection of a proposed idea, which research has shown to be a 'dis-preferred action' that is commonly followed by the use of laughter tokens as a means of mitigating the breach of preference (Shaw et al., 2013). The face covering hand emoji used at the end of the next line follows a phrase, which looks slightly peculiar in the English translation but is a buzzword with marketing connotations in the original Chinese. The laughter token could be read as indexing the term itself, and/or, perhaps, in repeating the same mitigating action found in the previous turn. Continuing with the example, P103's reply starts with an 'oh' which in English at least can be used as a discourse marker to indicate some disaffiliation (Schiffrin, 1988) and then says 'you want something high-end, generous and superior'. The use of the emoji at the end of the phrase appears in this case to relate to the performance of disaffiliated action, to mitigate implied criticism, and, again, to make accountable the use of the buzzword phrase itself. The final turn from P30 uses a standalone face covering hand emoji, which, as laughter token, follows the preference that when an ironic action is performed that it

P103	@P30 How about a mobile hard disk drive?
R1	I prefer supermarket gift cards.
P30	@R1 Your suggestion is good as this is what people need the most. But it's not an appropriate gift for teachers. 😁
	@P103 it is rejected by my classmates as well. They think it's not high-end, generous and superior enough. 🤔
P103	Oh, you want something high-end, generous and superior. 🤔
P30	🤔

P103	@P30 移动硬盘如何？
R1	我觉得直接送超市购物卡。
P30	@R1 你的建议很好，其实人类最需要这些的，送老师不太合适 😁
	@P103 这个也被同学否定了，觉得不够高端大气上档次。 🤔
P103	哦，要高端大气上档次。 🤔
P30	🤔

Extract 4.

R2	@P30 Maybe we are tired of books with a similar theme.
P30	It is similar to the Chicken Soup of the Soul.
	Reading one is alright but reading too many is unbearable. I always take naked exams.
P15	Naked exam 🤭
P30	It's not what you think 🤤

R2	@P30 可能我们对雷同主题的书籍感到疲劳了。
P30	就像现在的鸡汤文。
	看一本还行，看多了有点不能忍。经常裸考。
P15	裸考 🤭
P30	想远了吧 🤤

Extract 5.

is followed by an action indicating recognition, such as laughter (Glenn, 1989).

These four instances of emoji all function relationally to the text and their meaning relates not to abstract signification but to their role as laughter tokens in that context. We suggest that these interpretations are sufficient to see the work being undertaken by the emoji, and that, to the extent that they all act as laughter tokens, they are essentially interchangeable tokens. Our final example helps to emphasise these points.

In Extract 5 P30 makes reference to having 'naked exams' (裸考 – luokao). The phrase in Chinese is associated with undertaking exams without proper preparation. P15 repeats the phrase 'naked exams' and then uses the hand covering mouth emoji. This use repeats the phenomena found in Extract 4, with textual repetition and emoji being used to make the text accountable. In this case, the accountability involves drawing attention to the peculiarity of the phrase, and, perhaps to making available an obvious alternative meaning (i.e. taking exams while naked), a reading which P30 invokes in their response 'it is not what you think'. This is followed by a different emoji, which is called 'pooh pooh' in WeChat.

In using a different emoji, the text returns us to the hermeneutic paradox anew. This emoji is different to the others, comprising the depiction of a gesture of someone with their thumbs pointing down, with no mouth shown in the image. In physical interaction, this gesture carries meaning associated with rejection and disapproval. This association also clearly has some relevance here. The text displays that they understand the previous turn in the way we have outlined, and in invoking this quite specific gestural action, it shows that they are referencing the gestural performance of something like disapproval, and presumably (although that is less obvious here) in a slightly ironic way. In the final section of this paper we return to the concept of the hermeneutic impulse (Stark and Crawford, 2015) and to the issue of how to analyse different emoji and their gestural connotations.

4. Discussion and conclusions

4.1. Emoji and communicative action

Our aim in this paper has been to argue for a move away from semiotic approaches to emoji analysis and to show the value of conversation analysis as a tool to the examination of emoji's communicative purposes. The previous section began by showing that it is hard to demonstrably ground specific semiotic associations of emoji in instances of their use. The face covering hand emoji has very diverse associations of meaning, but our analysis illustrated that it is hard to make a case for their relevance to the unfolding actions.

There are several implications arising from this. Firstly, it shows the difficulty of applying semiotic analysis to emoji, as the wide variety of potential meanings that then could have are often difficult to fit with broader conversational actions. Secondly, it points to a difficulty that ordinary users of emoji face, which is in figuring out whether or not a particular possible association is relevant in a given context. While it is very preliminary, our analysis suggests that the interpretive ambiguity that users report when reading emoji may be a recurring feature of emoji use, as the various associations that people have of them may not fit with the other communicative actions being undertaken. Thirdly, it casts doubt on the hyperbolic claims that have been made about emoji's communicative possibilities as a 'universal language' (Alshenqeeti, 2016; Danesi, 2016).

Rather than trying to define the possible meanings of emoji in the abstract, we used CA to study the uses of the emoji in interaction in order to see how people employ them in conversational action. In our analysis we showed the communicative actions undertaken by the face covering hand emoji clearly related to the use of laughter tokens in interaction. The function of the emoji emerged from their sequential placement in relation to other textual actions and included actions such as emphasising that an utterance was ironic, that a question was rhetorical, or that a certain word or phrase was 'accountable'. This illustrates that productive analysis of emoji can be undertaken without abstract conceptions of culture or semiosis, and without an orientation to meaning as an inner event, which we have shown is another common trend in the analysis of graphicons (Herring & Dainas, 2017; Sampietro, 2016b; Tolins & Samermit, 2016; Yus, 2014).

The analysis of emoji in this way involves treating associative meanings of emoji as irrelevant to the action unless/until they can be demonstrably shown to be of importance to the interlocutors. In making this point, we are suggesting that the general approach of corpus analysis that CA has adopted in other modes of communication is an important tool for demonstrating differences in how people in different cultures might use and interpret emoji. Our analysis of this particular emoji in Chinese language has not found any particular differences with how it would be used in an English-speaking context. This most certainly does not mean that there are no differences but implies that much more work is needed on larger data corpora in order to map similarities and differences of use across cultures.

4.2. Limitations and implications

While our analysis has highlighted the importance of CA for exploring textual action, there are several limitations in the

approach we have adopted here. First, by focusing on just one emoji we created an unusual (and unrealistic) communicative context and, because of this, we minimised one of the key issues at the heart of the interpretive challenge in textual interaction, which is how to make sense of the use of different emoji. A critical area of analysis for scholars in this field concerns the comparative examination of emoji and the extent to which they perform distinctive interactional roles. As we have suggested, such analysis should be grounded in the contextual communicative actions of users.

Second, and related to the previous point, at the end of our analysis we pointed to the important relation between the (in this case) physical gestures that emoji represent, and their contextual meaning. In face to face interaction, there is potentially a difference between laughing with a hand covering mouth and laughing with your mouth wide open, and such differences may be relevant to interpreting the actions being undertaken in text.

Different facial expression emoji might well have distinctive implications when they are used, and analysis (for researchers and for ordinary societal members) involves trying to establish what those implications might be. We suggest that the communicative role of gestures should play an important role in the analysis of emoji.

Third, we have examined data in Chinese translated into English. Analysing translated texts in this way is a potentially problematic endeavour as one is at risk of using cultural assumptions and sequence rules to make sense of language that has a quite different set of sequential properties. While we would not wish to downplay this risk by any means, the findings of our analysis are borne out by existing research, which suggests that that while there may well be cultural subtleties regarding the organisation of the text that have been missed here, the general points relating to the function of emoji as laughter tokens are accurate. Further, the analysis was undertaken with native Chinese speakers and substantial care was taken to pay attention to the meaning in the original Mandarin.

Fourth, a particularly important limitation of our work is that it looked at a data set that had already been produced, rather than at the process of users writing to each other as a live action. This has impacted on the kinds of claims we were able to make. To put it bluntly, one of CA's key resources for analysis is how people construct their actions in unfolding action, but this is missing in our data and in the vast majority of studies of online communication (Meredith and Stokoe, 2013). As Meredith and Stokoe (2013) have argued, looking empirically at message composition through video recordings and screen capture is extremely important and we strongly echo this point: without seeing how people edit their messages in the process of their production, we cannot explore how unfolding action informs the process of composition and interpretation. We suggest that if researchers are to make advances in understanding emoji use, they need to look at how users select emoji during message composition. The affordances of specific technologies, and the ways that interfaces display emoji and enable users to access them should form a critical part of this.

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Appendix A. Supplementary material

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2018.05.005.

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