

Text Codes of the Internet Communication and Prospects of Universal Sense Protocol Formation

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to prove that the text appears in the Internet as a poly-coded formation and contains verbal-graphic (print), visual-informative (smileys) and visual-imagery (video, pictures, photos) codes. The semiotic system of the Internet communications is being investigated through the comparison of its codes and their explanatory potential. The outcomes of the analysis show the possibility and we also suggest the ways of forming a universal thesaurus of codes designed to recreate the atmosphere of interpersonal communication in the Internet.

Keywords

Internet Communication, Text, Semiotics, Code, Sign, Smiley, Universal Sense Protocol

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1. Introduction

The acceleration of information society formation is associated with the emergence of the Internet. From the standpoint of a modern man the Internet more fully meets modern requirements for communication than the other means of it. No doubt it causes some tactical benefits (convenience, speed, time) in comparison to some traditional means of information transfer. In addition to the benefits of the quality and confidentiality of communications, we note its versatility on the choice of different implementation methods of communication: oral or written, video or audio connection with a possibility of a quick change from one to another mode of communication, the possibility of a dialogue or polylogue communication and others. At the same time the Internet communication is technically-mediated, which makes a very acute necessity of finding universal semiotic means that would facilitate understanding of subjects of Internet communications.

2. Research Significance

Exploring the semiotic system of Internet communications

we turn to the semiotic approach, procedures and hermeneutical methods concerning the methodology covered in the writings of M. Bakhtin [1], R. Barth [2], M. Buber [3], J. Kristeva [4], Yu. Lotman [5], P. Ricoeur [6], J. Habermas [7]. The adequate use of hermeneutic methodology in understanding problems of the semiotic system of the Internet communications consists in their dialogical nature, reflecting the logic of the Internet communication environment, based on pluralism and multiplicity of interpretations of the text. The semantics of the Internet becomes clearer when researching its “keywords” [8 p.35] (the term of G. Vezhbytskaya) – a stable system of codes that are reproduced in the Web.

3. Analytical Investigation, Comparison and Discussion of Results

Under the sense protocol we understand an open thesaurus of codes and rules for their interpretation and application that minimizes the disadvantages of a technically-mediated communication, offering methods of reproducing the

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atmosphere of an interpersonal communication and, at the same time limiting their applications of codes by most standard communication situations. M. Castells was one of the first who insisted on the need for creating a universal protocol sense under the conditions of e-communications. He claimed that “the culture of a real virtual communication largely depends on the availability of sense protocols ... In our case, the most important of these protocols is art in all its manifestations (including, of course, literature, music, architecture and graphic design)” [9 p.19]. According to M. Castells, art is a means of social reconstruction, a kind of “a bridge between the network and the individual” [9 p.70].

In our opinion, other ways of encoding information in the Net are worth mentioning. In particular, messages there contain verbal-graphic, visual-imagery, visual-informative and other types of codes that require adequate reading and interpretation. Let us consider the basic features of the Internet text, based on understanding of the algorithm proposed by M. Bakhtin. To do this, we differentiate and generalize the types of codes that are used in the Internet. We believe that the codes there should be differentiated according to the following criteria: visibility, verbiage, graphicity, informativeness, figurativeness. The correlation of visibility-verbiage will allow us to describe the form and manner of representation of the code, while the ratio graphicity-informativeness-figurativeness – to assess its content.

By these criteria the text in the Internet is a poly-coded formation containing verbal-graphic (print), visual-imagery, and visual-informative codes. The most common code in the Net is verbal-graphic, designed to transmit textual information. The main elements of a visual code are: images of objects, colour, and spatial arrangement. A visual-imaginative code includes videos, drawings, photographs, and a visual-informative code includes smileys. The interaction of these codes has its own logic and depends on the represented information forming a complementarity of codes.

In semiotics they distinguish the following basic types of signs: iconic, indexative, symbolic, as well as icons and indices [10 p. 123]. According to the appointed nature they use the following signs in the Internet communication:

1. Iconic signs are images that have a natural resemblance to their marked image. Photos, paintings and icons particularly belong to them. Iconic signs, excluding special art sites in the Net, often have no independent ontological value, as they perform an illustrative role in the proposed narrative.
2. Indexical signs, i.e. the directive signs with a functional purpose represented in the Internet by different arrows and

other indicators of various configurations.

3. Symbolic signs are conventional signs, which are not associated with an object and act metaphorically as symbols-allegories. For example, the common Internet symbols-allegories may be represented through an eagle, a donkey, a bear, etc.

In addition, in the Internet communications there are widely used:

- icons: sound imitation, alliteration, smileys, etc;
- indexes: pronouns I-we-you, this-that and others.

Hermeneutics of the Internet becomes clearer if we study its “key words” that are particularly important and indicative of a certain culture [8 p.35], because they are designed to be the translator of “the nuclear cultural values” (the term is used by G. Vezhbytskaya). In her opinion, to justify that a word belongs to the key one, it will be possible to define:

- that the given word belongs to the commonly used, not provincial words;
- that it is used in one semantic field;
- that it is in the centre of an idiomatic family;
- that it can inform us about our culture as something significant and non-trivial [8 pp.36-37].

In our opinion, these requirements correspond to the so-called graphical emoticons that belong to the visual-informational codes of the Net. As it was explained in the previous subsection, the processes of encoding-decoding in the Internet are made due to the use of visually expressed texts. This expression is achieved by many means, including the use of universal graphical emoticons that encode human facial grimaces and gestures. Their versatility is achieved through the high recognizability that allows us to quickly correlate the sign and its significance, thereby reproducing the objective content of information. In this connection M. Abysova rightly observes: “With the emergence of new media the value of non-verbal communicative means does not decrease. For example, when communicating over the Internet, communicators use special combinations of punctuation marks and brackets that represent different facial gestures” [11 p.75].

The communicative purpose of these signs-icons becomes clearer if we consider their history. While emoticons became very widely used due to the appearance of the Internet, their occurrence is associated with the emergence of the big insurance company called *State Mutual Life Assurance Cos. of America* in early 60-s of the last century. That company launched an advertising campaign that promoted good mood, within which in 1963 the artist Bell Harvey painted a yellow smiley face – a prototype of the computer smileys. On the

upswing of its popularity in 1970s the sign started to be accompanied by the slogan: "Have a happy day!". Exactly in this form emoticons spread in the U.S.A. and Western Europe. The technically determined stage of smileys began in 1972 with their appearance in *Plato* educational computer network at the University of Illinois. The users of this network were invited to "write" smileys with some special code words. However, this way of their "writing" did not become universal because of their complexity.

The universal, so-called ASCII-smiley was created in the early 1980s of the 20th century by S. Falman, the specialist and research worker in the field of artificial intelligence at Carnegie Mellon University. He was the very first one to use these electronic emoticons: :-) (meaning smile) and :((meaning sadness), which then, in the late 1990s massively started to be used in the Internet. We emphasize that the simple graphical form of a smiley represents a rationally meaningful structure, which is designed to compensate extralinguistic and prosodic means of communication in the process of interactive communication of the Internet. Consequently, we believe that an electronic smiley was not the result of folk art, but it is an intellectual product.

It is generally accepted to divide smileys into three major groups: 1) the signs oriented to reveal (express) emotional state (so-called emoticons); 2) the signs that are focused on objective information about individual characters; 3) the signs that are not differentiated by some clear features, because they contain a wide range of specific phenomena and abstract nature. The last two groups of smileys can be called relatively notional.

The morphology of smiley is guided by the principles of expressiveness and sign retrenchment. Usually, emoticons are composed of two to four main signs – symbols of the most important carriers of expressive information: eyes and a mouth, sometimes using the symbols of a nose and eyebrows. In addition to these four main signs some optional ones are used: signs of hair, tears, teeth, etc. as for the additional coding means there could be odd and even punctuation marks, figures, letters of the Latin alphabet and others. It is worthy of notice that for the most of smileys there are two acceptable forms: using a nose mark (-) and without the latter. For example, to express sarcasm they equally use this :} or this :-} emoticon.

Among the most commonly used smileys we can distinguish the following emoticons:

☺ – smile; :-0 – surprise; :-/ – dissatisfaction; ☹ – grief, sorrow; :-e – frustration;

:-[– confusion; :-D – laughter; *O* – admiration; :-X – silence.

The signs that symbolize an action mostly express emotion in its activity aspect. Among these we can single out the following:

;) – wink; :-* – kiss; :_(– cry; :-P – showing a tongue; :-@ – shout in anger; :-> – mockery.

Emoticons and emotionally active signs are differentiated by the strength and tinge marked by them emotions and actions of a man. To express a stronger emotion, compared with the basic one, additional brackets, exclamation marks or the above-mentioned "helping" signs are commonly used. For example, to indicate a strong sadness, except the basic smiley :(meaning sadness, they use additional brackets or an extra apostrophe, and it can look like this :'(. Sometimes instead of additional brackets they happen to use exclamation marks. This establishes the fact that there are no clear quantitative and qualitative encoding rules for emotions. It is believed that the stronger the emotion or the author's accent is, the more additional means should be used.

At the same time in common Internet communications there are smileys that somewhat transform the "basic" smiley for shades encoding an emotional state. In particular, we can compare:

☹ – sadness, grief; :-0 – surprise; :-* – kiss; :-C – severe disappointment;

8-0 – stupefaction; :-{} – passionate kiss.

So, emoticons and emotionally active signs reflect the internal context of a communicator. In our opinion, they have the character and purpose of non-verbal means of communication. Especially it is due to them the reproduction of extralinguistic (laugh, cry, pause) and prosodic (volume, accent, accent speech) communication characteristics occurs. As rightly U. Eco observes: "In the basis of any graphic action, of any image there imposed a convention" [12 p.131]. The conventional character of emotion-reproductive smileys minimizes misunderstandings that automate their application and simplify "taking heed of" in the mood of an interlocutor. At the same time, they can not encode all emotional states, but only those that restrict their use by standard situations.

Unlike emoticons, sensual smileys encode the meaning of words and even phrases.

Among the signs that denote characters the common ones are:

8-) – a man with glasses; ::-) – a mutant; *:O) – a clown; O:) – an angel; [:] – a robot;

:-? – a person who smokes; % – a crazy man; :-[[– a skull; :*) – a drunk;

5:-) – Elvis; C=:-) – a chef; 8(-) – Mickey Mouse.

Other signs encode a wide range of objects and phenomena, as well as some separate phrases:

@-->--- – a rose, 0>-< – hands up; <3 – a heart;

/:-(- – off somebody's trolley; [] – friendly hug; >(// /)< – a candy;

)i({ – a butterfly; D-| – a glass of champagne; <:3)~::~ – a mouse.

Based on the ideas of M. Foucault, the art of language is reduced to a method called “to give a high sign” that is to mark a thing and to place signs around it [13 p.79]. Apparently, sensual smileys appear to be the independent semantic units that encode information about individual objects and phenomena. Their independence comes from the fact that firstly, they call real objects in the world (i.e. they perform a nomination function), secondly, they bring them into accord with each other (i.e. they perform a predication function), and thirdly, they localize semantic information in space and time (i.e. they perform a location function). Emoticons together with emotionally active smileys encode emotionally coloured information. However, this encoding is not performed by quasi-mimic means. Unlike emoticons, character smileys encode some more constant personality traits (or of a nominal person), for example, this one: C=:-(a chef). They can also transmit some certain features of somebody's appearance, for example, this one: :o)c---> (a man wearing a tie). Among them there are signs that provide a speech act with illocutionary force, for example, this one: O>-< (hands up). Some take the form of a trope, for example, this one: /:-(- (off somebody's trolley). When writing down some of them the principle of sign economy is levelled, for example, this one:]xxxx)[:> (a sword) or this one: ///(~_~)\\ (a little girl). This brings them closer to artefacts.

So smileys in their diversity act as nonverbal codes adapted to a written communication. Their hermeneutic value lies in the fact that they reproduce a personal context in its implicit (emotional, individual), explicit (clothes, gender, profession), illocutionary and aesthetic dimensions by quasi-mimic and quasi-corporal means.

The high explanatory potential of smileys comes from their graphic forms adapted to the visual perception. In this regard it is important to mention R. Barth, who remarked that any text and images are perceived differently. At first images are read and perceived, but the text's role lies in actualization of various metaphorical meanings of the same elements that make up the image. “Unlike the unyielding autism of photos, any writing always includes some ample opportunities for mediation and comprehension; its therapeutic function is inseparable from the present gift in writing of transcending any particular body and finding it in the transcendental form”

[14 p.197]. The poly-code composition of heterogeneous semiotic units creates a context that generates meaning of the text. The image that comes out as one of the elements of a nonverbal code is equivalent to a verbal sign, because it has certain semantics in conveying information. Thus, visual-imagery and visual-informative codes of the Internet are pre-comprehensible codes.

Concerning the communicative value of the above-described codes, it is worth highlighting the important fact discussed in the previous subsection when considering the language of the Internet communications. The communicative space of the Internet is pluralistic, not only from the standpoint of a visual-verbal code diversity, but also from the position of the multiplicity of languages and marginalized linguistic practices, which use their own codes protocol. The communicative locality of some specific codes protocol leads to non-sociability of their carriers that is to a personal and cultural reciprocal estrangement of people. In such circumstances, there arises a necessity for the invention of a universal, intelligible to all mankind codes protocol.

It is important to emphasize that the visually expressed signs are not the only codifiers of communicants' emotional states. We agree with M. Bergelson that “the informal communication in the Internet returns to punctuation its semantic character” [15 p.5], which is not so clearly defined in the written communication.

Traditional verbal and graphical codes partially convey their emotional attitude to the content of messages. In particular, the importance of one or another piece of information can be highlighted with the help of the already mentioned exclamation mark or capital letters, and surprise – with a question mark. To express the power of emotions they use the above-described iconic principle: “the more important the given information for the communicant is, the more visual space it occupies.”

The importance of the above-mentioned codes with a phatic purpose is confirmed by the normative instructions in terms of spelling and punctuation. The purpose of the instructions is forewarning in reference to the excessive usage of the mentioned means that leads to the distortion of information perception. Among the basic restrictive regulations we can name the following:

- It is forbidden to write all messages or most of them with CAPITAL LETTERS. They are inconvenient to read. Such messages will be deleted without warning.
- Please, do not write very many question marks, exclamation marks or brackets in the end of sentences. To express your emotions such combinations as “?!?” or “!!!” will be quite enough. The constructions such as

“How???” , “Yes!!!” or “It doesn’t work(((” irritate. It will look like you frantically yell. Similar yells will be deleted without warning.

Among the mentioned semantic accents we single out the following:

- The purpose of comas and ellipsis is first of all to convey the speech tempo;
- The purpose of a dash is sort out meaningful information, which is in the focus of the audience and is usually opposed to the previous text;
- The purpose of brackets is to delineate things, which are unimportant and to mark those ones, which belong to a metatext.

Under a metatext we here understand a textual substitute of any visual information (i.e. some author's remarks to a play) or an explanation of the sender. Conventionally, the information placed in brackets can be divided into two types: a specification of the communicator of his/her not exactly worded opinion without coming back and rewriting the sentence and placing in brackets the background information necessary to explain the main one [15 p.5].

So, we have observed a phatic function of punctuation marks used according to the situation and the subject of communication to clarify the meaning and the emotional background of the message.

4. Conclusion

The analysis of the semiotic system of the Internet communications has shown that the text appears in the Internet as a poly-coded formation and contains verbal-graphic (print), visual-informative (smileys) and visual-imagery (video, pictures, photos) codes. As the Internet codes are poly-semantic, they require clarification on the basis of the hermeneutic circle: through the correlation between the Internet language as a whole, and some certain types of codes as its parts. The sense protocol presumes to minimize shortcomings of technically-mediated communication, offering methods of reproducing the atmosphere of interpersonal communication and, at the same time, limiting the codes application by most standard communication situations. Now the central place in it belongs to smileys – visually distinct nonverbal codes, the hermeneutic value of which consists in reproducing personal context of electronic communication in its implicit, explicit, illocutionary and aesthetic dimensions by quasi-mimic and quasi-corporal means.

As N. Katherine Hayles points out, by constituting identity with the help of codes, the individual, who uses the codes,

changes into another kind of subjectivity. He/she changes namely into that one, which exists and can be identified, because he/she knows these codes. So, the truth is that we become those codes, with which we manipulate [16 p.77].

What, therefore, becomes instructive from this study is the fact that in the Internet communications music, painting, photography, graphic design, video portion of a television signal and also signs-icons (emoticons, sound simulation) can perform the role of a universal sense protocol.

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