The semiotic and social functions of Twitch.tv's emoticons in spoken interaction

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Jenni Luukkonen

JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO

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Jenni Marika Luukkonen

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract

Digitaalisen viestinnän hymiöiden vaikutusta lausemerkityksiin ja sosiaaliseen toimintaan on harvoin lähestytty puhutun kielen näkökulmasta. Pyrin tutkielmallani selvittämään, miten hymiöiden mahdolliset semioottiset ja yhteisölliset piirteet näkyvät puhutussa kielessä. Tutkimusprosessin tausta pohjautuu paralingvistiikkaan ja hymiöiden dynaamisiin semioottisiin piirteisiin. Lisäksi käsittelen puhutussa kielessä käytettyjen hymiöiden transmodaliteettia sekä käytäntöyhteisön (*community of practice*) vaikutusta hymiöiden merkityksien syntymiseen.

Aineistoni on peräisin live-sisältöön keskittyvältä Twitch.tv -sivustolta. Materiaalini koostuu kahden eri sivuston käyttäjän videotallenteista, joissa esiintyy hymiöiden käyttöä puhekielessä. Analysoin litteroitua aineistoa pragmaattisesta sekä vuorovaikutteisen sosiolingvistiikan näkökulmasta. Tarkastelen muun muassa aineistossa ilmenevien hymiöiden mahdollisia merkityksiä, hymiöiden sosiaalisia funktioita yhteisössä ja syitä hymiöiden käyttöön.

Tutkimustulokset osoittavat, että Twitch.tv -sivuston hymiöt ovat saaneet merkityksiä eri tavoilla. Analyysi osoittaa myös sen, että sivuston pääasiallinen käytäntöyhteisö ilmaisee solidaarisuutta käyttämällä jaettuja normeja hymiöiden merkitysten määrittämiseen eri konteksteissa. Modaliteetin vaihtuminen kirjoitetusta suulliseen ei vaikuta sivuston käytäntöyhteisössä hymiöille annettuihin merkityksiin, mikä viittaa jaettujen normien kestävyyteen. Yksittäisten hymiöiden semioottinen monimuotoisuus viittaa sivuston käytäntöyhteisön hajautumiseen pienempiin yhteisöihin, mikä mahdollistaa vaihtelevien merkitysten määrittelyn ja yhteisöjen semioottisten resurssien sekoittumisen.

Asiasanat – Keywords
emoticon, paralanguage, semiotics, communities of practice, transmodality, interactional sociolinguistics

Säilytyspaikka – Depository
Kielten laitos

Muita tietoja – Additional information

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the meaning-making features of emoticons in utterances and the motives behind their use. Until recently, emoticons have mostly appeared in written computer-mediated communication (CMC) such as text messaging, chat room interaction and online forums. Recently, however, a new phenomenon has surfaced where emoticons are utilized in speech. The change in medium has provided online communities with new ways of modifying interaction that are not present in most other online groups. This thesis elaborates specifically on the semiotic and social functions of emoticon use in face-to-face communication on the online live streaming site Twitch.tv.

As stated by Dresner and Herring (2010: 249–250), emoticons are signs that are mostly utilized in written CMC to compensate for non-verbal functions such as facial expressions and body language. Dresner and Herring note that these signs can be constructed with various combinations of different symbols to imitate facial expressions and even various objects (e.g., ':-)' represents a smile and '@>-->--' represents a rose or, more specifically, giving a rose to the recipient). Additionally, some online platforms replace text emoticons with images (Dresner & Herring, 2010: 249), which is the representation that Twitch.tv has chosen for their emoticons.

Emoticons have been addressed in linguistics since the late 1980s (see e.g., Asteroff, 1987). However, the introduction of emoticons to spoken interaction has not been researched, which is the primary incentive to analyze emoticons in spoken interaction. Furthermore, literature on emoticon use outside traditional online platforms such as e-mail and chat rooms (see, e.g., Thompsen & Foulger, 1996; Fullwood et al., 2013) is extremely scarce, which makes these findings valuable to future research on the topic (see Section 4.1).

The thesis proceeds with Section 2 on the theoretical background of the conducted research. Section 3 elaborates on the aim of this study as well as the methodology relevant to the data. The analysis of the data and its results are presented in Section 4, followed by the fifth and final section which concludes the thesis.

2. Theoretical background

Below, I will review key literature on the main concepts of this framework. Firstly, I will address the semiotic and non-verbal features of emoticons, focusing on their use as replacements for non-verbal cues via text and how it enables both fixed and dynamic meaning-making. Secondly, I will discuss the concept of transmodality where the interrelation of modes modifies meanings instead of an isolated mode doing so exclusively. Finally, I will discuss the theory of communities of practice, an approach that recognizes groups that form based on shared practices as opposed to social categories.

2.1 Emoticons and paralanguage

Paralanguage is an area generally focused on the non-verbal aspects of communication (Liscombe, 2007:5). Paralanguage as a definition has various interpretations: This is acknowledged by scholars such as Crystal (1974: 269) and Liscombe (2007: 5). There seems to be a consensus, however, that the definition of paralanguage includes prosodic features such as pitch, intonation and rhythm (Liscombe, 2007:5; Amaghlobeli, 2012:348) as well as other non-verbal signs, for example gestures and facial expressions (Fullwood et al., 2013: 648; Amaghlobeli, 2012: 352).

Emoticons are seen as replacements for paralinguistic features in CMC (Thompsen & Foulger, 1996:230; Jappy, 2013: 37), although there are many works that prefer to address emoticons as 'non-verbal' components instead (see, e.g., Walther & D'Addario, 2001: 327; Derks et al., 2008: 379). Crystal (1974: 270) was reluctant to include 'non-verbal' features such as kinesics in the definition of paralanguage at the time of publication. Jappy (2013: 37), however, considers 'paralinguistic' to be synonymous with 'non-verbal', reflecting the contemporary trend to use both terms interchangeably.

Before the emergence of emoticons online in the early 1980s, non-verbal cues in CMC were conveyed by, for example, imitating accents in spelling and emulating rhythm with spaces (Carey, 1980:67–68). The arrival of emoticons seems to have modified non-verbal communication online

even further: Derks et al. (2008:380) state that because emoticons are a conscious effort to express emotions, the perceived emotions of the speaker are easier to control than in face-to-face communication where non-verbal behavior is often unconscious.

2.2 Emoticons as semiotic signs

As emoticons are used to convey various non-verbal cues, they must carry meanings that correlate with non-verbal features of communication. Van Leeuwen (2006: 145) states that emoticons "realise 'interpersonal' meanings": His notion of interpersonal meaning refers to the expression of attitudes in interaction as a linguistic metafunction (van Leeuwen, 2006: 142). In CMC, this function is realized by, for example, surrogating an angry facial expression with a semiotically equivalent emoticon to show displeasure.

Jappy (2013: 37) notes that emoticons are "used to express various shades of meaning" and states the importance of semiotic regularity in facial expressions: Expressions have fixed emotive meanings which makes the interpretation of emoticons as their equivalents possible. However, as emoticons have developed, so have their meanings, and even the famous smiley face has acquired new semiotic purposes (Baron 2009: 5). This does not necessarily imply that the meanings of emoticons lack semiotic regularity as a smiley face still represents a smile. Instead, the phenomenon indicates that emoticons "cannot be assumed to unambiguously clarify user intention or emotion" (Baron 2009: 14).

Emoticons' semiotic effectiveness in CMC is problematic mostly due to their dynamic meanings. Menchik and Tian (2008: 361) argue that emoticons are a semiotic tactic and are used to apply meanings to messages in order to reduce misinterpretation. Baron (2009: 5) states that multiple meanings can lead to misunderstanding, which Menchik and Tian also acknowledge (2008: 355). The ambiguity thus poses a problem when emoticons are meant to make interaction online less confusing. Walther and D'Addario (2001: 335), however, show with their data that a wide-spread agreement on the semiotic signals of traditional emoticons is very likely to exist, at least in regards to traditional smiley faces. It is therefore possible for emoticons to reach a desired semiotic effect,

although they are more likely to cause more subtle changes in meaning than change the meaning of an utterance completely (Derks et al., 2008: 386).

2.3 Transmodality

Communication always uses multiple meaning-making resources called modes: These modes are socially developed, creating mode-specific meanings and thus establishing different meanings in different channels of interaction (Bezemer & Jewitt, 2010: 4–5). Written and spoken forms of communication are examples of the various modes at a speaker's disposal. Bezemer and Jewitt (2010: 5) argue that meanings are shaped by the modes that are used to establish them, which in turn creates new meanings as the modes change. Additionally, Bezemer and Jewitt note that all meanings are affected by the meanings they have in other modes, enabling further shaping of said meanings (2010: 5). This co-existence of different channels in communication is also known as multimodality.

The use of emoticons in spoken language instead of their traditional written form is not only an example of multimodality but, more importantly, an instance of transmodality. Pennycook (2006: 49) describes transmodality as a term that depicts the integration of languages in their environment more accurately than multimodality does, emphasizing the interrelation of different modes in meaning-making instead of treating them as isolated channels of communication. Transduction, a term close to transmodality, refers to something being defined in one mode but adapting to another as it moves between modes (Kress, 2003: 47). According to Pennycook (2006: 49), the definition of transmodality includes the aspects of reconfiguration introduced by transduction.

2.4 Communities of practice

The concept of a community of practice is closely related to the different functions of emoticons in spoken interaction. The term is used to identify a group of people who specifically share a practice and have "ways of doing things, ways of talking" while participating in these groups (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992: 96). Communities of practice differ from the more familiar speech

communities by focusing on the grouping and shared meanings created by social activity instead of social categories such as age, gender or ethnicity. In other words, speakers' identities stem from everyday interaction that is influenced by social categories (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992: 96; Eckert, 2006: 683). Because of the anonymity provided by an online platform, members of an online community are more invested in the its shared practice than the social roles of its members and can be categorized as a community of practice.

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992: 98) argue that an individual's linguistic resources do not exist only to display membership in a community. Instead, a person's way of speaking should be considered a representation of how the person in question participates in a community and how other communities in which he or she is part of affect this representation. Thus, the community brings together several other communities through its members while still sharing a practice of its own. Despite these notions, it is safe to say that communities of practice also express solidarity through the practices they share, which is an important motivator for emoticon use in the data.

3. Aims and methods

In this section, the relevant research questions are presented to elaborate on the aim of the thesis. Additionally, this section will explain the methods and motives behind the data collection process.

3.1 Research questions

The research questions of this thesis are as follows:

• Are there observable meaning-making features in the use of Twitch.tv's emoticons in spoken interaction? If so, how do they manifest?

•What are the most common social functions of the use of Twitch.tv's emoticons in spoken interaction?

The data is likely to provide examples of emoticons modifying the meanings of utterances in various ways. It can also be predicted that emoticons are used to promote solidarity in the Twitch.tv community.

3.2 Data and methodology

For the analysis, three short utterances will be used, gathered from the recorded broadcasts (VODs or *Videos on Demand*) of live streamers on Twitch.tv, an online live streaming platform. VODs from two live streamers will be chosen to more effectively find different types of emoticon uses.

The aim is to select data presenting:

a) utterances where different emoticons are used,

b) utterances where the speaker is not directly interacting with the audience, i.e., not explicitly addressing the viewers, and

c) utterances where the speaker is directly interacting with the audience.

These different types of utterances will aid me in providing a bigger picture of what meanings can be made through emoticons (a) and what their social functions are (b, c).

The data will be transcribed for analysis on meaning-making by following the conventions of conversation and discourse analysis: more specifically, I will utilize the transcription system outlined by Jefferson (2004). Accurate transcription of speech is required as the utterances have non-verbal details that are important in analyzing meanings behind specific emoticons. The transcriptions will be somewhat simplified as most features regarding minimal speech variation are not relevant to the analysis.

Because utterances provide clues to the meanings behind emoticons and as the meaning-making functions of different emoticons strongly originate from what meanings the community have developed for them, this study is closely related to pragmatics where social context is a contributor to meaning (Verschueren, 1999: 20). According to Liscombe (2007: 96), pragmatics focuses on language use where the speaker is attempting to reach a specific goal, such as receiving an answer by asking a question. Additionally, Dresner and Herring (2010: 260) imply that emoticon use has an inherently light-hearted performative function.

The thesis falls under the heading of sociolinguistics as I pursue to reveal potential social motives behind the emoticon use of a community. The field can be further narrowed down to interactional sociolinguistics, an approach that observes interaction as interpretative and pays close attention to the contextual presuppositions of communicative situations (Gumperz, 2005: 218–219). These presuppositions are retrieved by using non-verbal and verbal tools to connect interaction to past

knowledge, which is also known as contextualization (Gumperz, 1992: 230). In the data, contextualization is used inside a community to understand the intended meanings of different emoticons as they are used in conversations.

3.2.1 Researcher's position

I have been a member of the Twitch.tv community for more than five years. Despite not actively partaking in on-site interaction, I have established an understanding of the ways in which the site's emoticons are used through long-term observation. My appropriate utilization of the emoticons during external conversations with other community members makes this understanding evident. My research-oriented observation began as I noticed some interactional patterns regarding the emoticons. In order to analyze these patterns as general phenomena it is crucial for me to differentiate the meanings and uses that are common in the community at large from the ones that I have established individually or in smaller external groups.

It is worth noting that the analysis is quite interpretative due to the lack of concrete knowledge of the meanings of Twitch.tv's emoticons. Even though many emoticons seem to have a meaning that most of the community agree on, accurate definitions for any emoticons have not been provided, resulting in potentially different interpretations. Individuals outside the community would not necessarily be aware of how the emoticons in question are utilized and why. My involvement in the community can thus be an advantage to this research: However, it is important to acknowledge that the knowledge I have acquired is based on observations.

4. Analysis

In this section, I will present the data and analyze it in terms of semiotic and social features. I will preface the analysis with a brief explanation on the platform where the interaction takes place as some aspects of it require clarification.

4.1 The context

All communication presented in the data occurs on Twitch.tv. As an online platform, Twitch presents an interesting framework to communication. The site itself provides navigation to the individual pages of its users: The majority of the space on these pages is dedicated to the live stream feed of the user. A chat window is located on the right side of the feed, providing a room for all the registered Twitch users on the page to interact in:
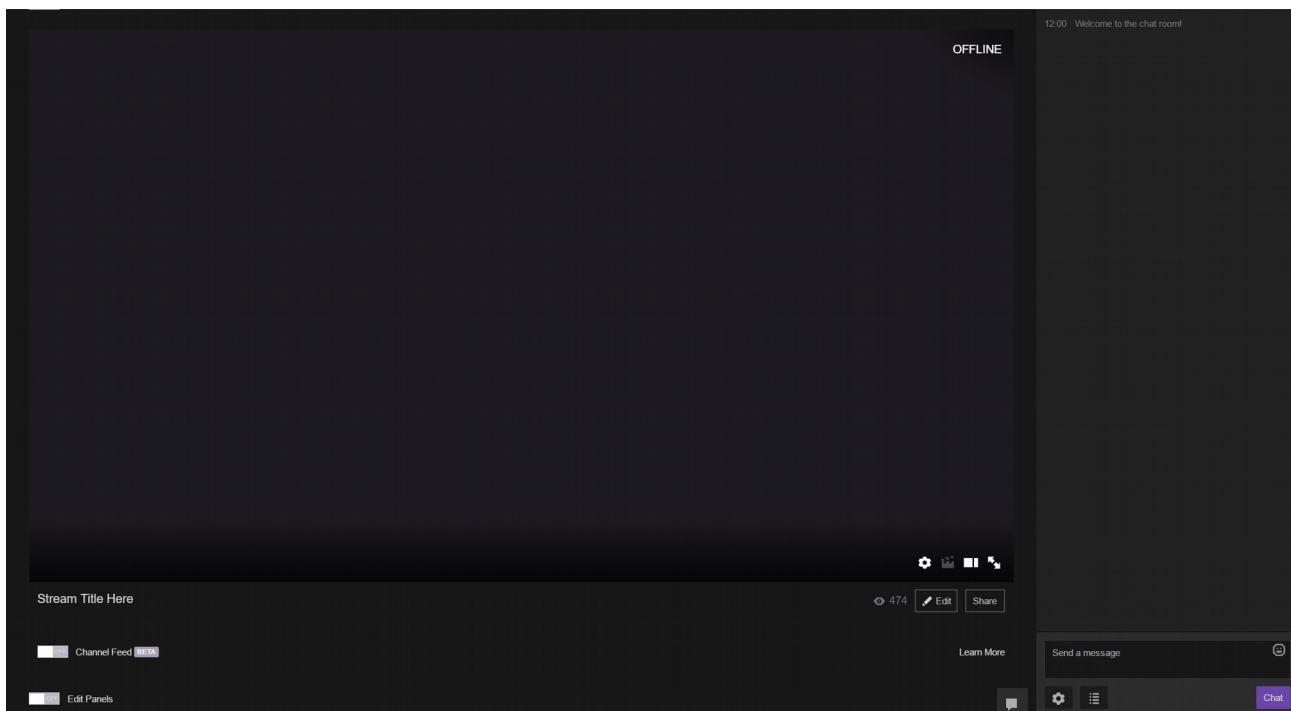

Figure 1. The layout of a Twitch.tv stream page.

During a live stream, the streaming user broadcasts his actions to the users viewing his or her page and interacts with them while doing so. The streamer can choose to speak to his or her audience with a microphone, show him- or herself through a camera and/or type messages in the chat window. Emoticons are used in varying amounts in these chat windows depending on the audience the live streamer attracts.

The emoticons on Twitch.tv are graphics that appear in a message when a specific string (sequence of characters) is typed in. The emoticons that appear in the following data have their graphical forms listed in the Appendix (Section 7).

4.2 Findings

This section presents the detailed analysis of three instances of emoticon use in speech. The semiotic and social functions that the following examples represent can be considered the most common after long-term observation and personal involvement (See Section 3.2.1). Other data of less common phenomena can be found but the purpose of this analysis is to focus on the most visible features of emoticon use instead of several.

The following excerpt is an example of an indirect utterance where the streamer is not addressing any specific viewer or group of people.

Example   1
1: ((tutting sound)) playing fla:re in two thousand sixteen ele:giggle

'EleGiggle' is an emoticon depicting a laughing face (See Appendix). Judging by the emotion illustrated in the graphic and the word 'giggle' included in the string that produces it, the speaker desires to convey amusement. Instead of explicitly laughing, however, he chooses to use the emoticon. This implies a presupposition that the audience knows the meaning of the emoticon and

thus understands the humorous tone of the utterance, although its meaning can be deduced as the emoticon is easy to associate with laughter. The 'tutting' sound that starts the utterance is generally meant to express contempt, which indicates that the purpose of the laughter conveyed by the emoticon is to ridicule. In this case, the emoticon functions as a surrogate to condescending laughter: Without it, the utterance would still express amusement and disappointment due to its tone but would lose some of its humorous edge.

The use of 'EleGiggle' at the end of an utterance is an example of a syntactic marker, which in written communication would replace punctuation (Amaghlobeli, 2012: 352). Amaghlobeli states that emoticons, as paralinguistic features, often replace punctuation due to CMC's similarity to spoken language (2012: 352). The placement of 'EleGiggle' can thus be seen as typical for spoken conversation where paralinguistic cues such as laughter often end utterances.

Example 2 is an interesting excerpt in terms of semiotic complexity. The speaker's addressee is not self-evident either.

Example   2
1: <u>so</u>:: sh<u>a</u>:man is: s<u>morc</u>?

In this example, the speaker seems to address the sentence to another person who is physically next to him. He describes an aspect of a video game called Hearthstone – 'shaman' – with an emoticon that represents the head of an angry green creature (See Appendix). In this context, 'SMOrc' is used to describe something as 'aggressive', which originates from a playable character in Hearthstone: the character is known in the community for promoting an aggressive playstyle and looks similar to the emoticon used in the example. This utterance demands more background knowledge from the listener than Example 1 as the meaning the community has given to the emoticon cannot be deduced from its appearance or text string. Furthermore, 'SMOrc' is used to refer to a playable fantasy race in another video game, World of Warcraft, making presuppositions even more difficult to understand as an uninformed individual.

In addition to having multiple meanings, 'SMOrc' appears to be what Amaghlobeli calls a "verbally used emoticon" (2012: 353). These emoticons are used in place of words or even phrases. This example is not the only case where 'SMOrc' is used "verbally": In the context of Hearthstone, 'SMOrc' can also mean the phrase "go face", an imperative to use an aggressive strategy.

The utterance seems to be directed at the other person on the live feed but is most likely not meant for him exclusively. In the related video clip, the speaker has positioned himself towards the camera: His body language implies heavily that he is including the viewers in the conversation. It is safe to assume that the utterance is meant for both the other live streamer and the audience.

The final example is an utterance that is directed at the viewers, causing a peculiar reaction among the viewers.

> Example 3
> 1: spam · ↑one <u>kappa</u>↓ per <u>line</u>

This utterance displays a clear pragmatic function as the speaker is ordering his viewers to act in some way. The emoticon used in the example, 'Kappa', is a smirking, grey head that is considered one of the most popular emotes[1] on Twitch.tv. Its purpose in the community has developed into expressing irony or sarcasm, although in this instance its typical meaning is ignored.

The utterance mentions 'spamming' which means the act of sending multiple repetitive messages in quick succession. Spamming is a regular occurrence in the chat rooms of popular live streamers and is either prompted by viewers copying each other's messages rapidly or the mention of an emoticon on stream. In the case of Example 3, the live streamer urges his viewers to repeatedly type 'Kappa',

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1   Based on global Twitch.tv emote statistics: https://stats.streamelements.com/c/global (Accessed 25.5.2017).

the most common emoticon for spamming, in order to break a record on a site that tracks the frequency of specific emoticons in chat rooms of live streamers. He reminds everyone to send one emoticon per message, or 'line', for optimal results. The chat users comply and proceed to 'spam Kappa', making it impossible to discuss in the chat room. This utterance presents the most visible interaction between a live streamer and his audience as there is a direct order and a reaction.

The use of emoticons as semiotic tools in spoken interaction reveals some of the different ways in which the meanings of these emoticons have developed in the Twitch.tv community. Example 1 shows how associations with facial expressions dictate meaning-making, which is similar to how traditional smileys function; Example 2 displays the semiotic development of an emoticon through a shared experience; and Example 3 presents a situation where the speaker uses an emoticon as metalanguage in order to instruct others. The data indicates that Twitch.tv's emoticons can be used to replace non-verbal cues such as laughter even in spoken interaction (Example 1) and that potential multiple meanings are either effortless or difficult to make sense of because of extremely specific contexts (Example 2).

While the meanings of emoticons may be dynamic, they can still be fixed enough as to not cause confusion: Emoticons such as 'SMOrc' (see Example 2) have more than one meaning in the community, yet members of said community know how to use them in appropriate contexts. This is largely due to the shared contextual presuppositions of the community and the longevity of their shared practices. Individuals outside the community can have great initial difficulties in following some of the semiotic norms of emoticon use on Twitch.tv. 'EleGiggle' (see Example 1) seems to be an easier emoticon to decipher, although the community has developed its meaning to 'mocking laughter' instead of just 'laughter'. Thus, even those who would know to associate 'EleGiggle' with laughter without the contextual presupposition of the community would not notice its subtleties at first glance.

The emoticons on Twitch.tv move from one mode to another constantly as the live streamers and chat rooms interact with each other. The fact that emoticons on Twitch.tv have retained their meanings as they have rapidly changed modes from written to spoken is an indicator of

transmodality. Furthermore, emoticon use in spoken conversation is an example of transduction, as emoticons whose meanings have been configured in the written and visual mode have adapted to the spoken and auditory context.

The analysis implies that the social functions of Twitch.tv's emoticons have a large impact on the community. Examples 2 and 3 especially show signs of shared practices that influence how different emoticons are used: In example 2, past knowledge was shared, whereas in Example 3 an activity was shared. All interaction related to these emoticons between the speaker and the audience requires contextual presupposition to be effective, which serves as a subtle indicator of solidarity between the users. The utterance in Example 3 received a violent reaction from the viewers due to the live streamer deliberately asking users to participate: This is a common phenomenon in the community, most likely because viewers enjoy any attention they receive from the live streamer they are watching, especially if he or she is popular. Typing identical messages as a group might also give viewers a feeling of belonging in the community. The phenomena outlined here clearly indicate that a community of practice is taking place on the site.

In addition to representing a large community of practice, Twitch.tv seems to have several subcommunities with their own values. This becomes apparent in Example 2, as the two different meanings of 'SMOrc' originate from different video games and it is not guaranteed that the same live streamers create content for every title. This opens the possibility of analyzing smaller communities inside the larger Twitch.tv community that focus on specific activities and develop new meanings for emoticons amongst themselves. To take it even further, individual live streamers have the potential to grow a smaller community around themselves as every live streamer has his or her own page and chat room. It is very likely that even though Twitch.tv seems to be socially unified, it is in actuality a melting pot of various communities that affect each other's ways of speaking.

5. Conclusion and discussion

The purpose of this thesis was to examine the use of emoticons in spoken interaction on Twitch.tv: More specifically, it aimed to explore what potential semiotic and social functions emoticons have in speech in a specific online community. Motivation for the topic came from the lack of research on emoticons in spoken language and interest in how the design of Twitch.tv affects the social functions of its users. The theoretical framework of this thesis first addressed paralanguage as crucial to understanding how the meanings of emoticons are constructed. Even though semiotics and communities of practice were the primary approaches I took into account during the analysis, it was important to include transmodality in the framework due to the inherent variance in modes in the community.

The main findings answered the research questions adequately. It was found that Twitch.tv's emoticons develop their meanings, for instance, through the shared practices of the community and associations with facial expressions, the latter of which is similar to the semiotic origins of the traditional smiley face. Emoticons also displayed several social functions such as establishing norms in a community through their shared meanings and serving as an expression of solidarity between live streamers and viewers.

Emoticon use in spoken interaction has only recently begun growing and initial research on Twitch.tv has provided an interesting snapshot of an online community that utilizes emoticons in a new way. Researchers interested in emoticons and the evolution of their use might find this material a good starting point to their own analysis. Twitch.tv especially is a community that has the potential for more academic material on as this thesis managed to only scrape the surface. In non-academic settings the study of the use of emoticons in communities could find a foothold in education: As contemporary symbols with the capability to traverse between modes, emoticons could be, for instance, used as visual cues for learning words related to non-verbal features. The implications of such applications can provide new ideas to teachers..

The analysis shows that emoticons keep evolving in interesting ways, which is why future research is definitely needed to chart all the changes emoticons will go through in the coming years. Emoticon use in spoken conversation has already been inspected in online environments by this research. Traditional emoticon use is bound to go through noteworthy changes as well. In addition to more familiar areas, emoticon research can begin looking for more new and extraordinary phenomena. Examples of such topics are emoticon use in face-to-face communication, which is already starting to surface as a result of sites such as Twitch.tv, and the ever growing emoji culture.

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7. Appendix: List of emoticons

The following table provides the graphic forms of the emoticons used in the data (retrieved May 31st, 2017 from https://twitchemotes.com/). The emoticons are listed in the order that they appear in this thesis.

	Input	Emoticon
1	EleGiggle	
2	WutFace	
3	SMOrc	
4	Kappa	