

# Some bilinguals use emoticons more when chatting in non-native language

February 17 2015, by Michelle Ma

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Sometimes, a smile can say everything. But has :-)—the emoticon version of a happy grin—crossed that line into becoming a socially acceptable way of communicating?

For some bilingual speakers, it turns out emoticons often are useful and may be used as vehicles to communicate when words and phrasing are difficult.

Cecilia Aragon, associate professor of human centered design and engineering at the University of Washington, joined an interdisciplinary group of computer scientists, psychologists and linguists from around the

world as she presented her research about trends of emoticon use among bilingual speakers in a session, "[Emotion in Informal Text Communication](#)," Feb. 14 at the American Association for the Advancement of Science annual meeting in San Jose, California.

Specifically, Aragon and her collaborators have found that one group of [bilingual speakers](#) used emoticons more often when typing in their second [language](#) in casual, online [communication](#) than they did when typing in their native tongue.

"As with any language, we're seeing a proliferation of new vocabulary across languages. Some of the face-to-face patterns we see in bilinguals are being echoed online," Aragon said.

Aragon's presentation was part of the larger symposium, "Social, Emotional, and Cognitive Bases of Communication: New Analytic Approaches."

Many past studies have shown that people rely more on [nonverbal communication](#)—facial expressions, hand gestures and body language—when speaking in their second language. As emoticons have emerged as a nonverbal, visual language of their own, Aragon's research team was curious whether bilinguals were using symbols in online communication as they might employ gestures and [body language](#) in face-to-face communication.

"Under certain conditions, bilinguals increase their use of nonverbal communication in their second language, and we discovered the same thing online with emoticons," she said.

The researchers analyzed a dataset of AOL Instant Messenger chat logs among 30 astrophysicists in the U.S. and France. They found that native French speakers used more emoticons when they communicated in

English.

Aragon's team is now looking with a sociolinguistic lens at how [emoticons](#) are used in casual conversations on other microblogging platforms such as Twitter, story comments and online forums.

Other symposium presenters included Munmun De Choudhury of Georgia Institute of Technology; Fermín Moscoso del Prado Martín of the University of California, Santa Barbara; Victor Kuperman of McMaster University in Hamilton, Canada; Yousri Marzouki of Aix-Marseille University in France; and Patrick Wong of Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Also participating as co-organizers were Laurie Beth Feldman of the University at Albany-State University of New York and Judith Kroll of Pennsylvania State University. Both collaborated with Aragon on the bilingual study.

Provided by University of Washington

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