



The *Faces* of Messenger Emoticons in the Virtual Communication

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Abstract. The present study examines the virtual communication-related habits on Yahoo Messenger, focusing especially on the role of the potentially emotion expressing icons in the online speech. The basis of the research consists of structured interviews that are completed by spontaneous instant messaging conversations of which three are presented in the paper. The interview subjects/discussion partners are individuals in their twenties, most of them are graduates. Apart from rating the emoticons into categories, the study – inter alia – seeks answers to the following questions: what kind of general and individual meanings are associated with the emoticons by the users of the Messenger, how do smileys complete written communication, furthermore what does their presence indicate regarding the relationship between discussion partners.

Keywords: Yahoo Messenger, communication habits, virtual communication, emotions, smileys

Introduction and review of the literature

The present paper studies the symbol set of an instant messaging program, namely that of the Yahoo Messenger. My goal is on the one hand to examine the role of certain emoticons in the virtual communication by ranking them into some sort of category system; on the other hand I intend to define the meanings of the more frequently used icons, also pointing to the reasons of their popularity among the users of the program.

Besides these questions I will pay attention to the use of the program, to the options that the users have at their disposal during the instant messaging process, also presenting the most generally applied options. Finally, I will focus on the issue of language use in the virtual communication, including also the question of spelling errors.

While using the Yahoo Messenger, there are several features for the potential users who wish to communicate by instant messaging. Users can share their thoughts with messaging partners not just in writing; momentary impressions, feelings can be transmitted also visually, with the aid of images and icons.

In addition to the aforementioned, there is the possibility of transmitting almost anything to the other party, meaning that the exchange of the different file types (images, music, text documents) is assured. Another positive feature is that messages sent to someone while offline will be received; when the addressee signs in again, he/she will get all those messages that were sent to him/her after the last log out.

Observing so many features, one can ask: how can we exactly define Yahoo Messenger? We can state that it is not just a simple instant messaging program, it implies much more. I can best define it as follows: it is a quick communication means, with almost no boundaries, in the sense that the audiovisual and multimedia aspects are so emphasized, that writing, image, music, sound and video features may be simultaneously used.

We read in the book of Zoltán Bódi (2004) that through the internet the oral, visual and written communication channels are interlocked and consecutively multimedia or hypermedia appears. Kristóf Nyíri (1994) writes that nowadays the effects of the audiovisual communication have become more accentuated.

Referring to the video feature, if two users of the program have a web camera, they can benefit of the possibility of mutually visualizing each other. At such occasions sound, image and writing are all present at the same time, providing the user with a much more complex experience.

One could write pages about the unlimited possibilities that the program implies, but setting this aside, I shall examine more of the preconditions of applying the aforementioned features and the method of becoming a Yahoo Messenger user. To become a user, one primarily has to have the following: internet connection, the program set up to one's computer, and last, but not least a Yahoo email address. Compared to simpler instant messaging programs, Yahoo Messenger seems to be a better option also due to fact that in this case it is the user who decides with whom he/she wants to talk and with whom not. The user compiles his/her own partner list, from where at the given moment he/she later chooses the instant messaging partners, avoiding thus the possibility of any undesired contact. During communication image visualizing is also possible, as almost every user uploads an image about him-/herself, so that the other chatting

partner can see not just the written thoughts, but also the other chatting partner's photograph; all this makes the conversation more personal.

In this study I shall rely not only on my own experience regarding the program, but I shall also present the views of my acquaintances – users themselves – regarding Yahoo Messenger. During instant messaging conversations I held 10 interviews, but due to their length I shall not present these. My questionnaire contains 28 questions and it tries to illustrate the most important problems of communication through the messenger. I mainly rely on the emoticons themselves that can be visualized in the program, and on the knowledge about these. A part of the interview questions refer to their usage. I rendered these symbols in the Appendix; presenting them in a table, with their appropriate English and Hungarian meanings, also specifying the character combination by which these icons can be visualized.

I shall refer to the aforementioned in more detail. For the moment I consider important to note just that these symbols are at every occurrence animated pictures; these are the further developed versions of the traditional emoticons, thus they seem to be more popular among users. In this study I cannot present the motion picture versions of the icons, but I will display all their static pictures that I saved by screenshots of the motion pictures.

I also annexed for comparison the symbols of another instant messaging program, that of the Windows Live Messenger, mostly known as MSN. Compared to those of Yahoo Messenger, these icons are not so favoured, due to the fact that the MSN symbols are only static pictures.

Within the text of this study I included several shorter and more interactive chat fragments that I had on Messenger. By them I would like to present the practical use of the aforementioned symbols, focusing also on the linguistic issues that communication via messenger implies.

Emoticons in the virtual communication

The first emoticon, 'the smiley', was created by Harvey Ball in 1963, after which the symbol was trade-marked in London in 1968, and it became more and more popular. It was used to decorate t-shirts, cups, buttons, stickers and other objects. These objects became very popular in the United States. At the beginning of the 1990s the icon became the symbol of acid house music culture. The icon was often displayed also on ecstasy pills (Bódi and Veszelszki, 2006).

The symbols that I studied are iconic signs, and their common feature consists of a set of similarities. Most of the signs mainly represent human facial expression in motion; the icons are meant to express some kind of human feeling, but they may refer also to some kind of action or gesture.

The smiling code is such a general sign, that it may be interpreted apart from language or culture. It is meant to express some kind of general human facial

expression, thus its interpretation may be unambiguous for everybody (Bódi, 2004). Differently put, emoticons are graphic representations of facial expressions that many e-mail users embed in their messages, these symbols are widely known and commonly recognized within computer-mediated communication (D'Addario and Walther, 2001).

These symbols got several denominations in the daily and virtual vocabulary. They are called smiling faces or smileys, emoticons, mood signs. Overtaking the emoticon expression, there was an initiative to introduce the use of another Hungarian denomination – “*érzjel*” (meaning “emotion sign”) –, but it failed. Ágnes Veszelszki, the acknowledged researcher of the emoticons in the Hungarian consulting literature, published the following other denominations of the signs in question: smiling code, emoticon, simper, smiley, little face, mood sign, figure face, emotion sign, little image (Bódi and Veszelszki, 2006).

Géza Balázs mentions smileys as the visual tools of the SMS; the smileys – in his definition – are mood defining signs, fulfilling abbreviation and encrypting functions. In Zoltán Bódi's book about the virtual vocabulary, in its glossary one may read the following about the emoticons: these are signs that spread in the virtual interaction, that complement the emotionality in mobile SMS communication, the para- and extralinguistic elements; the range of the signs consists of a limited number of basic versions and an infinite number of individual versions. In the language use one can also find mood signs, smiling codes and other versions of these icons (Bódi, 2004).

The smiling symbol expression has not really become widespread among users, but Zoltán Bódi, in his book about the virtual communication, uses for these iconic signs the aforementioned denomination. In his opinion, the elements of the symbol imitate the defining signs of the human face with the aid of the existing characters on the keyboard, so these signs are iconic symbols (Bódi, 2004).

Emoticons can provide support to written communication, in much the same way that visual or body language can enhance verbal communication (Cochenour and Rezabek, 1998). In the opinion of David Crystal, written virtual interaction efforts are made regarding the completion of the deficiencies of prosody and paralinguistics with visual elements. Crystal writes: “Written language has always been ambiguous, in its omission of facial expression, and in its inability to express all the international and other prosodic features of speech” (Crystal, 2001: 38).

The emoticons may confer to the written text symbolically definable contextual reporting functions as the emotional extra denotation, irony, euphemism or confirmation. (Bódi and Veszelszki, 2006). Bódi defines the smiling symbol as a symbol which has no precisely definable meaning, only the intention itself transmitted by the icon can be exactly told. The author mentions Sperbert's and Wilson's names, who say that these kinds of symbols do not enter into the category of codes, they are not part of the code model, they can be described just by the

interferential model (Bódi, 2004). This means that the meaning of the smiling sign may be defined only from the context of the conversation.

Susan Herring also emphasises that one can draw conclusions on the transmitting function of the emoticons only from the given context (Herring, 1996). Gyula Laczházi also studies the emoticons. He writes that the emoticons nowadays have already become a regular part of communication among the young; stating that emoticons are graphic signs which can express emotion, and that these are character combinations that can be displayed with the aid of computer or mobile phone keyboard (Laczházi, *sine anno*).

Nikoletta Ágnes Érsök (2004), while examining the linguistic characteristics of the SMS, she classifies the letter- and the punctuation mark multiplication to the category of the graphostylistic means.

Referring to Bódi's expression, the smiling symbols have become widespread over the internet also to compensate the facial mimics and gestures, without which the message can often be misinterpreted.

In my opinion the smiling symbol denomination itself does not cover it all, but only a certain set of the symbols, which is the circle of those icons that have positive meaning. This is also true for the English term *smiley*, which is derived from the word smile; it is not so appropriate to define a symbol system which mostly expresses negative feelings with such a denomination. The most correct definition may be mood sign, because this one may refer to icons expressing both positive and negative feelings.

Laczházi explains the appearance of emoticons by the increase in significance of the emotions in the postmodern era. In his study titled *The emoticons and the emotion expressing techniques of the early modern age* he writes that the accentuation of the emotions in the postmodern era is connected above all to the decline of the instrumental mind and to recognizing the limits of rationality. (Laczházi, *sine anno*) The emoticons represent the finite group of emotion expressing universal signs and at the same time they are non-linear expressing means, as the text containing such signs becomes two-dimensional (*ibidem*).

Image and text are simultaneously present during communication, this makes the process more entertaining, the conversation becomes more colourful, and besides these, in certain cases such parallelism decreases tension between parties.

Merlin Donald thinks that, compared to verbal communication, visual thinking represents the basic level of human information processing (Donald, 1993).

During communication with these signs a certain on-line bodytalk takes place, and this may occur because we dispose of a diversified range of emotion expressing means.

One may ask: does this emotion expressing way also represent a certain static and universalized state, behind which true emotions are in fact lost?

In my opinion, the occurrence of the aforementioned issue also depends on the extent to which parties communicating with each other are honest, on how honestly they choose the emoticons with which they express their actual state of mind. It is natural that some emotions cannot be expressed by one or two emoticons, and I think that their purpose is not even that; there are several other features of the messenger for the better expression of our emotions; I refer here to those live conversations when one can use microphone or web camera.

I observed among messenger users that maintaining relationships among parties is not limited just to the virtual communication, as this is continuously completed with periodical personal encounters.

In my opinion, these chats on the internet complete our personal encounters and referring hereby to symbols, I think that these make our virtual conversations more expressive, bringing them closer to the atmosphere of live chats by the illustration of gestures and mimics.

Zoltán Bódi writes that the majority of the social networking users have personal encounters as well, bringing up here as examples the emailing partners and also the groups of chat rooms (Bódi, 2004).

As of the fear of isolation that may occur because using the internet, Kristóf Nyíri observes that in the majority of the cases this does not happen in reality, because, as he mentions, emailing is not a limiting factor to the traditional forms of communication. (Krajcsi, Kovács and Pléh, 2001).

A certain development of the smiling symbols can be observed. This development is a graphic one, since if I mention the smiling face, its initial form consisted of the alignment of a round bracket and a colon; later on the form was further developed to a face-like display, which was a static picture; finally this was followed by the coloured face visualization, a display that also entered into the static picture category.

All the aforementioned phases were further developed and the motion version of the coloured face visualization appeared. The most recent initiatives show that this version itself can be further improved, for nowadays the loud smileys have already been invented. While chatting on the messenger, we can send motion pictures with audibles to our instant messaging partner. Later on I shall detail the reasons of their moderate popularity among the users, despite the attractive graphic design of the signs.

The emoticons have increasingly become more complex and affect more and more senses; the latest animoticons and audibles consist not only of an image, but they also emit sound, they make the content of the text unique by the application of audio phonetic means. (Bódi and Veszelszki, 2006) The emoticons used in email, forums and during chatting do not consist only of the colon-hyphen-bracket character combination, but an image file is also included into the unique, complex code of these signs (*ibidem*).

In the Hungarian speech area László Bódi and Ágnes Veszelszki published, claiming to cover all details, the first study regarding the emotion expressing functions of the emoticons in virtual communication. The authors define in their book two main categories of the emoticons: the static and the dynamic ones (Veszelszki, 2005).

Before turning to the evaluation of the interviews, I consider it important to summarize through some paragraphs the significance of communication through images.

Communication through images

During instant messaging the users apply icons more or less frequently; this is somehow the result of the users' insistence on images. We can often express more with images than just in writing. When both writing and image are simultaneously used, communication seems to be more successful.

Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1984) mentions that images and words need mutual assistance because verbal and non-verbal messages are compensatorily interconnected and help maintaining the correct interpretation of the messages.

Kristóf Nyíri (2011b) writes that words accompanied by images or even only images are more appropriate means to express our thoughts than just the mere words. The visual element makes the message more concise, more concrete and also more fitting to the receiver's given location, situation. The meaning of the images can be considered one of the simplest meanings, as the images resemble their meaning, but compared to images, this is generally not true for words.

According to Wittgenstein's (1998 – quoted by Nyíri 2001b) philosophy some images have obvious meaning without any learning or interpretation. Concerning this, he mentions the image face, towards which, in some aspects, he has the same attitude than towards the human face. He accentuates that one may react in the same way to the image face as to the expressions of the human face.

Regarding images, Neurath (1936) has an interesting idea: according to him words separate, while images reinforce relationships. *Words divide, pictures connect.*

Kristóf Nyíri (2000) writes that images may represent more than a mere emblem or illustration, as images may have semiotic function, may bear meaning or may transmit actual information.

John M. Kennedy (1974) underlines in his book titled *A psychology of picture perception*, that animated pictures are originally and more obviously information carriers than the static displays. A good example for this may be those interconnections between the motion icons of Yahoo Messenger and the static ones of Windows Messenger that I am hereby studying. Animated images express more, and this is precisely why these are more frequently used. While the static picture

often requires explanation, the animated picture has obvious meaning which needs no specifying.

Mitchell Stephens (1998) underlines the importance of the fact according to which the image nowadays is associated with the motion picture; the opportunities of the rational, visual logics are exploited in the video and animation. A significant characteristic of images is that, compared to writing, images can have a greater impact on human feelings. As Nyíri (2001a) also writes, the image has stronger and closer impact on feelings, creating thus intense communication and mutual identification among individuals.

Henceforth I present the results of my research regarding Yahoo Messenger.

Research results

I completed the questionnaire research in 2006 during my master's studies. I held interviews with ten persons (for data about the informants view table 4 in the Appendix) through the process of the online research (formal interview on Yahoo Messenger). The questioned persons are members of my own circle of friends. In the period of the research I stayed in touch with everybody via Messenger on a daily or weekly basis.

I chose these ten persons, first of all because at the moment of holding the interviews I maintained a more intense online communicational contact with them, secondly because – paying specific attention to the use of emoticons – I was also looking for answers regarding how similar or how different the online communication habits of the mostly recently graduating individuals may be.

Before passing on the questions of the questionnaire and receiving answers for these, I had personal conversations with every informant; these discussions ran like every other spontaneous chat. After inquiring about each other's well-being and momentary activities, at a given point of the conversation I mentioned my research intent. All partners had an open attitude towards the questions after they found out about the research purpose.

I didn't send the already edited questionnaire to the informants, but depending on the communication act I asked my questions one by one. In my opinion this made possible for me to receive answers for every question, respectively, in case I didn't receive a concrete answer to a given question right away, I could ask once again the same question. The spontaneous feature of the conversation allowed the display of such a set of information that was possible only by dialogue. From the interviews one can also see that, just like during a live conversation, there often appear such sentences that don't refer to the asked question, but to the former discussions of the talking partners. In these cases, just like when holding interviews by live talk, the asking party always has to draw back the attention of his chatting

partner to the former question. Regarding age, the data providers are in their twenties: the youngest being 20 years old, the oldest 28 years.

Concerning the gender of the interviewed persons, I spoke with seven men and three women about this form of the virtual communication. Among the data providers seven persons were born in Csíkszereda (Miercurea Ciuc), one in Szatmárnémeti (Satu Mare), one in Nyárádszereda (Miercurea Nirajului), finally another is from Miskolc, Hungary. Except two of them, all have university degree. The majority of those informants who studied at the time of the interviews are now working in their field of specialty. In their opinion, the Yahoo Messenger is very popular in their circle. Two of the aforementioned persons know and regularly use the program for two years, the others for 1–3 years.

The questioned persons say that they use the program for human communication and contact maintaining purposes.

It can be observed that all data providers, except one, use not only the Yahoo Messenger for chatting with their acquaintances, but in the majority of the cases the use of such other programs can be assessed as: Windows Live Messenger (5 persons), Skype (3 persons), Google talk (2 persons) or the Hungarian Gyalogló Chat (4 persons). One of the data providers indicates his preference for using 4 instant messaging programs with the fact that he talks with friends from various parts of the world, where options concerning the use of such programs are also varied. According to his opinion the Yahoo Messenger is rather used by his Romanian and American friends, while the German, English, Swiss and Czech friends prefer Windows Live Messenger.

Compared to other simpler instant messaging programs, the 10 data providers indicate their preference for Yahoo Messenger due to its simple use; to the possibility of multimedia share and the increased number of emoticons itself constitutes an advantage.

Nine out of the ten interviewed use Yahoo Messenger on a daily basis, some of them are constantly online, others 1–10 hours/day. Usually those use the program more than 5 hours, who need it not only for entertainment, but also for work.

Most of the users chat with their friends on the messenger, but conversations with distant relatives and acquaintances also occur. The interviewed persons speak rarely with their family members on Yahoo Messenger.

All of them communicate primordially in Hungarian, but everyone, except one, mentions at least one other foreign language or Romanian, in which he/she also communicates. Apart from Hungarian and Romanian, the questioned persons speak with their distant acquaintances in German, English, Italian or French.

The primordially used language is Hungarian, but unfortunately nobody who took part in the interviews writes *in Hungarian*, that is no one of them uses accentuated letters, as it would be correct according to the spelling and grammatical rules of the Hungarian language. Four out of ten persons use

occasionally accentuated letters and only in order to avoid the misunderstanding of words with multiple meaning.

Avoiding the use of accentuated letters has another reason, this being the fact that the dynamic of the instant messaging conversation matches that of a live talk, so people simply don't have time to pay attention to the use of these characters, that need to be applied with a little more attention. The third reason is related to the speed of the virtual world. As events have become more dynamic in the outside world, a similar predisposition for trying to be quicker can be observed also on the internet.

On the instant messaging programs the use of commas, sentence beginning capital letters and sentence ending characters is regularly avoided; all these deficiencies occur to maintain the dynamic of information exchange, to reach the maximum typing celerity and in order to reach the dynamic level of the spoken language as much as possible (Bódi, 2004). The author also mentions that while chatting on the messenger is very quick, it is in writing, but its dynamic equals that of the live speech and regarding the format, it is closer to the live word.

The written virtual language is brought closer to the spoken language by the simultaneity and the instant interactivity of the first one (Ferris, 1997).

In some cases avoiding the use of hyphenated letters and the grammatical rules may be connected also to the material side of the issues, meaning that the person, who is using the services of an internet cafe and uses the messenger or the features of the email there, tries to send as much text to the other party as possible and as quickly as possible.

Bódi (2004) writes that in the last 500 years of the history of the Hungarian written language one could not observe such a dominance of the phenomenon of avoiding the use of accentuated letters as it occurs nowadays in the virtual communication. In his opinion, avoiding the use of accents has become widespread due to the necessity of the technical background.

Part of my interview questions referred to the use of Yahoo Messenger symbols (see the questionnaire in the Appendix). I was curious to know how popular these symbols are among the chatting users, to know the reasons for which they apply them, and last but not least to find out the extent to which the meaning of these symbols is known by the users.

The Yahoo Messenger's symbol feature – the option from where the emoticons can be chosen – lines up 54 smileys. These icons express some kind of emotion or state, or maybe some kind of human action. Eighteen of these express positive emotions, while 27 are appropriate for expressing negative feelings. Other 9 pieces may be seen as neutral from the point of view in discussion; these generally refer to some kind of human action.

The symbols expressing positive feelings or states are the following:



Symbols expressing negative feelings or states are:



Neutral states (actions):



The 54 smileys do not cover the entire emoticon set of the Yahoo Messenger, because using other menu options one can visualize new and much better icons. Picturing a complete image about the smiling symbols is not my goal; I studied only those that are part of the initial symbol set.

Everybody whom I questioned uses symbols. Some of them apply these to compensate verbal communication with images, others apply these because of their living character, but most of them accentuate the fact that with the aid of these symbols they can express their state of mind or their momentary mood. Regarding this, informant named B. Sz. creatively declares: *When I smile, my 'desktop' is also smiling* 😊. By his statement B. Sz. confirms the fact that the emoticons are totally appropriate to successfully display the human face related mimics.

All ten data providers think that the symbols are much more expressive than the written word, so in their opinion these, compared to writing, are a much more appropriate alternative of expressing human emotions. Compared to speech, they think that chatting on messenger is disadvantageous, as in this last case the emphasis of the message can't be expressed during communication; this can be partially compensated by the emoticons, which may indicate the emotional content of the written word.

During the online interviews the informants didn't display emoticons – only when I asked them to show their favourite/less favoured smileys, but they continuously used these according to the context of the conversation; this fact proves that these emotion expressing iconic signs represent a significant part of our internet related communication habits.

The users also have favourite symbols; these are the most used by them. These symbols are chosen from that set of emoticons which can be more easily visualized, with the aid of keyboard character combination.

The most frequently used symbols are:



These mood signs express mostly some kind of positive emotion. Such emotion is for example the smile, the leer, the kiss or the laugh. The mood signs displayed during spontaneous discussions also underline the fact that chatting partners show each other the positive feelings more often, but this can be influenced by the given person's state of mind. While being jollier they use more positive symbols, and when being sadder they avoid the use of signs expressing positive emotions, repeatedly displaying icons which express sadness.


Zoltán Bódi concludes, regarding the function of static emoticons in the virtual communication that in the texts examined by him the most frequently illustrated emotions with emoticons are joviality and sorrow (Bódi and Veszelszki, 2006). Ágnes Veszelszki distinguishes from a thematic aspect the following types of dynamic emoticons: expressing emotions, illustrating general action, alluding to sexuality-eroticism, and expressing aggression or humour. She categorizes separately those animated mood signs which refer to keeping in touch or to ceremonies, furthermore, she detaches those animal and tale figures, that basically guard the smiley style display by their head shaped forms. (Bódi and Veszelszki, 2006)

On the basis of the questionnaire answers, we can conclude that the messenger users know the meaning of these symbols; this is also due to the fact that the meaning of the symbol appears in English at the moment of visualizing, thus the users can deduce from this the Hungarian meaning.






During the interviews I specifically made inquiries about the meaning of one or two mood signs, to see what is the conception of the chatting partner (the list of meanings associated to the emoticons may be found in the Appendix). In the first table of the Appendix I presented the possible meanings of a given symbol in the view of the questioned subjects. Because of the increased number of the symbols I could not ask the subjects about the meaning of each symbol, I rather focused on icons with ambiguous meaning.

There are signs that were not 100% clear to some of the subjects, e.g.: 🤒, which means sick, 🤓 meaning hypnotized or 🤔, signifying anxious. The majority of the questioned persons think that the mood signs do not always have a clear meaning, that their real meaning can be deduced only from the context of the conversation.

The informant named G. E. also accentuates that certain mood signs may have totally unique significance, so anybody can use mood sign while not taking into account its standard meaning; this doesn't mean that the respective person misapplies the icon, as the given conversational context may permit the presence of









the icon. An example for this can be the  symbol, which generally means sick; G. E. displays this symbol to express not sickness, but when she barracks for somebody before an exam or in other situation, so she wants the other party to succeed.








The smileys, by their animated display, provide a broader explanatory frame for the receiver. During the interviews I asked the subjects to formulate their opinions about several mood signs that I showed on the desktop. In most cases the informants gave spontaneous and concise, usually one-word answers. There are many overlaps among the meanings, the questioned subjects may not use the same expression, but they say synonyms of the given expression. Exceeding the general meanings depends also on the extent of the individual imagination, thus some associate to certain emoticons such unique denotations, which are often humorous.

The users of the signs often take the opportunity to creatively denominate certain symbols. Such examples are the following:  – I am so cool I cannot bare it,  – smirk, king,  – as Tiptupa flirts with Csipike*,  – nerd,  – shut the fuck up!

From certain answers one can see that the users of the mood signs compare the given smiley to some fabled fellow, which occurs to a great extent also due to the individual imagination (Smurfette, Tiptupa, Pinocchio).

As its denomination also shows, the mood sign is a more appropriate tool for expressing a certain type of emotion than just the mere written word. One of the interview subjects, K. S. thinks that it is more appropriate to express his impulses with certain symbols than to do the same thing in writing.

Using the symbols implies really varied options, but there are some icons that users rarely use or do not use at all. Such signs are: the clown , the devil , the cowboy , sick , pusher/angry , the looser , the daring , or the liar .

Opinions are divided over display methods through which the users visualize the mood signs: one option is the direct click on the icon, the other is character combination. As I mentioned before, the simpler icons are generally visualized by character combination. Such signs are:       . As we can see there are icons expressing both negative and positive feelings among these.

The Yahoo Messenger takes multimedia features onto another level with the inclusion of the so called audibles or loud animated emoticons options. I cannot give examples for these. One only has to know about these that they generally represent coloured animated pictures that need to be chosen from a separate menu, and that they are mainly funny. Compared to emoticons, the audibles are

* Two Hungarian children's tale characters

much more complex, merely because of the fact that in the case of audibles image and sound are simultaneously present. Specialists have created several versions of the audibles, among which also the further developed versions of the emoticons that I studied. The main characteristic of these latter ones is that they are much larger and seem to be more effective, in the sense that their appearance is followed by sound.

In spite of the complexity of the audibles, users do not apply them usually, or use the feature only occasionally. During the online interview I showed some of these to my discussion partners. In most of the cases they did not like these motion images. Another reason for which these kind of animated pictures are not preferred is the time that their visualization takes. While the mood signs can be displayed in seconds, the visualization of the audibles takes a little more time, and their use interrupts at times the communication, representing thus an impediment for the users regarding the dynamic of the conversation. Against all the aforementioned factors, everybody accentuates that the use of the audibles – just like the use of emoticons – is justified only when they are placed into the appropriate context.

During chatting loud conversation is also possible. The subjects of the interview use this feature in 50%-50% proportion. If they use the option, they use it when they are talking mostly to their friends.

This form of communication often implies also the use of web camera. The majority of the persons whom I questioned did not seem particularly interested in the web camera or in several cases they did not have such a tool.

While the use of the web camera seemed unpopular, sending files to discussion partners seems to be a regularly used option. All ten subjects use this feature. They generally send each other pictures, music or some other type of document.

Last, but not least, I was curious to know the quality of the communication. Opinions are divided regarding this detail. Some are more interactive when they chat on the messenger than they would be face to face with their discussion partner. For others the communication channels do not count in this sense; in their opinion they behave similarly both during chatting on the messenger and when having a personal encounter.

Based on my own observations, I can state that most times people are more interactive when they have a conversation on messenger than when they meet personally with someone. This tendency can be explained also by the fact that this type of communication situation represents only an indirect contact form between the interacting partners, and in such conditions they talk more easily about their feelings, they are more daring and more open.

We may be convinced regarding the above arguments by the following three discussions that were recorded in parallel with the questionnaire research. The text fragments, except the first one, are discussions with one of the interviewed subjects

(G. O.). These brief dialogues are part of some longer conversations. I chose these parts based on their funny style and because of the presence of the mood signs. The mood signs displayed at the end of the sentences and those that appear by themselves are proof of the fact that discussion partners consider important to express their momentary mood, which is reflected in the cheerful atmosphere and in the tendency to use humour during the discussion. The following text fragments do not always correspond to the live talk, out and away; they reflect the characteristics of the virtual language use.

Text fragments

Text fragment no. 1

X: how are you?
X: I hope I'm not interrupting
Y: no
Y: I'm relaxing
Y: I edited a study
Y: I've just finished it
X: may I ask what's it about?
Y: it's about gypsies.
X: it must be interesting.
X: are you a sociologist?
Y: no 😊
X: policeman? 🤖
Y: spy 😄
X: I had three more guesses: musician, flower vendor, thief 🤖
Y: 😊
X: it's just sheer habit.

Text fragment no. 2

X: there will be a karaoke party this weekend
Y: really?
Y: on Saturday?
X: yes
X: we're looking forward to a party
X: it's been a while
Y: maybe I'll go

Y: if someone will come with me
 X: wheeze before, so that I know 🗣️🗣️
 Y: why?
 X: it's a joke 😊
 X: - darling, has the electrician gone yet?
 X: - no mum, but he's wheezing!
 Y: 😊
 X: we chaff each other with this

Text fragment no.3

X: hi
 Y: hello
 X: how 'r' U?
 Y: relax (in Hungarian: *en pihi*)
 Y: you?
 X: work-relaxing (in Hungarian: *en dolipihi*) 😊
 Y: 😊
 Y: you are one of the kind 😊
 X: I am not a namby-pamby
 X: I just have my moment
 Y: somehow I could not even picture you like that 😊
 X: 😊
 X: another came up to my mind
 X: 😊
 X: he's so depressed he'll soon put an end to his days. (in Hungarian: *olyan depi mindjart öngyi*)
 Y: don't put an end to your days, grab instead some cucumber salad (in Hungarian: *ne legy ongyi, kapjal be nemi ubi salit parival es tojival*)
 X: 🗣️🗣️
 X: this is good 😊
 X: you exceed my limits
 Y: well, I'm unique too 🗣️🗣️
 X: 😊
 X: yap

Regarding the first text fragment, we can see that a simple communication situation is taking place. The parties, who just partially know each other, after

asking about the well-being of the other party, continue the conversation by focusing on a specific issue. This text fragment becomes funny just because for one chatting partner it's not exactly clear what the job of his partner is. After spotting the *Gypsy* word, many other Gypsy-related associations come to the respective person's mind.

He consciously plays with these links, he consciously tries to be funny. This is obvious not just from the mood of the conversation, but this is reflected also in the meaning of the mood signs themselves. Based on the information about his partner, who is currently writing a study about gypsies, he tries to guess what his partner's occupation is. The following answers come up: *sociologist*, *policeman*, *flower vendor*, *thief*, and *musician*. We can see, that not only the *guessing* party tries to be funny, but also his chatting partner; this is proven that with the *spy* word he tries to come up with a neat retort to the other guessing party's answer.





The answers aligned by the other party are conscious associations, this being underlined also by the last statement, as the respective party confirms that the associations that he has just mentioned are just mere guesses based on his lack of information. The good mood between the parties is further developed by the certain mood signs that come one after the other. The first smiling sign 😊 is followed by the much more expressive 🎲 icon, and after the punchline the laughing face 😂 is also displayed, representing the culmination of the humour in the conversation. After this, after enumerating the associations, the tongue icon 🤪 also appears, which, as an ending, confirms one more time the use of the tools of the humour.

The second chat fragment begins with drawing the attention on an event. This is also a funny conversation. The *wheeze* word has an allusive role in the text, as one chatting party quotes a joke, in the secondary sense of the word. When typing the word the sign that shows a laughing figure rolling on the floor, 🤪, already indicates the side-splitting style that the word implies. The other party, after reading the joke, expresses with a smiling sign 😊 that he got the punchline.

In the third text fragment the accent is put on smiling and laughing. The abbreviations are dominant in this chat fragment as well. Almost every abbreviation is followed by a smiling sign. Talking in abbreviations is a conscious act for both parties and it occurs for maintaining the humour. The *how 'r' U?* that appears at the beginning of the dialogue and is in fact the abbreviation of the *how are you?* question encourages the other talking party to answer by also using a sort of abbreviated, slang language.

As an answer, he uses the word *relax*, (in Hungarian: *en pihi*) which indicates relaxation. The other party, further maintaining the mood of the conversation, answers with *work-relax*, which means in fact that he works and rests in turns. This conversation in abbreviations evokes in the other party the *he's so depressed he'll almost put an end to his days* (in Hungarian: *olyan depi mindjárt öngyi*) phrase, which

is used by so many. To come up with a neat retort to this phrase, the other party, in a humorous tone, tries to give the following advice: *don't put an end to your days, grab instead some cucumber salad*. (in Hungarian: *ne legy ongyi, kapjal be nemi ubi salit parival es tojival*) – with almost all words abbreviated in a slangy way.

Seeing the answer, the receiving party lets the other party know with the rolling-laughing sign , that the hint reached its destination. This text fragment is also full of smiling signs. The following three types appear:   .

As it is illustrated in the three chat fragments, the symbols depend on the context, even though they have a meaning. Even if they are displayed without any text; during a given conversation one can deduce their meaning or hint only on the basis of the discussion that “*is going on*”.

All three conversations are spontaneous, the structure of the sentences indicate informality. The atmosphere between communicating parties is friendly, this makes possible for them to joke with each other. Joking, chaffing may be peculiar also in everyday speech, but in my opinion this feature becomes more accentuated while communicating via instant messaging programs. Given the fact that parties are not present face-to-face, they are even more open for this type of interaction. An important factor concerning such conversations is the fact that discussion parties need to pick up each other's mood, which is possible because they both are in a similar state-of-mind.

Conclusions

In my study I examined the dynamic emoticons of the Yahoo Messenger instant messaging program. Apart from checking the speciality literature, I undertook a research based on online questionnaire, in which I involved ten of my acquaintances. During the interviews I made enquiries about the habits related to virtual communication, paying special attention to those mood signs that often complete the discussions.

Using the instant messaging program as a starting point, I made the database of the animated emoticons, and apart from that I also edited into a smaller database those meanings associated to the symbols that rest on the individual opinions of the questioned persons. My research also confirms the view which states that emoticons are important complementary elements of chatting on the internet. Emoticons are very popular among users, mainly those ones which can be quickly, simply visualized by character combinations. The necessity for emoticons derives from the paralinguistic deficiencies of the written text. As compared to the text, the animated picture symbols are appropriate also for displaying such gestures and emotional manifestations, that otherwise would be hard to express in writing.

From the animated emoticons the most popular are those that express positive emotions. The text fragments, part of the present paper, also underline this fact; in these texts the emoticons are tools of the humour. The smileys always appear as part of the text, they accentuate and enforce the preceding thought units. Their mere use without text is not indicated, their meaning can be deduced from the context of the communication. Due to this fact, next to the standard meaning, some emoticons may also have additional meanings, but this can be concluded only by seeing the connections between image and text.

The frequency of mood signs in the written text may denote something about the person of the communicating party or about the quality of the relationship between chatting parties. Those who are more open for expressing their emotions use more often emoticons also during chatting on the messenger. If we take into account the relationship between communicating parties, one can observe that those who are friends in real life are more willing to use mood signs for completing their sentences than those who are in a formal relation. Primordially the frequency of the positive emotion expressing smileys shows if discussion parties have a more confidential relationship.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

1. For how long have you been using Yahoo Messenger?
2. Do you use instant messaging programs other than the Messenger?
3. In your opinion what Messenger features are more developed compared to those of other instant messaging programs?
4. Who do you talk to on Messenger?
5. How frequently do you use the program?
6. In what language do you communicate on Messenger?
7. Do you use hyphenated letters while you are writing?
8. What is the main reason for which you use the messenger?
9. Do you use smiling symbols when chatting on messenger?
10. Why do you use them?
11. Do you consider that in certain occasions the use of certain symbols is more expressive than writing?
12. Which are the symbols that you most frequently use?
13. Do you know the meaning of each smiling symbol?
14. In your opinion, do these symbols have an obvious meaning?
15. Which is the symbol that you avoid to use?
16. Do you choose the symbols or you rather type the appropriate character combination?
17. Do you use Audibles while chatting?
18. Compared to smiling symbols how do you find these?
19. Which is the Audible that you most frequently use?
20. To what extent do you take into account the object of the conversation when you choose to use Audibles?
21. Do you hold loud conversation on Yahoo Messenger?
22. At such occasions who are you talking to?
23. At the occurrence of loud conversations and chatting do you use web camera?
24. Do you change your behaviour when you turn on the web camera?
25. Have you had video conferences on Messenger?
26. Do you send different files, images to your chatting partners?
27. What do you send them mostly?
28. Is your behaviour more personal during an instant messaging conversation than during a personal encounter or when talking on the phone?

Table 1. The meanings of the mood signs

























Mood signs	The meanings of the mood signs
	sick, I am sick of it, being sick or just bad mood, I am sick, it stinks, I cannot breathe
	nerd, plodder machine, geek, you are very clever, I see well
	don't tell anyone, close your mouth, shut the fuck up!, shhht, shut up, secretive
	rolling eyes, they are again boring me with this, I'm so bored, he's surprised
	silly, crazy, crazy kid, drunk, someone out of his mind
	you are angry and you take out your tongue, offended, angry, someone who potters
	appetizing, slobbering, I do not know it, diamond tooth
	I'm sorry, it was unintentional, ashamed, blushing cheeks
	you're lying bro', Pinocchio, liar, lying person, someone who is about to lie
	hahaha, laughing, I cannot stop laughing, very funny
	flirty look, as Tiptupa is flirting with Csipike, wink
	you get on my nerves, you are angry, frown
	don't break my heart, disappointed, he/she does not love
	smirk, king
	little devil, devil, evil
	you are offended, griping while saying no, I do not know, I don't talk
	little saint, angel
	he is marvelled, shaking the head
	nailbiting, the little one is afraid, bites his nails
	mocking, not very well intentioned, you do some ploy, insinuating insult
	Kiss
	I am so cool, I can't bare it
	impatient, cautionary
	Proud

Table 2. The emoticons of Yahoo Messenger

Symbols	The expression of the symbol with character combination	The meaning of the symbol in English	The meaning of the symbol in Hungarian translation
	:)	Smiling	Mosolygós
	:-/	Confused	Zavaros
	:-o	Surprised	Meglepődött
	>:)	Devil	Ördög
	o:)	Angel	Angyal
	:-&	Sick	Beteg
	(:I	Yawn	Ásít
	@-)	Hypnotised	Hipnotizált
	:)]	On the phone	Telefonál
	:(	Sad	Szomorú
	: x	Love struck	Szerelembe esik
	x(	Angry	Mérges
	:((	Crying	Sír
	:-B	Nerd	Ideges
	:-\$	Don't tell anyone	Ne mondd másnak
	=P~	Drooling	Ostobaságokat beszél
	:^o	Liar	Hazug
	:-c	Call me	Hívj fel
	;)	Winking	Kacsint
	:”>	Blushing	Elpirul
	:>	Smug	Önelégült
	:))	Laughing	Nevető
	=;	Talk to the hand	Ne mondd!
	[-(	Not talking	Nem beszél
	:-?	Thinking	Gondolkodik
	:-w	Waiting	Várakozik
	~x(	At with end	Megáll az eszem
	:D	Big grin	Nagy vigyor
	:P	Tongue	Nyelves
	B-)	Cool	Merész
	:I	Straight face	Őszinte arc






























	I-I	Sleepy	Álmos
	:o)	Clown	Bohóc
	#-o	D'oh!	Jaj
	:-<	Sigh	Sóhajt
	:-h	Waving	Integet
	::)	Batting eyelashes	Csábosan pillogtat
	:-*	Kiss	Csók
	:-s	Worried	Nyugtalan
	/:)	Raised eyebrow	Felhúzott szemöldök
	8-I	Rolling eyes	Szemforgatás
	8-}	Silly	Ostoba
	=D>	Applause	Tapsol
	>:P	Phbbbt!	Kiöltött nyelv
	:-t	Time out	Lejárt az idő
	>:D<	Hug	Átkarol
	=((	Broken heart	Összetört szív
	#:-S	Whew	Hú, túl vagyok ezen is
	=))	Rolling the floor laughing	Fetrengve nevető
	L-)	Loser	Vesztes
	<:-P	Party	Buli
	:-SS	Nailbiting	Körmét rágó
	<:)	Cowboy	Marhapásztor
	8->	Day dreaming	Ábrándozó

Table 3. The emoticons of Windows Live Messenger (msn)

Symbol	The expression of the symbol with character combination	The meaning of the symbol
	:)	smiling face
	:D	face with big smile
	:)	Leering face
	:-o	surprized face
	: P	face showing tongue
	(H)	face smiling in swelter
	:@	angry face




	:S	embarrassed face
	:\$	shy face
	:(	sad face
	:‘(	crying face
	:I	disappointed face
	(A)	angel head
	8oI	snarling face
	8-I	Crazy face
	+o(	ill face
	:-#	secretive face
	:-*	whispering faces
	(6)	devil head
	^o)	ironic face
	(L)	red heart
	(U)	broken heart
	(M)	messenger
	(@)	cat head
	(&)	dog head
	(Sh)	snail
	(bah)	black sheep
	(S)	sleeping half moon
	(*)	star
	(#)	sun
	(R)	rainbow
	({)	left hug
	(})	right hug
	(K)	red lips
	(F)	red rose
	(W)	faded rose
	(O)	clock

Table 4. The socio-demographical profile of the interviewed

Informants	Gender	Age at the time of research	Year of birth	Place of birth	Actual residency	Highest level of education	Occupation at the time of research	Current occupation	How often do they use Yahoo Messenger?
B.Sz.	man	20	1986	Miskolc, Hungary	Budapest	high school	musician	musician	1 hour/day
B.L.	man	22	1984	Miercurea Nirajului	Carei	university degree	master studies	teacher	1 hour/week
G.E.	woman	23	1983	Miercurea Ciuc	Miercurea Ciuc	master studies	master studies	topographer	a few hours/day
H.T.	man	23	1983	Miercurea Ciuc	Cluj Napoca	university degree	interpreter	help desk team leader	all day
K.S.	woman	23	1983	Miercurea Ciuc	Greece/Miercurea Ciuc	master studies	data analyst/master studies	animation	all day
K.L.	man	24	1982	Miercurea Ciuc	Miercurea Ciuc	university degree	unemployed	economist	4-5 hours/day
V.P.	woman	24	1982	Satu Mare	Carei	university degree	student	special education teacher	all day
B.E.	man	25	1981	Miercurea Ciuc	Miercurea Ciuc	vocational/specialized school	transporter	sales agent	1-4 hours/day
G.O.	man	27	1979	Miercurea Ciuc	Miercurea Ciuc	high school	radio presenter/student	radio presenter	8-10 hours/day
B.B.	man	28	1978	Miercurea Ciuc	Miercurea Ciuc	master studies	biologist	biologist	3 hours/day