

# Semiotic resources in everyday communication

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## Abstract

When we talk about everyday communication, our default perspective is restricted to words or grammar. If we look at textbooks and grammar books, they imply a view of communication as a system of fixed rules and stable conventions. However, everyday communication transcends words. It involves diverse semiotic resources. To appreciate this perspective, an analysis of online and offline communicative practices of ten Japanese and non-Japanese residents of Niigata City was carried out. Findings suggest that as communicators, we are sign-makers who can shape, re-shape, orchestrate and organize semiotic resources to reflect our communicative interests. We also have the agency to select, organize, modify and appropriate resources to suit various communicative goals. Over-all, the results imply a conceptual departure from conventional notions of communication which couched us in predefined signs within a stable and fixed system of choices.

**Key words** : semiotic resources, communication

## 1. Introduction

When we talk about everyday communication, our default perspective is restricted to words or grammar. If we look at textbooks and grammar books, they imply a view of communication as a system of fixed rules and stable conventions. However, everyday communication, in both offline and online channels, is unstable, fluid, conflictual and unexpected. Rules are blurred, scripts are obscured. The default perspective is an obstacle to adequately understand and account for the complexities of communication as it is now. Communication, in fact, but which we fail to recognize as a given, transcends words (Kress, 2010; Canagarajah, 2013). It involves diverse semiotic resources. Semiotic resources are “the actions, materials and artifacts we use for communicative purposes, whether produced physiologically - for example, with our vocal apparatus, the muscles we use to make facial expressions and gestures - or technologically - for example, with pen and ink, or computer hardware and software - together with the ways in which these resources can be organized” (van Leeuwen, 2004, p. 285). Setting out a view of communication within the purview of semiotic resources is what this paper is about.

## 2. Methodology

To appreciate a more expanded and informed view of communication, I carry out an

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analysis of online and offline everyday communicative practices of ten different participants, whose names herein are kept in pseudonyms, from diverse sociocultural backgrounds. These interlocutors are Japanese and non-Japanese residents of Niigata City, the capital city of Niigata Prefecture, Japan.

Due to space constraints, I limit my discussion and analysis to four excerpts of online conversations, and an interview excerpt. Online conversations were culled from a total of 140 sets of online chats; each set contains six or more screenshots of a single conversation from various instant messaging (IM) apps. The interview excerpt was obtained from ten interview transcripts. Such data were gathered over a two-month period. Data analysis was conducted via integrated conversational analysis (CA) and pragmatics approach (Canagarajah, 2013). In doing integrated CA and pragmatic procedures, a two-level approach was used. On the first level, I single-handedly analyzed data. My preliminary analyses went through the second level, in which two readers critiqued and refined them. The critiquing and refinement of my analysis was not top-down, linear and static. It is characterized by a multiple iterative process. Over formal and casual meetings, I and my readers reviewed the online chats and interview transcripts, then I refined the analysis, re-read and refined again, until stable sets of analysis were achieved. At this point, the data analysis procedure shifts to the participants, a procedure more known as member checking. I took the interpretations and findings back to the participants by email. Only excerpts were given; in other words, selected parts where the interpretations and findings specifically involved them. I asked the participants to read and comment on the excerpts, which were sent to them as email attachments.

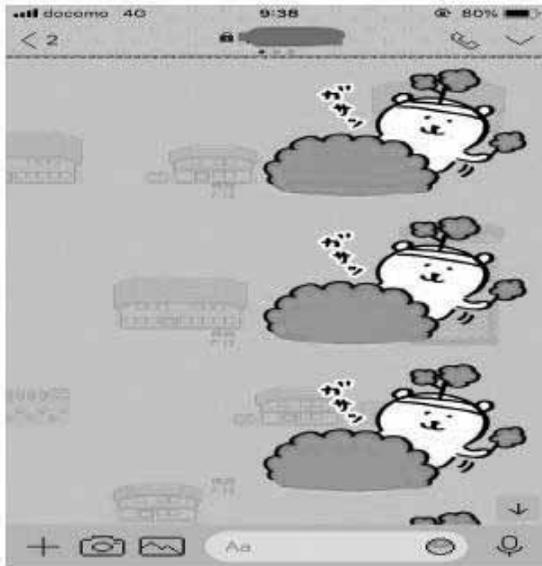
### 3. Findings

A semiotic resource commonly used by the participants in online chats is the sticker. To appreciate the sticker as a semiotic resource, let us take a look at Excerpt A below, which is a LINE app conversation between Star and her male best friend. Conversing in Japanese, both Star and her best friend are university students who belong to the same class. The topic of their conversation was about an upcoming examination. Part of preparing for the exam was to compare and contrast examination papers of previous years, and identify which questions are most likely to re-surface.

Excerpt A: LINE exchange between Star and her male best friend



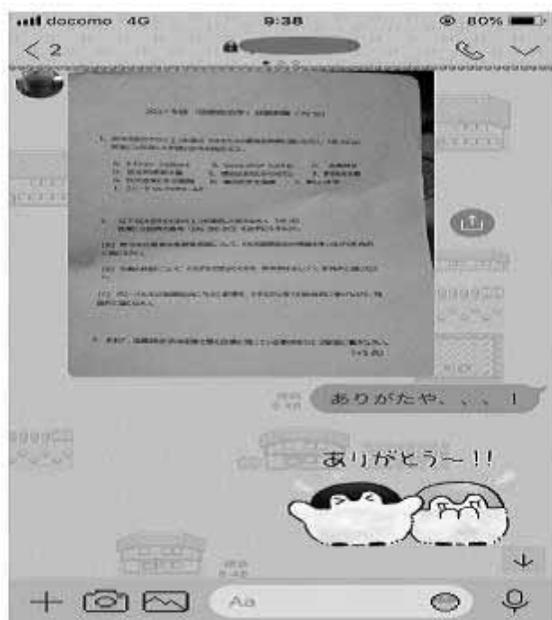
- 1 I got last year's test about international politics.
- 2 If you want, you have to really beg.
- 3 When I checked it out, I didn't see any difference.
- 4 I want!
- 5 (sticker)
- 6 (sticker)



- 7 (sticker)
- 8 (sticker)
- 9 (sticker)



10 (sticker)



11 (photograph)

12 Thank you!

13 (sticker) Thank you!

Star’s male best friend informed that he had obtained a copy of an examination paper given the previous year. It was followed with a friendly banter, as he told Star that she had to beg for it. On line 4, Star replied with a Japanese sentence which, in English, means “I want!” She followed it with a LINE sticker, which is an animated character whose hand is raised with a stick adorned with green bush (lines 5 to 9). This is an instance of what I call as *semiotic self-mirroring*, adapting the term “mirroring” from psychology studies. I define semiotic self-mirroring as a conscious dispatch of animated or talking images and other visual resources that mimic one’s thoughts. In the case of Star, she sent a LINE character that exactly

impersonates her desire to obtain the examination copy. However, unlike in psychology where mirroring is viewed as a subconscious act, there is a level of conscious awareness in semiotic self-mirroring. Star clarified, during the member check process, that there is a range of LINE stickers to choose from. She made a conscious decision to select and send a specific LINE sticker, among other varieties of stickers, that best reflects her communicative intentions. Her agency, in this case, is enabled by technological “affordances” - a term I shall deal specifically in the subsequent paragraphs. The affordances of sticker variety that LINE provides seem to ‘empower’ Star to make conscious choices.

The act of mirroring is said to be common in face-to-face communication, in which users imitate their interlocutor’s language, body gesture, facial expressions, and so forth for a number of communicative reasons. Star’s tendency for semiotic self-mirroring suggests to us that mirroring can also be evident in online chats. While users cannot convey feelings and thoughts through facial expressions and gestures to their interlocutors in online chats, semiotic self-mirroring serves as a resourceful alternative. Through semiotic self-mirroring, users are able to humanize their feelings, thoughts or intentions in online chats.

We can also see in this conversation that Star made a strategic choice of one semiotic resource over the other. When asked if she wanted to have a copy of a previous examination paper, Star responded with merely words (line 4). Within a minute, she sent another message (line 5), this time a LINE sticker that is a combination of image (character) and words (ガサッ = *gasa* in Romaji, which means a rustling sound made when bushes or leaves are moved). Perhaps, she thought that written text alone is not adequate enough to persuade her best friend.

It appears also that she was firm on her strategic choice of a LINE sticker. She sent it five times in succession (lines 5 to 9) within the next two minutes, which gives a sign of her persistence to articulate what she wanted. She could have opted for repeatedly sending sentences alone. But, as I have mentioned, she might have felt, at the time of the conversation, that both images and words would be more persuasive than plain text only.

The repetitive transmission of the same LINE sticker brings us to Hutchby’s (2001) concept of “affordance” which is broadly defined as the possible uses of technologies, thereby suggesting how users may interact with technology. One of the affordances that IM apps offer, in comparison with paid text messaging services, is their free-of-charge and seamless replayability of characters and texts under real-time conditions. Star creatively exploits such affordance by sending the same LINE character as freely as she could in order to accomplish her purpose of procuring a copy of previous examination paper. Without such affordance, sending stickers successively may not be possible, and Star might have to find other ways to persuade her best friend, if such is the case. In this regard, we can see what uses IM apps

invite and facilitate, what they lend themselves to, and what they can do well.

The online conversation above had a successful uptake of meanings. After successively sending the same sticker, Star's best friend replied with a sticker too. The LINE sticker (line 12) is a character covering her eyes, suggesting that he, again in a friendly banter, was ignoring Star's plea. Eventually, Star's best friend sent a photograph of last year's exam paper (line 13). From this angle, Star was successful in accomplishing her goal. She re/constructed meanings by deploying two semiotic resources. The first relies on words that conveyed a less convincing plea while the second is an image-word combination. Her choice of the latter as a resource turned out to be more strategic and forceful.

There is another interesting point I would like to make. On line 14, Star replied by saying "Thank you!" in Japanese sentence. Here she resorted back to plain words after receiving a copy of the exam. She did not reply anymore using LINE stickers. It seems for her that there was no point anymore to be persuasive. She got what she wanted. We can surmise here that the participant is communicatively astute. She has the ability to assess the conversation and turn this to her advantage. From this perspective, semiotic resources are not pre-givens and fixed. IM apps like LINE offer a myriad of resources such as ready-made stickers or emojis. Though they are easily available at an instant click, they can be reconstituted by users anytime in the conversation. Like Star, users know very well what semiotic resources to use, when and where to use, and for what purpose.

Excerpt B is a group chat between *Moon*, a female Chinese entrepreneur, and her two Chinese female friends who also live in Niigata City. The conversation is predicated on Moon's personal trip to Beijing, China. Upon her return to Niigata, she told her two friends, through WeChat app, what Beijing looked like when she went there.

## Excerpt B: WeChat exchange between Moon and her friends

2017/10/01 9:26

1 (emojis) Good morning!  
(icon)

2 (picture)

3 Look at the big smog in Beijing (emoji)

4 Last night, I chatted with my friends until 3 o' clock in the morning, and I was overwhelmed.

5 (name withheld) Are you back to Beijing?

6 (emojis)

2017/10/01 9:28

7 (emojis) Look at our green mountains and waters

Line 1, though short, is a mixture of semiotic resources which, if we remove one of them, meanings can alter drastically. The Chinese text (English translation: “Good morning”) was surrounded by two emojis: the first was a face with a hand over mouth and the second was a sun. Moon could have simply typed the Chinese text without these emojis. By adding emojis, a whole layer of meaning was added.

Taking together other semiotic resources in the same line, the prefatory emoji seems to suggest a morning yawn. It was consecutively typed three times, suggesting that it was not just a simple yawn, but perhaps a deep one. As a rhetorical device, emojis, like words, can be repeatedly used to emphasize meanings. The conversation took place at 9:26 in the morning. Moon was at her home in Niigata City, and it might have been sunny on that day, as the second emoji indicates, when she woke up. She might wish to express that she had just risen from a restful, deep sleep after a long trip to Beijing. It could also mean, on one hand, that she was feeling very sleepy. At any rate, without those two emojis, Moon could not express more nuanced feelings.

It is instructive to note that emojis have “standard” definitions. *Emojipedia* (cf. <https://>

emojipedia.org) is the reference website that contains an inventory of emojis and documents its standard meanings. It is designed to help users know the “official meaning” of any emoji (Hakami, 2017). According to *Emojipedia*, the standard meaning of the emoji on line 1 is concealed laughter. For a number of my Chinese friends who use WeChat day-to-day, this emoji also denotes a suppressed chuckle. But as we have seen in the online chat above, Moon appeared to defy this standard meaning to signify another thing. She appropriated the meaning in her own terms by mixing it with other semiotic resources. Even in online communication, there is “semiodiversity” (Halliday, 2007). There are no fixed meanings. It is true that there are ‘standard’ semiotic resources, but the boundaries of which can be transgressed by users.

The ability to appropriate standard meanings may come naturally or intuitively for users. Hakami (2017) notes that many users have no idea about the “official meaning” of each emoji they use. From this perspective, it is considered an ordinary matter for users to assign their own meanings to emojis, and use their own interpretive processes, without conscious knowledge of, or reference to, standard meanings. However, Hakami’s (2017) claim may not be true for Moon. In a follow-up conversation, Moon remarked that she knows the official meanings of some commonly-used emojis, but she prefers to use them in her own indexical terms.

But it is not all the times Moon transgressed standards. As the conversation continues, Moon sent a photograph she took in Beijing (line 2), which shows an aerial view of the city covered with smog. She has a special affinity to the city. During the member check process, she added that Beijing is a special place to her as this is where she was born and raised at. She also said that her travel to Beijing was a homecoming trip for her. Her relationship with the city, which is her birthplace and home, is the reason why she felt strongly about its worsening environmental conditions. On line 3, she told her friends to pay attention to the photograph, and used a frowning face emoji at the end of the text to index sadness over the situation. In standard usage, this emoji signifies a feeling of sadness, annoyance or disapproval. The bottom line here is that users like Moon can shuttle semiotic resources back and forth, threading ways through non-standard and standard usages and meanings. Communicative paths are not linear. While users know how to follow standard conventions, they also bring in their own norms.

Another image-based semiotic resource that participants mostly used is the photograph. Above, we have seen how Moon used the photograph as a semiotic resource. The photograph of Beijing covered with smog (line 2) furnished evidence to her two friends that the condition is real and worse. The message would not have been clearer or impactful if she sent plain words or sentences. According to Moon, she took the photo by herself, much like a real-time documentation of her life events. By sending a self-taken photograph to her friends, she was

also sending the message that she was personally immersed in the situation. In other words, the problem was very personal to her. Her friends replied to this in several ways: first, one of her friends sent a grinning face emoji (line 6) to suggest, perhaps, that it was a kind of smile that is a result of displeasure; and second, another friend replied with a sarcastic remark, accompanied with an emoji that indicates a surprise (line 7). From these responses, we can see that there was a successful uptake of meanings, even though Moon's sentiments were received in a less sympathetic way. Nevertheless, the photograph was deployed as a meaning-making resource, reflected her personal interest, and served as the nucleus of the whole conversation.

Let us pursue further the photograph as a semiotic resource. Excerpt C is a LINE conversation between Seiro, an American teacher, and his online female pen pal. The subject matter of the chat was his pen pal's trip to Hawaii. According to Seiro, his pen pal is a hugely wide traveler, and her trips are often the topic of their online conversations.

Excerpt C: LINE exchange between Seiro and his female pen pal



1 (sticker)

2 (photo)

3 (photo)

4

5 (name withheld), how are you?



6 (sticker)

7 Always nice pictures sent. Thank you!

8 How long are you there? Hawaii is nice, isn't?

9 A picture of the view is good, but where is (name withheld)?

10 Have fun!

11 (photo)



12 I always have a nice smile.  
13 Hawaiian clothes suit you.

14 (photo)

15 (photo)

On lines 2-3, Seiro's pen pal sent photographs with a view of the sea or ocean. On line 4, she told Seiro that those pictures were taken in Hawaii. On line 9, Seiro replied that the panoramic photographs were good, but he also asked to send photographs with her in them. On the subsequent lines, she complied to the indirect request. A couple of selfie photographs were first sent, then photographs of hibiscus flowers she found on site. Only a few words came from her, but a range of meanings was still evident even with the dominance of images.

The interaction shows the kind of social distance that Seiro and his pen pal have. Though they have not seen each other personally, both seem to share a personal connection with each other. Because she was willing to share photographs that are rather private, on Seiro's indirect request, the communication between the two might be characterized with familiarity. The photographs represented a particular social relation between the viewer (*Seiro*) and producer (*Seiro's pen pal*). Furthermore, the composition and organization of the photographs are also meaningful. Seiro's pen pal forwarded pictures of recurring images: sea/ocean, trees, flowers and herself. The self is foregrounded in some of the pictures. When aligned together, they appear to communicate human and natural beauty. The meanings brought about by such configuration were realized in a successful way. Seiro appreciated her beauty as she remarked in line 18, "(*pen pal's name withheld*)! Always beautiful!" (English translation).

What we can also learn from the above conversation is that the photograph as a semiotic resource has the capacity to form complexes of meanings which internally cohere with each other, and externally with the context in and for which they are produced (Liu, 2013; Kress

& van Leeuwen, 1996). The composition, positioning and representation of the photographs convey meanings. What is to be foregrounded? What is to be backgrounded? What specific images would one frame? How about the size and scale? Where does one position her/himself? These are questions that users deliberately consider when using photographs. Meanings that photographs communicate in online chats are not arbitrary. They are highly organized, deliberate and purposeful.

When visual semiotic resources such as photographs are altered, what happens to the meaning-making process? We address this query by examining the following Facebook Messenger group chat among Belle de Jour, a Filipino who works as a staff in a Japanese company, and her former college classmates. In mixed Filipino and English language, the group members discussed updates about their personal lives. The conversation is characterized with constant bantering, a tone which is typical in a “barkada” - a Filipino slang term which means a tightly knit circle of friends.

Excerpt D: Facebook Messenger chat between Belle de Jour and her college friends

	<p>1 I don't want to mention names as someone might take a screenshot of it haha!</p> <p>2 Haha All of you have not changed! Hahahahaha</p> <p>3 Hahaha. My face looks slightly like a monkey, but hers is becoming like one. Haha</p> <p>4 Wahahaha</p> <p>5 (name withheld) is mean oh (emoji)</p> <p>6 Send me picture of view where you are now haha</p> <p>7 As if we are together</p>
	<p>8 She has always been like that ever since. Just continue your legacy ahaha</p> <p>9 (emojis)</p> <p>10 Hey I want your pictures</p> <p>11 (picture)</p>



- 12 Mine is this haha
- 13 I'm about to take a bath
- 14 Have you all taken a bath there?
- 15 Oh gosh, you're naked again  
hahaha
- 16 (picture)
- 17 Ready to sleep already! Haha
- 18 Hahaha
- 19 Chun Liiiiii
- 20 Is it cold there, (name withheld)?
- 21 Hahah. I'm fascinated with these  
gimmicks of FB Messenger.
- 22 No, it's getting warm actually
- 23 (picture)

On lines 1-5, Belle de Jour and two other members of the group chat (whom Belle de Jour identifies in pseudonyms as *Michelle* and *Shirley*) bantered with each other. Michelle was poking fun at a common female friend by comparing the latter's face to a 'monkey'. On line 8, Belle de Jour said in jest that Michelle was mean, and that her meanness is a "legacy" she has left in the group. In the midst of bantering, Shirley asked selfie pictures from all the group members (lines 6). Michelle sent a photograph of her, which she took as she was about to take a bath (line 11). Belle de Jour chuckled at Michelle's photo, and implied that it was not the first time for Michelle to send a 'naked' photo of her. On line 13, Belle de Jour sent a selfie of her lying on bed. The chat happened at around 20:39 (Japan time), and Belle de Jour was about to sleep. By comparison, it was a photograph different from Michelle's. Belle de Jour altered her

selfie with virtual images, a pair of pink hair buns, as if they are her 'real' hairstyle. On line 19, Michelle reacted to the photograph by calling Belle de Jour 'Chun-Li' which is a reference to the popular character from the video game series, Street Fighter. Chun-li is a female street fighter who is known for her hair buns made of silk brocade and ribbons. Belle de Jour's photograph alteration is made possible through 'filters', one of the features of Facebook Messenger. Filters are three-dimensional stickers, frames and face masks, allowing users to personalize photos and videos on 'live' camera mode. Users can see what they look like in the photo or video before sending it. In this case, Belle de Jour chose a specific face mask (a Chun-Li hair bun sticker) that laid top on her face. Using filters too, Michelle replied with a one-second video of her donning virtual bunny ears (line 23).

I call this deliberate alteration of photographs a *semiotic augmentation* which, adopting the concept of "augmented reality" in computer science, is the superimposition of virtual images on a user's view of the real world which, in effect, generates a more complex composite view. The photographs of Belle de Jour and Michelle were semiotically augmented with virtual face masks like hair buns and bunny ears. On surface, face masks and other types of filters appear frivolous to be considered serious points of analysis. However, these resources significantly contribute to meaning-making processes when employed in conversations. They offer users perceptually enriched experiences or representations. Belle de Jour sent a filtered selfie (line 16), which is a visually enhanced representation of herself. In a follow-up conversation, she said that she chose 'Chun-Li hair buns' because she wanted to look cute. Belle de Jour's filtered photograph, alongside her intention to have an attractive appearance, invited an enthusiastic response from Michelle who, in turn, sent a filtered video of herself (line 23). Michelle's facial expression in the short video clip suggests feelings of eagerness and zest. By comparison, this video was different, in terms of what was foregrounded and backgrounded, from her unfiltered selfie on line 11. In that selfie, her face was not in close-up view. It seems from this that Belle de Jour's semiotic augmentation motivated Michelle to modify how she represents herself - from a 'regular' (unfiltered) photograph in which members of the group chat are unable to 'see' her feelings to a filtered close-up video which conveys a more explicit jovial-like personality. In such exchange, we see how semiotic augmentations enabled both users to make meanings more visually and affectively nuanced.

Furthermore, through semiotic augmentations, users are able to tap the faculty of imagination. On lines 6-7, Michelle asked the members of the group chat to send their pictures online "para kunwari magkakasama tayo" (English translation: "as if we are together"). She seems to suggest here that sending self-taken pictures "where they are now" exudes a make-believe world in which they are together even though the reality is that they are distant apart by time, space and place. What followed was a lively exchange of self-taken pictures that were either unfiltered or augmented. Here, there is both the recognition of imagination, and the performance of imagination. Michelle called for, and acknowledged, the unreal, that

is, the members of the group chat are physically and spatially together. After a recognition of the unreal comes the semiotic performance of capturing, altering, sending and reacting to photographs. The primary message here is that through semiotic augmentation, users are able to use their imagination to embody possibilities other than the actual, to embody a time other than present, and to embody themselves other than their own. We can also see the role that imagination plays in communication. Imagination is the user's visualization of possibilities when processing complex thoughts and ideas, which are then translated into various semiotic resources, and thereby enabling the process of meaning attribution.

Apart from images, non-verbal cues as semiotic resources in offline communication also emerged from data. Belle de Jour reported during the interview about the use of nonverbal cues in communicating with Japanese speakers.

BELLE DE JOUR: So I can say that the proficiency in different languages ... I don't think it's just about the language that we are speaking. It's more of communicating with them as well in nonverbal ways... Because that's the most difficult part of communicating here in Japan, especially in Niigata, because they are still, I can say traditional... So here I think ... it's better to learn, to communicate with them non-verbally too.

In order to appreciate the statement above, it is important to know where the participant is coming from. Belle de Jour is a Filipino who works in a Japanese manufacturing company in Niigata City. One of her main duties is to serve as a liaison between the company and their offices located in the Philippines, Indonesia and China. To do this, she shuttles between Japanese and English. Her statement above is framed within her day-to-day work at this company, where she observes the verbal and non-verbal resources Japanese employees use to communicate with her, and with each other. Belle de Jour added that some examples of non-verbal resources that she has commonly observed in her workplace are smiling, head nodding and silences.

On the salience of silence in her workplace context, she added, "That's why I am saying it's more of a nonverbal communication, sometimes, you won't know that they are angry with you. You just have to figure it out yourself." During the member check process, Belle de Jour remarked that she does not intend to sound racist by saying that the Japanese manner of interaction is traditional, nor generalize the ways Japanese people communicate with foreign workers, but to express what to her are differences in communication styles based on personal experiences.

The interview remarks above suggest tendencies to assume uniformity of cultures and meanings. This, of course, is open to contention. There are studies (e.g., Yamada, 1997) which confirm Belle de Jour's personal observations. Nevertheless, a nonverbal resource such

as silence is always ambivalent and multifaceted (Nakane, 2007). Belle de Jour attributed silence to anger. But meanings vary on micro-levels. We have to be aware, on one hand, that descriptions of “unique” Japanese ways of communicating are not objective and fixed. In intercultural communication studies, the Japanese people have always been exoticized; the truth is, however, that they are hardly unique. Any cultural description is partial and partisan (Canagarajah, 2006). The analyst’s own frame of reference, influenced by her/his cultural backgrounds, is treated as a foil in relation to the other culture. The frame of reference is usually premised on cultural stereotypes. Cultures, however, are fluid. Nonverbal cues such as head nodding and silences are not biologically innate to Japanese speakers.

While non-verbal cues pose as communication problems to Belle de Jour, it cannot be denied that they carry propositional meanings in her workplace. Her acknowledgment that the silence of her Japanese colleagues possibly signifies anger makes this nonverbal cue a resource for meaning-making. She knew that there was a meaning; at this point, though, due to lack of contextual information, we cannot arrive at informed interpretations. Nonetheless, it is important to bear in mind that nonverbal cues do not stand alone. Users provide nonverbal cues that suggest a fit between utterances and contextual spaces in which they become meaningful.

A number of insights about how people communicate can be learned from the results of the present study. From Star, we learn that users have the ability to move from one resource to another. The shuttling back and forth of resources depends on the goals and interests of the users. They know what resources to use, when and where to use, and for what purpose. Users also engage in semiotic self-mirroring, in which they send semiotic resources that mimic their own thoughts and feelings. Also, the use of semiotic resources depends on technological affordances. What users can or cannot do in online chats is, at times, contingent on what IM apps offer to users. From Moon, we learn that users have the capacity to appropriate semiotic resources to their advantage. This creative capacity is called “resemiotization” (Kress, 2003; Iedema, 2003). Emojis, for instance, have standard definitions, but users can defy the standard to their own communicative advantage, a way of signifying their ownership of resources and meanings. They can re-define resources with established meanings, and still gain uptake from their interlocutors. As meaning-makers, users know as well how to utilize both ‘standard’ and ‘non-standard’ resources, judiciously mixing them to index new meanings. There are many resources latent in online environments. Users manipulate the affordances that these resources offer. From Seiro, we learn that semiotic resources are not motiveless. They are indicative of social relationships. They are composed and positioned to represent or convey meanings. This shows that users are purposeful in relation to the resources around them. Finally, from Belle de Jour, we learn that users can involve themselves on semiotic augmentations by means of altering photographs and videos through filters. Such augmentations, which are outcomes of imagination, enable meanings to be more sensory and perceptual. In addition, we learn from Belle de Jour that semiotic resources, such as non-verbal cues, may be conceived as cultural.

While meaningful, they can reinforce cultural stereotypes that limit or undermine interpretive universes. When stereotypes are invoked, subtly or pronouncedly, the meaning-making potentials of a semiotic resource is restricted. Thus, we have to be cautious about attributing non-verbal cues to specific cultures.

#### 4. Conclusion

The findings above point to the fact that communication encompasses diverse semiotic resources. Words are only one semiotic resource among many, such as symbols, icons and images. These resources work together for meaning. Furthermore, semiotic resources are embedded in a social and physical environment, and aligned with various contextual features. The findings likewise suggest that as communicators, we are sign-makers who can shape, re-shape, orchestrate and organize semiotic resources to reflect our communicative interests. We also have the agency to select, organize, modify and appropriate resources to suit various communicative goals. The findings also imply a departure from conventional notions of grammar which couched us within predefined signs within a relatively stable and fixed system of choices.

What does this mean to language teachers? One of the main types of data analyzed in this study are online chats. Because online chats often take place in informal and private contexts, they are not valued by formal institutions of learning and teaching (Barton & Lee, 2013). However, the participants' online chats are characterized with creativity, hybridity and multimodality. Merchant (2001) argues that such characteristics are features of our diverse social world. Participating in online chat is, therefore, one of the many ways to develop communicative skills required to participate in the contemporary social order. In this sense, there is a need to develop a pedagogy "where the online is central and it is not brought in just to boost existing practices" (Barton & Lee, 2013, p. 163). To develop a pedagogy where the online is central makes good sense especially if we realize that what we consider to be specific to online communication have found their way to offline contexts, suggesting that the offline-online dichotomy we have so believed is blurred (Barton & Lee, 2013).

Too often we teach students as if we communicate through speech only. Block (2014) calls this attitude as a "lingual bias" (p. 56) which is a tendency to conceive communication in terms of its linguistics (morphology, syntax, phonology, lexis). The participants have shown us that communication entails a deployment, and alignment of, various semiotic resources. As such, an important step to take as teachers is to recognize the role of semiotic resources in communication, and to develop ways for students to learn how to exploit various meaning-making resources.

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