

Investigating Emojilized Chinese with New Grammatical Functions

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Keywords: Emoji, Emojilized Chinese, Modals

Abstract: This study proposed the new grammatical functions of emojilized Chinese – the Chinese character on the emoji icon, in this case, “ke”(can), “de”(got) and “you”(have). Apart from the icon itself, the linguistic content of character emoji showing dual functions in the language use – as an emoji, and also Chinese. This study pays close attention to the usage of “ke”, “de” and “you”. The current usage tends to put the “you”(have) and “de”(got) at the clause-final position – which could be ungrammatical in the formal written form; whereas “ke” (can) could either occurred at the clause-final or in the preverbal position, functioning as adjectives and modal word. The authors propose that the interaction between emojilized character and the formal written form of Chinese will contribute novel meanings to Chinese grammar, and the impact has already shown in the mainland China social media context. As a ‘language tattoo’ on emoji, the emojilized character is also the language ‘opportunity’ in human communication.

1. Introduction

In this study, the authors aim to find out the application of the emojilized Chinese – in other words, the Chinese character on the emoji icon – with new grammatical functions. We predict that it would contribute novel meanings to Chinese grammar, and the impact has already been shown in the mainland China social media context.

We will focus on the function of emojilized Chinese by investigating the role it plays, to see whether it can be replaced by the meaning in the formal written form (or, say, the standard written Chinese) of online conversation, and Twitter/Weibo posts. In this study, we are going to pay close attention to the usage of “ke”(can), “de”(got), “you”(have) respectively, see the icons in figure 1 below. In the following section, the authors will use the Chinese pronunciation to represent these three icons.



Figure.1

The corresponding Chinese form is: ‘可’ke (means ‘can’ or ‘may’, as a modal word), ‘得’de (means ‘gain’ or ‘got’), ‘有’you (means ‘have’, ‘exists’, or ‘be’). The current usage tends to put the “you”(have) and “de”(got) at the clause-final position, which could be quite weird in the normal Chinese context; on the other hand, in the most of the case, “ke”(can) could either occurred at the clause-final or in the preverbal position. Due to the dual-function of this type of character emoji – say, it has maintained the normal usage and function of emoji, though, to some extent restricted by the grammar of the language itself, it has introduced a new possibility to the language.

We will list examples as evidence to elaborate in detail to show the application of emojilized Chinese in daily usage and how they interact with mainland China’s social media, and impact on Chinese grammar.

2. The Grammatical Function of “ke”(can), “de”(got), “you”(have)

2.1. Prediction 1: Pseudo-small Clause

Emoji is a term from Japanese, refer to the meaning of ‘繪’(picture) and ‘文字’(character), which has the function of helping with the effectiveness of conversation and emphasizing meaning in dialogue (cr. Danesi 2017).

On the Chinese internet, social media like Weibo, people put “ke”(can), “de”(got), “you”(have) into the written form of chat and send out posts online, introducing the new form of written Chinese into the web. The example could be like in (1a). Note that (1b) is problematic because this is not a grammatical usage of written Chinese, and the sentence seems incomplete.

- (1) a. 雅詩蘭黛 小 棕瓶 有 (emoji-have)

Ya-Shi-Lan-Dai Xiao Zong-ping 有 (emoji-have)

Estee-Lauder little Brown-bottle 有 (emoji-have)

The Estee Lauder small brown-bottle series. 有 (emoji-have)

- b. ?? 雅詩蘭黛小棕瓶有。

Ya-Shi-Lan-Dai Xiao Zong-ping have.

Estee-Lauder little Brown-bottle have.

The Estee Lauder small brown-bottle series are in stock.

The reason why we introduce the concept of small-clause is because of the symmetric structure. The small clause in general has the following features: 1) lack of verb; 2) the absence of tense. For instance, in English, a) “I convinced [Lisa my best friend]”. In example a), we can see that within the bracketed [Lisa my best friend], ‘Lisa’ and underlined ‘my best friend’ is in a parallel position, see the tree diagram below.

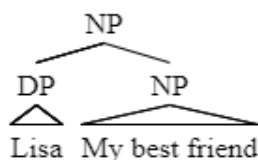


Figure.2 Tree diagram for small clause

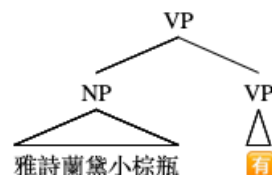


Figure.3 The tree diagram for emoji-有(you) usage

From the figure.2, we can see that the DP and NP in this small-clause are in the manner of symmetric. The further prediction will be: the syntactic structure of certain Chinese-character emoji phrases might behave in a similar way. But in example (1) the sentence seems not tenseless, it resembles small-clause just from the perspective of structure, we propose the character-emoji phrase is a structural Pseudo small-clause. See the proposed tree diagram in figure.3 above.

However, one might also propose that this “you”(have) with its original meaning ‘have’, could be generated from the higher branch of the tree, see the tree diagram in the figure.4 below.

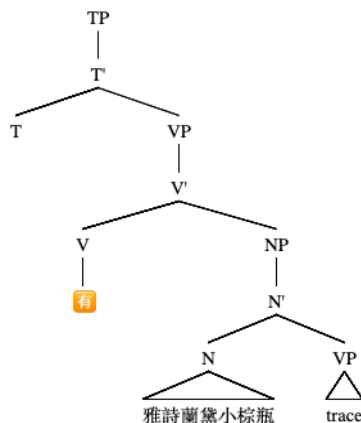


Figure.4 The tree diagram for hypothesized emoji-有(you) syntactic position

- (2) 800 元 得 (emoji-got)
 800-yuan 得 (emoji-got)
 800 yuan (can get).

Now take a look another example of Chinese character emoji phrase, the example (2) above was picked out from a WeChat-online business group, people share and posts advertisement among the ‘Friend Circle (朋友圈)’ which seems share a similar structure in figure.5 below



Figure.5 The tree diagram for emoji-得(de) usage

From the examples above we can see that the characterized-emoji (or, the emojilized-Chinese character) is inseparable from the main-clause context, and seems to function more like language than emojis. Emojis with Chinese characters are not the same as emojis with facial expressions (i.e., emoji smile 😊). The facial expression seems to have a vague meaning and is not easy to judge the underlying ‘sense’, it sometimes has to be interpreted with the help of context.

However, emojis with Chinese characters are clear and easy to interpret. There won’t be various understandings in the sentence. To a certain extent, the clause with Chinese character Emoji has a relevantly fixed structure, apart from obtaining the ‘emoji’ characteristics, it also shares properties in Chinese language and grammar.

Note that certain flexibility in expression and the concept of lose-talk (cr. Pragmatic halo) might play a role. For example from the old Chinese saying, when people met on the road, they usually greet each other with: "你吃飯了麼 (Have you eaten?)". The general response would be: "我吃完飯了 (I eat-finish meal le-PERF. ‘I have eaten my meal already.’)". However, if the interlocutor answered in: "我吃飯完了 (*I eat-meal finish le-PERF. *‘I have my meal already.’)", though a bit weird, people can also understand each other (Note that this kind of word order might occur in different dialects of Chinese). The last sentence does not conform to the rules in grammar, it seems dropped into a Pragmatic-Halo. Admittedly, since the written form of Chinese (though the context of online social media seems not in a formal sense) is restricted in a certain way, ‘hearing’ some words could be extremely different from ‘reading’ a sentence. Further research need to be done.

What we want to discuss here is: Emojis with Chinese characters can be used as independent components in a clause (i.e., not only acting as a modal, in the case of “ke”-can) or any other grammatical particles in Chinese. Correspondingly, the novel usage of these emojilized Chinese characters might impact the written Chinese grammar – at least in the online social media context.

2.2. Prediction 2: in the Case of “ke”(can)

Let’s make further assumptions in the example of “ke”(can). Emoji “ke”(can) with the Chinese character “可” is to some extent differed from “you”(have) and “de”(got) in the sense of ‘positions’. That is to say, when it was placed at the end of a clause, it may have different meanings comparing to it occurred at the middle or preverbal positions. But note that the meaning of this emojilized “ke”(can) has diverged from the original meaning of “可”.

See the example (3) and (4) below:

- (3) 小明 可 (emoji-can).

Xiao Ming CAN(emoji-can)
XiaoMing is nice!

(4) 今天 吃 燒烤 🍖(emoji-can)

Today eat. BBQ, CAN(emoji-can)”

We can have a BBQ today! / It’s a good idea to have a BBQ today!

In (3), “ke”(can) means the adjectival "excellent" or "nice". In example (4), “ke”(can) expresses more like an approval, and the original meaning of the modal word ‘CAN’, means “we could eat BBQ today”. It should be noted that in emojilized characters, only the position of “ke”(can) is flexible and not limited to the end of the sentence (position other than clause-final for “de”(got) and “you”(have) are rare).

For the modalized “ke”(can) here, cross-language evidence also showing the same position of “can” and “will” could occur clause-finally. (i.e., in HKSL, CAN and WILL always occurring at the end of the sentence).

The predication 2 further shows that Emoji with Chinese characters has completely entered the Chinese language system to some extent. It can be as flexible as our daily expression, and it can also be fully understood effortlessly via online social media context in the written form. These phenomena is going to add new possibilities to Chinese grammar.

3. Conclusion

The Chinese character emojis are representing meaning either in a traditional way and also function as a ‘true’ emoji. Take the case of “ke”(can), “de”(got) and “you”(have) into an account, they are active at both layer of ‘emoji’ and the semantic meaning of Chinese language.

As long as the original character itself contributing to the syntactic information in Chinese, the emoji features of it are inducing the transformation of the syntactic structure. Here the author borrowed the concept of small clause and named it as pseudo-small-clause to emphasize the structure of symmetric constituent between main clause and the character-emoji. (i.e., “ke”-can, “de”-got and “you”-have). This identical status also enables the emoji itself to be flexibly moving to anywhere they want. Imagine that the emoji itself are to some extent touring around in a parallel dimension universe which could be shadowing to anywhere of the main clause. But the most intriguing part of this study is, the mentioned set of emojilized Chinese character icon are unfortunately be ‘bounded’ by the ‘language tattoo’ on the ‘face’ – the character on the icon image. Therefore, the rule of Chinese grammar is inevitably manipulating it; But consequently, thanks to the colorful, eye-catching visual icon, they are also lucky enough to maintain some liberty of emoji kingdom (though not 100%), which enables them to create some novel word order as both word and emoji, in this way, contribute novel strategy to the Chinese grammar.

Emoji (with Chinese word content) is reconstructing the grammar of Chinese written language in social media context. Our further prediction will be: the emojilized character in languages other than Chinese (i.e. in Japanese, English, and others) might behave in a similar way when given a certain context. Further examination need to be done.

The language ‘tattoo’ on emoji, is also the language ‘opportunities’ in human communication.

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