The Social Semiotics Construction of Emoticons Discourse

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Abstract—**Emoticons, as the "spokesmen" of the Internet communication among young people, quickly become popular around the world. This sub-cultural phenomenon dissolves the mainstream culture, resists the cultural hegemony, and constructs its own discourse system and social space. This thesis analyzes the discourse of the emoticons of "the expedition and battle of Liyi Bar to Hong Kong Events on Facebook", demonstrates from the field, toner and mode of discourse, and uses Halliday's social semiotics theory to deconstruct discourse rights and construct the group identity of emoticons discourse.**

Keywords—emoticons; discourse; representation; sub-culture; social semiotics

I. INTRODUCTION

Emoticons are one of the important means for contemporary youth to communicate and disseminate information in mass media. In recent years, the new network emoticons have swept through various chatting apps and platforms such as Wechat, Microblog, Line, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Since 2014, July 17 has been designated as "World Emoji Day". In the days of "no chatting without emoticons", the discourse that integrates visual symbols and linguistic symbols, makes our communication smoother and more vivid, and helps us avoid the embarrassment and misunderstanding that may occur in communication. Meanwhile, as a discourse symbol of self-expression and identity, it represents the subculture of marginal groups.

The research on emoticons at home and abroad is also in a spurt development trend. The research perspectives are more diversified, from linguistics to cultural theory, from design to communication, and from aesthetics to psychology. In terms of semiotics, for example, Xu Hang's (2016) *Symbolic Interaction Theory on the Battle of FB Emoticons* and Wang Zhongjia's (2016) *Symbolic Interaction Analysis in Social Media - Taking "the Event of Emoticons Battle"* analyze the generation, regularity, function and effect of network emoticons on the basis of symbolic interaction theory. Corina Parkwell's (2019) "Emoji as social semiotic resources for meaning-making in discourse: Mapping the functions of the toilet emoji in Cher's tweets about Donald Trump" uses the principles of social semiotics to analyze the meaning generation mechanism of emoji. It can be seen that the study of interpreting the emoticon discourse which is a subcultural phenomenon from the view of social semiotics still has a large space.

Youth subculture is considered as social texts, encrypted information, and "maps of meaning" (Hebdige 1979) in the semiotic category, which need to be decoded in cultural practices related to generations and classes. Language is the key factor in the process of cultural transmission.

Halliday (1993) discussed the role of language as cultural dynamic in his article *LANGUAGE AS CULTURAL DYNAMIC*. He pointed out that language is a highly evolved semiotic system. The "symbolic" model can be further extended and enriched, and in the second level, "the language system as a whole is interpreted as the system and process for the realization of culture, which becomes the "higher" level of semiotics (Halliday, 1993:3). In other words, it is a way to understand and implement culture (or "social semiotics") in this sense. As the main critical aspect of Halliday's thought, social semiotics provides a powerful basis for us to analyze mass culture. In view of this, he made it possible for us to use social semiotic theory to analyze emoticons.

This article aims to analyze how emoticons discourse (due to space limitations, only the recently popular emoticons of "the expedition and battle of Liyi Bar on Facebook" about Hong Kong issues are cited as representative examples) in the context of mass culture consumes, deconstructs hegemony, and constructs its own style, living space and discourse system from the perspective of Halliday's social semiotics

II. FROM EMOJI TO EMOTICONS: THE REPRESENTATION OF SUBCULTURE

Emotional symbols are originally a kind of Internet subculture. In September 1982, a professor at Carnegie Mellon University in the United States wrote the first smiling face ":-)", which is the earliest origin of the emotional symbols. Subsequently, Emoji came out, which originated from Japanese word "絵文字" (Japanese kana is "えもじ", and its pronunciation is emoji), with the meaning of "絵(e=pictures) 文(mo=writing) 字(ji=characters)", is a set of 12 x 12 pixels emotional symbols in Japan, which created by Shigetaka Kurit. It was first popular among Japanese Internet and mobile phone users, and it was inspired by Japanese cartoons and Japanese characters. But such simple symbols can only express abstract concepts (as shown in Fig. 1). In August 2014, the Oxford Dictionary Online added "Emoji" to the new vocabulary, which also means that it has become an official vocabulary.

Fig. 1. Simple symbols express abstract concepts

Emoticons, which are developed from emoji, are composed of pictures or dynamic pictures and text. The English word emoticon is a new word that was cleverly combined by the words Emotion and icon at the end of the 20th century. They take root and sprout on the fertile soil of social networking. The background materials are from "singer", "actor", "animal".

Recently, oracle bone inscriptions, museums and other materials with rich cultural connotations have appeared. Compared with the universal and simple emotional symbols in Fig 1, which have no effect of releasing emotion, emoticons are offensive and self-mocking.

Fig. 2. The emoticon text combines images of pictures

The emoticon text combines images of pictures and words to present a lot of codes, which together constitute the unique tone of young people – with subversive, critical, resistive, marginal style features.

The practices of youth subculture style (Kristeva 1978) are called "semiotics guerrillas" by Eco, at least for a period of time, these practices have caused interference in the daily life and in the process of media communication and information flow. Emoticons have also gradually replaced the traditional text message communication and changed our lives, which has reached the state of "no happy without emoticons". "Subculture is a form full of expression, which reflects the most basic state of tension between the authorities and the predestined subordinate classes". (Kristeva, 1978:117). Therefore, this "carnival" state is the representation of youth subculture, resisting cultural hegemony.

III.   EMOTICONS DISCOURSE: THE DISSOLUTION OF CULTURAL HEGEMONY

Foucault's definition of "discourse" is close to "linguistic form". "Discourse" system refers to the norms, styles and systems of discourse among different cultural communities in different cultural environments, traditional habits and social systems. The public society is influenced by the mainstream narrative, and then the authoritative discourse system will take charge of the dominant position. However, the vitality of modern network language is gradually dissolving the grand narrative. While shaping the language, the users of the language are also seeking the power of discourse. Levi-Strauss once said, "whoever says 'human', that is to say 'language', and that is to say 'society'" ("*Tristes Tropiques*"). In Strauss's view, the essence of human beings is that human beings have "culture", and the formation and development of human culture depends on the use of language. Therefore, it can be said that "language defines the essence of human beings, and at the same time, makes a clear distinction on the boundary between culture and nature." (KHA Saen-Yang, 2017: 148) As discussed in the previous section, emoticons, as a subcultural representation, rely on the Internet to spread. Therefore, as a

network language, it also bears the heavy responsibility of human development. But the emoticons discourse is essentially a marginal discourse. Ding Jianxin, a scholar, believes that "no matter anti-language, female discourse, homosexual discourse, youth discourse, Internet discourse or immigrant discourse are all marginal discourse." (Ding Jianxin, 2013:20) The marginal discourse with post-modern characteristics symbolizes the dissolution of power and thus against mainstream ideology.

"The expedition and battle of Liyi Bar on Facebook" refers to the event that on the evening of January 20, 2016, the members of "Li Yi Bar" which is known as Baidu's largest bar flood massively flood the screen on the Facebook homepages of SETTV News, Apple Daily, etc. To oppose Taiwan independence. A group of netizens who are from the legendary area where is the production base of Internet emoticons are famous for the diversity and variety of their emoticons. They are good at using simple words and proper emoticons to reason with others. It spreads in Jianghu that "once the Li Yi Bar starts expedition and battle, not even a blade of grass grows". Recently, in response to the Hong Kong incident, "Li Yi Bar" launched an expedition on Facebook again. At 8pm on August 18, 2019, they focused on the Facebook platform, Hong Kong Apple Daily and Hong Kong Police and implemented activities by posting the topics, emoticons and pictures created by netizens. The following examples are selected from them.

Fig. 3. The examples are selected

It can be observed that the discourse symbols in emoticons dissolve hegemony under the coupling effect of pictures and words, criticize the discourse system in a radical way, and become the communicators presenting subversive meanings openly in the field of public media to dissolve discourse hegemony. If the discourse space of the government, the intellectual elite and the general public is the mainstream discourse space, then the discourse space of the emoticons is non-mainstream, or the marginal discourse space with its own group identity.

IV. EMOTICONS AS SOCIAL SEMIOTIC: THE CONSTRUCTION OF GROUP IDENTITY

"Halliday believes that to understand the nature of language, we'd better return to the social (interpersonal) environment of language and human beings, as "social person" and as living, oral and inter-subjective social semiotic." (Ding Jianxin, 2014:10) Halliday has incorporated "intersubjectivity" into his social semiotic model, and he believes that "people construct a semiotic (meaning) potential by interacting with people around them. And this potential leads us to the building of meaning that constitutes social reality." (Halliday, 1978:90) In Halliday's view, there are six concepts that form the cornerstone of social semiotics theory: text, situation, register, system and social structure. Among them, the situation is essentially a semiotic structure, which is a collection of meanings produced by the semiotic system that constitutes culture. We can express the semiotic structure of situation types from three dimensions: the field of discourse, the tenor of discourse and the mode of discourse. Similarly, taking the Hong Kong incident of "the expedition and battle of Liyi Bar on Facebook" as an example, here is a set of "panda head" series of emoticons.

Fig. 4. A set of "panda head" series of emoticons

(1) Aiming at Hong Kong independence incident, the netizens of "Li Yi Bar" posted emoticons on Facebook as the main focus of the discourse scope. (2) "Language, like clothing, is a symbol of social identity. Language is like a cage, we can't get out of it. Language is like an island. It traps itself and keeps others thousands of miles away. Language, like a weapon, is an important tool in social struggle." (Ding Jianxin, 2013 (09): 72) The emoticons are struggling modestly in the network media society with banter, attack and resistance tone of discourse. (3) The mode of discourse also presents diversified characteristics. Some are irony, such as (1); Some are rhetoric questions, such as (2); some use rude anti-language, such as (3); some are intertextual lyrics, such as (5); some are warnings, such as (4) (6). In addition, some emoticons are the same emojis that their texts can be changed to represent different meanings, such as (4) (5) (6) in the set of pictures.

The semiotic features of this particular type of situation are called "register" in social semiotics, and "register" is actually the special meaning potential of a particular type of situation. This process is regulated by "code". Young people use the mass media such as Micro blog and Facebook as the specific "register". Through the "code" of emoticons, it can generate the meaning that influences the social value orientation and constructs the group's common cognition and identity to realize the maximum exertion of its meaning potential. "Code is the semiotic principle by which organizes and represents the

meaning of a certain subculture. Subculture variants, in turn, are products of social structures." (Halliday, 1978:123-126) In the case of "The expedition and battle of Liyi Bar on Facebook", emoticons, as the core "code", represent the semiotic principles of the youth subculture, and construct the group identity.

V. CONCLUSION

Emoticons are the means of discourse communication in new media and the representation of youth subculture. It is because its discourse characteristics of subversive, critical, rebellious and marginal that it can quickly sweep the world and be favored. Halliday's social semiotics, as a dynamic, evolutionary theory that places language in the social context, provides the possibility for discourse analysis in the post-modern paradigm. The field of discourse with specific "register" provides meaning potential for discourse analysis; the emoticon "code" set the discourse tone of banter, attack and resistance for communication; and the diversified discourse mode brings its meaning potential into full play. As a social semiotic, emoticons has it own subculture group "style", and constructs a marginal discourse group identity outside the mainstream ideology, which is also a kind of cultural identity.

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