The "Slightly Smiling Face" Emoji in WeChat: A Conversation Analytic Investigation

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the interactional functions of the "Slightly Smiling Face" (SSF) emoji in Chinese WeChat conversations through the lens of Conversation Analysis (CA). Drawing on 50 naturally occurring chat excerpts involving 12 participants across various relationship types, the study identifies three core uses of the SSF emoji: (1) signaling sequence-closing, (2) mitigating dispreferred actions, and (3) conveying disaffiliation without explicit disagreement. These functions parallel some of the roles traditionally fulfilled by nonverbal cues in face-to-face interactions, such as smiles or laughter tokens, revealing how digital communication retools physical gestures through symbolic surrogates. While prior research on emoji use often relies on statistical or multimodal analysis, this paper offers a context-sensitive examination that underscores how a single emoji can accomplish varied pragmatic work depending on sequential positioning and interactional context. By centering on a culturally embedded and pragmatically ambiguous emoji, the study contributes to the understanding of digital CA and broadens the scope of emoji research beyond Western platforms.

Keywords: Conversation Analysis, WeChat, Digital Pragmatics, SSF Emoji, Emoji Functions

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, online communication has become the center of our digital world, and emojis are becoming increasingly important in digital conversations for supplementing written text, adding layers of meaning to online communication, and providing cues that aid in the interpretation of tone, intent, and politeness. The "Slightly Smiling Face" emoji (SSF, 🙂) on WeChat offers an excellent opportunity to examine these dynamics in a Chinese digital

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context. Prior research has analyzed other emojis, showing similarities between online and offline communication patterns (Gibson et al., 2018; Sampietro, 2021). However, the functions of the SSF emoji remain under-explored. Existing research (Andrade Jr et al., 2016; Sampietro, 2021) mainly focuses on Western social media platforms such as WhatsApp or Facebook, leaving significant gaps in understanding how emojis function in non-Western contexts, such as WeChat, the dominant social media platform in China. This study seeks to address this gap, offering new insights into the role of this emoji in digital pragmatics and broadening the application of Conversation Analysis (CA).

As a powerful framework for studying the structure of social interaction by analyzing naturally occurring conversations in detail (Schegloff, 1968, 2007; Wong & Waring, 2021), CA has traditionally been used in analyzing face-to-face verbal communication, in which non-verbal cues such as nodding or smiling play a key role. Recent research has extended CA to digital communication (Giles et al., 2015), and the emergence of the field of digital CA has shown that emojis can serve similar functions to those of the non-verbal cues such "markers, intensifiers, teasers and strengtheners of speech acts" (Andrade Jr et al., 2016, p. 78). Sampietro (2021) compared the use of the "Face with Tears of Joy" emoji (😂) on WhatsApp with the sequential organization of laughter in face-to-face interactions and found that when the emoji appears at the end of an utterance, it often signifies something humorous and implicitly invites others to share in the laughter. This invitation is frequently acknowledged through the repeated, standalone use of the same emoji, reflecting its role in fostering affiliation and shared emotional responses in digital conversations. In their CA study on the functions of the emoji "Face Covering Hand" (🤭) on the most popular Chinese social platform WeChat, Gibson et al. (2018) revealed that it can function as a laughter token and perform specific interactive work related to laughter.

Although CA literature has explored emojis of different types of laughter in both Western and non-Western social media, there is a lack of research on the SSF, a more ambiguous emoji widely used by Chinese people on WeChat. In fact, there have been numerous studies on the function of the SSF using other research methods. Tong and You (2024), for example, conducted a multimodal analysis of the five most popular smiley face emojis on WeChat, including the SSF, to examine their communicative functions. They found that these emojis were originally designed as positive symbols, but young users often use them to convey negative meanings such as sarcasm or speechlessness. Similarly, Sun (2021) perform a statistical comparison of seven smiley face emojis, including the SSF, focusing on the similarities and differences of their usage patterns across two different age groups. The analysis revealed that the SSF is used with similar frequency between young and middle-aged people, but with completely opposite meanings. While older users tend to interpret it as a positive expression—signaling confidence, friendliness, or happiness, younger users are more likely to perceive it as conveying negative emotions such as sarcasm or even disgust. Age and interpersonal relationships also have an impact: while older users are more inclined to use emojis regardless of context, younger users employ them to signal casual intimate relationships; pragmatically, emojis maintain harmony, intensify emotions, and perform speech acts (Tong & You, 2024). While these studies provide valuable insights into the usage of this emoji, they primarily emphasize broad statistical or multimodal analyses rather than

detailed, context-specific investigations of different functions that each emoji plays.

Therefore, there is a lack of in-depth CA-based research focusing specifically on the SSF emoji on the WeChat platform. The current study addresses this gap.

DATA AND METHOD

The data for this study consists of naturally occurring WeChat conversations, including both one-on-one chats with others and group chats, all of which I am a part of. I used the search function (see Figure 1) of WeChat to select a total of 50 texts containing the SSF emojis, and there are 58 SSF emojis in all the texts -- 46 appearing in one-on-one chats and 12 in group chats. Some messages contain more than one SSF emoji used consecutively or within the same message. The dataset captures the authentic, everyday use of the SSF emoji in a real-world context. The dataset involves 12 participants, all of whom were located in China at the time of the interactions. These participants represent a diverse range of relationships, including close acquaintants such as friends and family, professional connections like teachers and students, and casual contacts within group chats. This variety allows for the examination of how the SSF emoji functions across different social contexts and relational dynamics. All conversations were conducted in Chinese, providing insights into how the SSF emoji operates within a linguistic and cultural framework distinct from Western norms. This is particularly significant given that emoji usage can vary based on cultural values, politeness strategies, and social expectations.

The analysis was conducted within a conversation analytic framework. Developed by Sacks et al. (1974), CA attempts to reveal the implicit rules and practices that people follow when communicating, such as taking turns, organizing the sequences of conversation, and repairing misunderstandings. Traditional CA procedures involve collecting naturally occurring conversations from audio recordings and videos, transcribing the data using detailed transcription conventions (e.g., Jefferson, 2004), and conducting an "unmotivated looking" (Sacks, 1984) to answer the question "why that now?" (Sacks & Jefferson, 1995).

In recent years, CA has expanded into the digital realm, providing researchers with a new perspective to analyze online communication. Digital CA allows researchers to analyze how users employ various features of online social platforms, such as emojis, punctuation, and message timing, to achieve interactional goals. While traditional CA relies on verbal and non-verbal cues from recorded conversations, the digital adaptation focuses on the multimodal elements unique to online communication. For instance, the study considers how the SSF emoji interacts with accompanying text, message timing, and other contextual factors to fulfill its pragmatic functions.

FIGURE 1
Example of the search function of WeChat

Note: [微笑] means "Slightly Smiling".

The texts range from short, single-line responses to longer multi-line messages, reflecting the flexible nature of digital communication. The dataset also includes conversations with both immediate responses and delayed replies, providing opportunities to analyze how timing affects the interpretation of the SSF emoji. To ensure the ethical use of the data, all participants were informed of the study and consented to their conversations being included for this study. Personal identifiers, such as part of the names and contact information, were removed to maintain anonymity and confidentiality.

ANALYSIS

The analysis revealed three uses of the SSF emoji: (1) to signal sequence-closing, (2) to mitigate a dispreferred action, and (3) to convey disaffiliation without explicitly stating it. I will show two extracts for each practice.

To Signal Sequence-closing

SSF is often used to signal sequence-closing. Extract 1 below is a conversation between sister and grandpa in a group chat, talking about an AI-synthesized video.

Extract 1: Family Chat about an AI Video

[02:38 PM] Sister:
       01   这是真的吗？
          Is this real?
[02:38 PM] Sister posts the video:
       02   video
[03:20 PM] Grandpa:

03 这是特朗普被赶出白宫吗？不可能吧哈哈哈！
Is this Trump getting kicked out of the White House? That can't be true hahaha!

[03:25 PM] Sister:

→ 04 🙂

[09:36 PM] Uncle posts another irrelevant picture:

05 picture

[09:52 PM] Grandpa:

06 哈哈哈
hahaha

Sister initiates with a question in line 01 and then posts a video in line 02, which makes conditionally relevant an answer (Schegloff, 1968). Grandpa then responds with a comment in line 03. Line 01 to line 03 forms a typical base sequence involving an confirmation request and response. Sister's use of the emoji in line 04 is a minimal post-expansion or sequence-closing third (SCT), which is an additional turn beyond the second pair-part designed to terminate the sequence (Wong & Waring, 2021). This use of the SSF does not project any further talk; it neither demands a response nor opens a new sequence. That Uncle starts a new sequence at line 05 provides further evidence that this SSF closes the sequence. In other words, he also treats the sequence as closed. The emoji here acknowledges Grandpa's disconfirming answer without verbally engaging further. The minimal response implies that the sister has no more to add but acknowledges the comment. It serves as a non-verbal cue that she is not looking to extend the conversation further.

SSF may also be used to signal a much delayed closing. Extract 2 below is from a course group chat in a college's Principles of Marxism course. Student Gu asked the instructor Sun why she did not see the grade (01), other students (Zhang and Du) noted that they have received theirs (lines 02-03), and Zhang, in particular, offers technical instruction on how to get the grade (line 04).

Extract 2 [simplified]: Grade Inquiry in a Course Group Chat

[04:57 PM] Gu:

01 老师，我们还是没有马原成绩诶，请问什么时候可以有呀？@孙磊
Teacher, we still don't have a grade for the Principles of Marxism class, when can we have it, please? @Sun Lei

[04:57 PM] Zhang:

02 好像已经有了
I think we already have

[04:57 PM] Du:

03 我这里已经有了
I already have it here

[04:57 PM] Zhang:

04 要设置一下日期

You need to set the date

[04:58 PM] Gu:

05　嗯嗯？刚刚班长忽然问我为啥没有！不好意思打扰了！
Uh-huh, the class monitor suddenly asked me why there were no grades just now! Sorry to interrupt!

[07:53 PM] Sun:

→　06　🙂🙂

[07:53 PM] Gu:

07　嗯嗯！谢谢老师！
Thank you teacher!

In line 05, Gu apologized for bothering everyone. The teacher's use of the emoji in line 06 after a significant time lapse (from 04:58 PM to 07:53 PM) then appears to acknowledge the conversation without extending it further because the information sought by Gu was already clarified by other participants. At the same time, since Gu specifically mentioned the teacher in the group chat, the teacher's response is made conditionally relevant and would otherwise be noticeably absent. In this case then, the SSF satisfies that conditional relevance and potentially closes the sequence, which Gu acknowledges with an appreciation (line 07). This use of SSF confirms prior literature on how emojis can play a role in providing nonverbal cues to subtly signal the end of a conversation (Kelly & Watts, 2015).

To Mitigate a Dispreferred Action

SSF may also be used to mitigate a dispreferred action. Extract 3 comes from an undergraduate Italian interpreting class group chat. It begins with the instructor assigning a relevant video for an upcoming class.

Extract 3: Instructor Assigns Extra Work for Class

[07:12 PM] Teacher:

01　这是明天下午上课的相关视频，注意，是相关视频，
This is a related video for tomorrow afternoon's class. Note that it is a related video,

02　而不是我们上课要使用的内容。请大家务必提前看这个视频，
not content we will use in class. Please be sure to watch this video in advance

03　熟悉其语言风格特点，而我们上课在这个的基础上进行意译汉的口译练习，
to familiarize yourself with its linguistic features, and we will practice Italian-Chinese interpreting based on this film,

04　具体内容与其密切相关🙂

→　the specific content of which is closely related to it🙂

[12:00 PM next day] Teacher posts the online class link :

        05   link

Note that the teacher's directive to watch a video that is not part of the class content but still essential for the upcoming lesson ends with an SSF in line 04. One might argue that this particular SSF is used to mitigate the dispreferred action of assigning extra homework, i.e., softening the directive with a more friendly and approachable tone. This is in line with findings by Walther and D'Addario (2001), who noted that emoticons influence perceptions of friendliness and social presence in computer-mediated communication. In this particular case, the mitigation is further evidenced in the combined use of "请" (please) in line 02 and the SSF emoji, where "please" serves as a polite directive, softening the tone of the comman (also see Derks et al., 2008; Dresner & Herring, 2010).

       Instead of mitigating a directive, SSF can also be used to mitigate the rejection of a suggestion. My friend (Huang) and I were engaging in a discussion about visiting a dessert bar. However, after an internet search, Huang says that the line of the dessert bar is long (line 01).

Extract 4: Postponing a Dessert Outing

[03:42 PM] Huang:
        01 这个要排很久
           The line is going to take a long time
[03:42 PM] Huang:
        02 一个小时吧
           about an hour
[03:49 PM] Li:
        03 一个小时
           An hour
[03:49 PM] Li:
        04 救
           help…
[03:53 PM] Li:
        05 但你晚上下课之后人应该会少吧
           But there should be fewer people after your evening classes
[03:53 PM] Li:
        06 没有人用这个当晚饭
           No one has this for dinner
[03:54 PM] Huang:
        07 下周再去吧😊😊
       → Let's go next week😊😊
[03:54 PM] Li:
        08 喝喝 好
           Ok fine then

In response to Huang's lament on the hour-long wait given the long line (lines 02-04), Li implicitly suggests that the they could still go to that dessert bar by noting that the line won't be that long after the evening classes since no one eats dessert for dinner (lines 05-06) . Here, accepting Li's suggestion would be the next preferred action, but in line 07 Huang rejects it, proposing to visit next week. What the SSF emojis appear to be doing then is mitigating this dispreferred action. Li's subsequent acceptance in Line 08 may at least in part be attributed to this mitigation.

Notably, Huang uses the same SSF emoji twice in a row. Boutet et al. (2021) noted that the addition of a congruent emoji to a verbal message can enhance the processing of its content, which might imply that repeated emojis could further intensify this effect. Thus Huang's repetitive use of the SSF emojis may serve to reinforce her mitigation, conveying a genuine apology for the delay and a sincere intention to continue with the plan at a later date.

To Convey Disaffiliation

As will be shown below, SSF emoji can also be used to convey disaffiliation without explicitly saying so. In the following two extracts, my friend (Xu) and I, as Taylor Swift fans, were discussing her The Eras Tour movie. I saw it in the US and shared the song list of the movie with her; she was in China and didn't get to see the movie firsthand.

Extract 5 [simplified]: Reacting to a Taylor Swift Setlist

[09:31 PM] Li:
      01 非法恋和眼泪连在一起很神
            It is amazing that *illicit affairs* and *my tears ricochet* come together

[09:31 PM] Li:
      02 而且非法恋是从 bridge 开始唱的好像
            and *illicit affairs* seems to begin at the bridge part

[09:31 PM] Li:
      03 贼震撼
            very spectacular

[09:31 PM] Xu:
  → 04 🙂

[09:32 PM] Li:
      05 没唱 Mirrorball 我是不同意的
            But I don't agree with not singing *Mirrorball*

[09:32 PM] Xu:
      06 我都看不到
            I can't see any of it.

Li's strong positive assessment (line 03) makes conditionally relevant a response of agreement or disagreement from the recipient. However, Xu's response of the SSF emoji in line 04 does not fulfill either of these response expectations. By not producing a clear,

upgraded agreement, it implicitly conveys disaffiliation (Pomerantz, 1984). Here, the dispreferred nature of Xu's response may also be attributed to her lack of access to the assessable (not having seen the film). In the absence of a direct verbal response to Li's assessment, Xu's emoji serves as a non-verbal stand-in. As Bai et al., (2019) noted, this use of the emoji reflects a nuanced aspect of communication where non-verbal elements function as substitutes for verbal actions, conveying complex social and emotional stances. As shown, the complex stance of implicit disaffiliation as conveyed by the SSF here is in part registered in Li's response, where he too expresses his disaffliative stance, i.e., his disapproval of Swift not singing a particular song (line 05).

Extract 6 below is the continuation of Extract 5, where Xu also used an SSF emoji to convey disaffiliation.

Extract 6 [simplified]: Disappointment over a Cut Song

[09:32 PM] Xu:

01 我还喜欢 season
    I also like season (*'tis the damn season*)

[09:32 PM] Li:

02 哈哈哈哈哈电影的惊喜曲目是 our song 和 on your own kid
    Hahahahaha the surprise songs in the movies are *Our Song* and on your own kid (*You're On Your Own, Kid*)

[09:32 PM] Xu:

03 结果也没有
    and it turns out it wasn't in the movie either

[09:32 PM] Li:

04 season 被砍我觉得正常
    I think it's normal for season to get cut.

[09:32 PM] Xu:

→   05 🙂

[09:32 PM] Li:

06 evermore willow 直接开场也很不错
    It's also nice to open the *evermore* era with *willow*

In line 01, Xu expresses her like for the song *'tis the damn season*. Line 02 is the continuation of Li's introduction of the song list. Line 03 demonstrates Xu's disappointment that the song did not appear in the movie, further emphasizing her love for the song. However, Li's subsequent comment about it being normal for the song to get cut could be seen as undermining Xu's preference. Given that Xu likes the song, Li's remark could have obtained a more engaged response -- some verbal disagreement perhaps. It is within this sequential context that Xu's subsequent SSF emoji (line 05) is hearable as conveying a non-affiliative stance towards Li's assessment.

Thus, in both cases, the SSF emoji is used a nonverbal, nuanced tool for expressing a position that is incongruent with that of the previous speaker.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that the "Slightly Smiling Face" emoji plays an important role in (1) signaling the closing of conversation, (2) mitigating dispreferred actions, and (3) conveying disaffiliation without explicitly stating it. These findings contribute to the study of digital CA by highlighting the use of the SSF emoji in text-based online interactions.

At the same time, it is important to note that these findings are limited to the context of WeChat. This specificity restricts the generalizability of the results to other digital platforms, such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and so on, where platform design may influence emoji usage differently. Additionally, emoji interpretations can vary across cultural contexts and user groups, suggesting that the results may not be applicable to broader populations or multilingual users. The dataset also consists of a relatively limited variety of extracts, which may not fully represent the diverse ways the SSF emoji is used across different types of conversations.

Future research could explore whether similar patterns emerge in different digital environments. Comparative studies of emoji usage in different cultural contexts and different age groups could also be conducted. To address limitations in methodological robustness, mixed-method approaches could be incorporated, such as combining CA with surveys or interviews, to triangulate findings and provide a richer understanding of user motivations and interpretations.

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