Speech acts, interjections and emojis - revisiting communicative cues

Interjections, discourse particles and other triggers of non-at-issue meaning have been shown to disambiguate the speech act of their host utterance (see, e.g., Grosz 2012, 2014). In German, "Ach, wäre ich ein besserer Tänzer!" ("Oh, if I were a better dancer!") more easily communicates an optative wish than a variant without the interjection "ach". In the English V1-exclamative "Wow, did I get this wrong!", the interjection "wow" seems close to obligatory for an exclamative reading to arise (see also Pesetsky & Torrego 2001:411n39). Similarly, "Geh ruhig nach Hause!" ("Go [particle] home") more clearly communicates a permission than a variant without the discourse particle "ruhig".

In written digital communication, emojis are an innovated means of encoding features of face-to-face communication, such as facial expressions and intonation patterns. On a par with interjections, emojis can disambiguate the speech act of an underspecified utterance, which is most easily illustrated for imperatives: While "call me 😉" is most likely understood as a command ("you must call me"), "call me 🥺" is more plausibly understood as a request ("please call me"), "call me 😋" is compatible with a permission ("go ahead and call me"), and "call me 🙄" seems to be concessive ("okay, call me if you must").

This talk argues that face emojis can be analyzed as related (though not equivalent) to natural language interjections (such as "yay", "boo", and "wow"), as a consequence of which their interactions with speech act encoding should be modeled at a similar non-compositional level. This, in turn, can inform research on how speech act encoding interacts with [i.] facial expressions (since face emojis are depictions of facial expressions), and [ii.] intonation (since facial expressions correlate with intonation patterns, e.g., Sendra et al. 2013, Giustolisi & Panzeri 2021).

References

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