

Say What Again? (笑): The Interface Constraint and the Representation of Laughter in Japanese Twitter Discourse

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INTRODUCTION

• Bennett (2012) – The Formality Constraint

In 2012, I found that a formality-based approach to analyzing the way Japanese users textually represented laughter on Twitter could reveal interactional moves across synchronous exchanges of Tweets. I now call this framework the Formality Constraint, under which the variation in textual representations of laughter were interpreted as follows:

Kanji variant: (笑) - formal, signaling warm/friendly keying and

Romaji variant: w - informal, signaling a playful keying

Through these, I found that the users I examined could build rapport and shift alignment with other users.

• 2015 Reanalysis – The Interface Constraint

In my first analysis, I examined a series of interactions between a public user saywhat327 and some of his public followers under this framework. However, one interaction I extracted from his Twitter page demonstrated how constraints of the interface through which saywhat327 composed his Tweets influenced his use of (笑) and w: the autocorrect of w into Japanese characters.

Thus, in this study, I reanalyze that interaction under what I call the **Interface Constraint**, acknowledging the effect of interface-imposed limitations such as autocorrect and their impact on interactional moves achieved in synchronous digital discourse.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A key concept in understanding synchronous digital discourse is indeed that it is *both* speech and writing simultaneously, as shown by Baron (2011; c.f. Baron, 2010), where different affordances and constraints associated with oral and literate strategies in discourse can impact the interactional nature of digitally-mediated exchanges in different ways. Werry (1996: 57) addresses this issue, claiming that because synchronous chat exchanges are inherently orthographic *and* instantaneous transmissions, users have developed “a complex set of orthographic strategies designed to compensate for the lack of intonation and paralinguistic cues that interactive written discourse imposes” on participants. Given that lack of sound is a constraint of literate discourse strategies, he finds that users employ stylistic variations in punctuation, capitalization, and nonstandard spellings in order to convey meaning above the semantic level of the utterance itself. In turn, Werry states that these cues can be used to achieve different interactional goals such as shifting in and out of speech registers. Though he did not specifically classify these stylistic variations as digital equivalents to Gumperz’ notion of contextualization cues in spoken conversation, I offer that they are exactly that—linguistic tokens by which we signal and interpret the meaning of a digital utterance.

Gumperz (1982) offers that participants interpret contextualization cues based on the sociocultural knowledge they bring to an interaction. In other words, they make sense of what is said based on prior spoken interactions in which they have previously encountered the cue and the tones they signal. These tones that exhibit meaning above the semantic level are what Goffman (1981) calls linguistic ‘keyings’ that signal to other participants not to take what is being said for its literal meaning. When we relate this to the textual nature of the digital realm wherein Japanese users make sense of textual representations of laughter based on previous contexts in which they have encountered them, Becker’s (1995) concept of prior text comes into play as users fit old orthographic symbols into new digital contexts. Specifically, the contexts in which Japanese users have encountered the *kanji* and *romaji* scripts (i.e. texts used for one’s out-group versus in-group) influence the associations they make between (笑) and w as contextualization cues in the digital realm, providing users a basis upon which they can link the first variant with conveying formality and the second with expressing a casual tone. This is what I have called the Formality Constraint, where the use of one of the two variants depends on prior associations of *kanji* with formality and distance, and *romaji* with informality and closeness.

Yet, one crucial difference between digital discourse and traditional conceptions of speech and writing is that users’ utterances in the digital realm are mediated through a device that has its own technological limitations constraining the visual representation and transmission of discourse. Herring (2007) calls these limitations ‘medium facets.’ She offers that in our analysis of computer-mediated discourse, it is important to include contextualizing attributes that do not originate from user-based strategy (i.e. only producing 160 characters per message) and are instead features of the “hardware, software, and interfaces of users’ computers” (11) that impact how utterances are transmitted online such as size of message buffer, channels of communication, and message filtering. While mandatory auto-correct features are not included among Herring’s list of medium facets, I offer that because it is an aspect of the device interface that imposes obligatory and instantaneous stylistic changes on the representation of users’ utterances in digital discourse it should be added as a facet. Similar to Tannen’s (2013) observation of how a malfunction in electronic equipment (i.e. a dead mobile phone battery) could lead to users unintentionally signaling lack of enthusiasm in a text messaging exchange, I offer that because digital contextualization cues can signal pragmatic meaning based on how they *look*, such as the script in which they are produced (*kanji* versus *romaji*), a medium facet such as mandatory auto-correct that disallows the textual realization of *romaji* on a Japanese smartphone could lead to the unavoidable signaling of formality in synchronous Japanese digital discourse. In other words, interpretations of digital contextualization cues can be informed not only by sociocultural knowledge but also by the interface-driven limitations constraining how they are stylistically realized in the discourse.

PARTICIPANTS: SAYWHAT327 AND MATSURI232

saywhat327

- Male, college student attending major university in Tokyo
- Most of Tweets pertain to music, recording industry (i.e. rock shows, instrument specs)
- On average, Tweets approximately 3-4x/day in Tokyo dialect of Japanese
- Uses formal and informal registers
- Uses (笑) and w to textually represent laughter
- Android user; accesses Twitter via proxy clients twicea and Janetter
- twicea – **Android app** that allows users to access Twitter using a ‘skin’
- Janetter – online social media client designed for **PC use**; facilitates Twitter access

matsuri232

- Female, college student attending same university as saywhat327
- This is presumably how they know each other in real life
- On average, Tweets 1x/day in Tokyo dialect of Japanese
- Uses formal and informal registers
- Uses (笑), 笑, and w to textually represent laughter
- Accesses Twitter through Keitai Web (using Twitter on a smartphone web browser)
- Not indicative of which kind of smartphone interface she uses

ANALYSIS OF SAYWHAT327 UNDER THE FORMALITY AND INTERFACE CONSTRAINTS

Analysis 1: Comparing (笑) with w under the Formality Constraint

Here, matsuri232 Tweets a public request to her followers using informal Japanese to ask if one of them might be willing to check and see if she locked the front door to her home after leaving for school in the morning. Because saywhat327 is among her group of followers, he is included in the audience to which matsuri232 issues her request. When saywhat327 responds to her request, her previously asynchronous post gets reframed as the beginning of a synchronous 1:1 exchange.

In line 1, matsuri232 positions her followers as members of her in-group by using informal register and downplays the face-threatening quality of her request in using 笑 as a contextualization cue to key her utterance as friendly and respectful. In using the *kanji* symbol without parentheses, matsuri232 indicates a level of formality that is less rigid than (笑) yet more deferential than the casual w. This conveys a tone of friendliness while acknowledging the ritualistic formalities of issuing requests in Japanese. saywhat327, a member of her group of followers, responds to her request in line 2 using the formal variant (笑) with informal Japanese: *Okay-* (笑), aligning himself with matsuri232 as a member of her in-group in his use of the informal register. His use of the formal (笑), however, maintains distance between himself and matsuri232, since formality is associated with out-group relations in Japanese. Considering the fact that he could have mirrored matsuri232’s use of the less-formal variant 笑 to invoke the same key, saywhat327 positions himself as a member of matsuri232’s in-group who does not have a close relationship with her by employing (笑).

matsuri232 accommodates the shift in positioning as she replies using the formal variant (笑) in line 3 with slang Japanese: *Thankies* (笑). The polarity of the slang utterance and its formal cue has the same effect as saywhat327’s previous transmission—it re-positions matsuri232 as a member of saywhat327’s in-group who does not have a close relationship with him. More importantly, she increases the level of formality in her contextualization cues by switching from the middle variant 笑 to the formal variant with parentheses. This is in response to saywhat327’s use of the formal variant instead of the middle variant in line 2, maintaining the overall tone of friendliness but also joining saywhat327 in keeping distance. In line 4, saywhat327 maintains the friendly key and distant friend positioning by using the formal variant: *It was definitely locked* (笑), however in line 5, matsuri232 attempts to close the distance by re-introducing the middle variant to the interaction with *So quick!* 笑. saywhat327 resists this move once again in line 6 by continuing to use the formal variant (笑), keying his utterance as warm/friendly but still maintaining distance by not transitioning into using the a less-formal variant: *It’s cause I was in the game center, y’know* (笑). matsuri232 makes another attempt to close distance between herself and saywhat327 in line 7 as she uses the middle variant with informal Japanese, inserting an arrow beside the symbol to draw his attention to the alignment change (*Call the game center, man* 笑←), and finally transitions into using w to fully position herself as a close friend within saywhat327’s in-group: *There should be a moth stuck to the side of the door handle w*. Here, she makes a stronger bid for close alignment with saywhat327 as a member of his in-group, keying her final utterance as playful and shifting out of the *kanji* representation of laughter into the informal, casual *romaji* variant: w.

It is only upon matsuri232’s emphasis on shifting into a close alignment that saywhat327 begins to accommodate her move and take up a close alignment with her. After matsuri232 transitions into using the informal variant w, saywhat327 accepts the alignment change and replies using w in line 8: *It’s not like they can do anything but score at Mahjong and Quizzy wwww*. The reduplication of w characters at the end of his utterance demonstrates that he has accepted the alignment change and also solidifies his positioning as a close friend within matsuri232’s in-group. In essence, under the Formality Constraint, I interpret that saywhat327 only transitions into using the informal variant because continuing to employ (笑) would effectively distance himself from matsuri232 by rejecting her attempt at taking up a closer alignment.

Analysis 2: Comparing (笑) with w under the Interface Constraint

However, if we look closely at the input logs indicated in brackets beneath each Tweet and displayed in bold, we see that saywhat327 begins using w after switching from his Android smartphone to his PC (Janetter). In this case, the Android’s mandatory auto-correct feature disallowed the textual realization of the informal variant w, preventing saywhat327 from using it in response to matsuri232’s attempts at shifting into a closer alignment while he was on his phone.

The pressure for saywhat327 to transition into the informal variant increases in line 7 when matsuri232 used 笑 and w. While saywhat327 could have utilized 笑 to accommodate matsuri232’s alignment moves, I offer that because he did not use this variant in any of his Tweets in my observation of his account, accepting her alignment shift in that way was not an option for this user. However, shifting from the most formal variant (笑) to the most informal w with an utterance such as line 6: *It’s cause I was in the game center, y’know*; might signal that saywhat327 is teasing or making fun of matsuri232 by overtly stating a fact using discourse marker *y’know* and keying it as playful. Given that produces his Tweet in line 6 using twicea: *[Sent via twicea]*, even if saywhat327 opted to use the informal variant, he would not have been able to produce w because of Android’s autocorrect. In this context, saywhat327’s use of the formal variant demonstrates that the Interface Constraint takes precedence over the Formality Constraint in that he is willing to accommodate the restrictions of auto-correct by using the formal variant even though it distances himself from matsuri232 at an interactional level.

In line 8, saywhat327 finally accommodates her alignment move by using w, which he achieves by switching to his PC: *[Sent via Janetter]*. Here, the risk of further distancing himself from matsuri232 begins to take precedence over the convenience of using the smartphone interface as saywhat327 abandons his Android altogether for the sake of matching matsuri232’s move to close distance. Altogether, it appears that both constraints of formality and interface limitations are constantly in effect at all times. However, saywhat327’s accommodation of one constraint over the other at a given time is what appears to impact his use of either the formal or informal variant of laughter in his Tweets, ultimately affecting the keys with which he contextualizes his utterances and in this case, his alignment with matsuri232.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

- Considering the stylistic limitations imposed by the interface used to engage in synchronous digital discourse may yield a further contextualized analysis of interactional moves made by users.

The Interface Constraint allowed me to gain a more comprehensive sense of the processes taking place between saywhat327 and matsuri 232 in their digital interaction. As I have shown, the Formality Constraint was always at play when they employed formal and informal variants of textually represented laughter in Japanese. However, the Interface Constraint is another factor that is omnipresent in these interactions, as the mandatory auto-correct feature of the Android-based platform prevented saywhat327 from using w earlier in the exchange. It is not until he is pressured by matsuri232’s use of informal w that saywhat327 is forced to circumvent the Interface Constraint and sacrifice his attempts to accommodate the auto-correct feature for the sake of maintaining rapport with matsuri232.

In this way, the Interface Constraint is an additional factor that impacts how saywhat327 selects and employs variants in his Tweets. Given that survey participants also highlighted this concept as a facet that impacts their use of (笑) and w, perhaps it is a constraint that affects other types of stylistic variation in digital discourse. Additional analysis of data from other users, however, is needed to examine how prevalent this factor is in synchronous media and the exchanges that take place therein.

- Future analysis of these types of data will explore:

Other Variants – What are the prior texts and possible interactional functions of other variants such as 笑 (sans parentheses), 爆笑 (*bakumaru* – explosive laugh), and extended/reduplicated forms such as *www*?

New Interfaces, New Constraints, and Language Change – As GIFs (e.g. GIF Keyboard), pictures and memes, short videos (e.g. Snapchat, Vine), and voice clips get appropriated and introduced into textually-mediated synchronous discourse, how will text-based contextualization cues be reinterpreted and repurposed in interaction? Furthermore, how will text-to-speech based interfaces impact the resources available to users as they abstract away from traditional keyboard-based input methods?

Larger Corpora & Variationist Analyses – How do (笑) and w [as well as others such as 笑 (sans parentheses), 爆笑 (*bakumaru* – explosive laugh)] vary across social strata and in larger corpora? Beyond their ability to accomplish contextualization cues and alignment moves in interaction, how are these textual representations appropriated in performance of identity, style, and/or stance, or even the construction of persona?

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