

Scott Davis

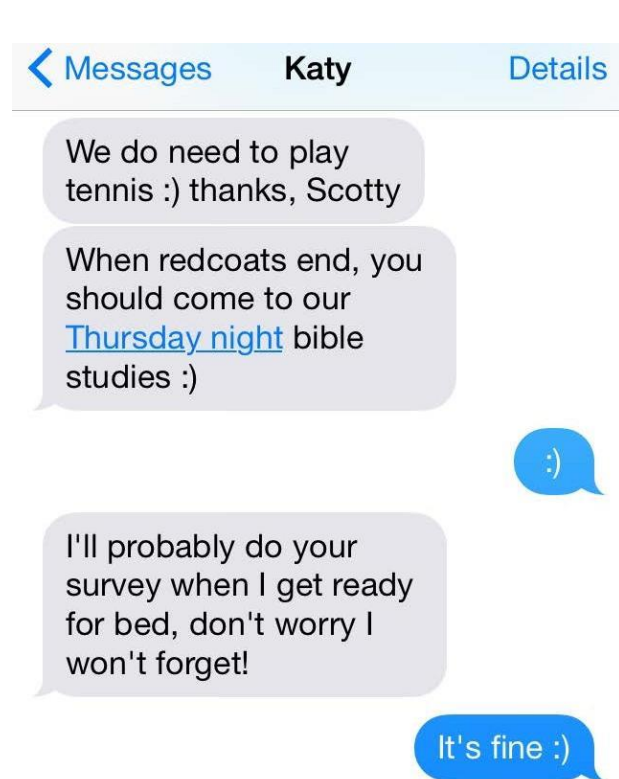
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English 1101

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Fine, whatever . . .

In the digital age, expressing your emotion can be as easy as typing one or two punctuation characters, such as a colon and parentheses to make a smiley face :). You have



probably seen this string of characters or other ones like it various times throughout texting, email, IM messaging, or other examples of CMC (computer-mediated communication), but where did it all come from? CMC is essentially any human communication that occurs by two or more electronic devices (“Computer-mediated communication”), which would inherently include texting. The character shown above, as well as :(:-) :-(:P :/ and many others, are examples of “letters” or

“configurations” in the alphabet of emoticons. However, perhaps the “emoji,” easily considered emoticon 2.0, is of more importance and weight in today’s communications, as it is more modern: ☺ ☹. Although you, the reader, may not be *as* familiar with these as you are with emoticons, you have still likely seen them by some form of CMC. While most people over the age of 25 likely think of emoticons and emojis as pointless and as adding little meaning to

writing (Marsden 2), these characters have a big effect on today's CMC, especially emotionally. In fact, they were made explicitly for emotional expression, created to fill the emotional, tonal, and modal hole that had been created naturally in CMC. Additionally, long before the emoticon, ever since writing was established, we have had punctuation as a writing tool to help establish tone and emotion. In a world of short and brief text messages, punctuation and emojis/emoticons determine the tone of the text message more than the actual words do. This makes the textual interaction more human and allows us to communicate more naturally as well as personally by allowing us to add visual components of communication that were originally lost.

With the kind of language we use in texting, the words themselves alone lack effective tone. Critics of the emoticon and emoji claim that it reduces writing and emotional intelligence, but this is a biased and superficial criticism that often seeks to compare CMC with formal writing. Alice Robb, one such critic, states that "the ability to convey tone and emotion through text, without resorting to illustration, is one of the key challenges of writing. It's what makes someone a good writer rather than an effective artist or illustrator" (4). The problem with this reasoning is that formal writing is a very different type of communication and text than computer-mediated communication. Formal writing is generally longer and the writing itself is much further planned out than that of CMC. Formal writing attempts to make fantastic literature through thought-out, revised, and doubly revised word content, while CMC's purpose is to represent common, everyday conversation within the digital world of text. Most people do not just walk around reciting poetry as means of conversation, and in the same way, CMC exists to represent not literature, but conversation.

People soon discovered a problem with the invention of CMC, however. This problem was that while the text of CMC could accurately represent the words of conversation, certain



characteristics of normal human conversation, such as audio tone and visual cues, had been lost (Sherwood 1). In fact, statistically, 93% of human communication occurs visually through body language and through tone of voice (Harmon 70).

This is where the emoticon comes in. Judith Meyer says, "Nowadays, we often use writing as a form of quick communication in text messages and chats. These don't leave the time to carefully consider how we can avoid misunderstandings of

our tone, so emoticons are a very useful tool." With the help of the emoticon, we are able to

clarify emotional context with what

would have been otherwise

ambiguous emotional standing

within a message, as well as make

text messaging more human. Take,

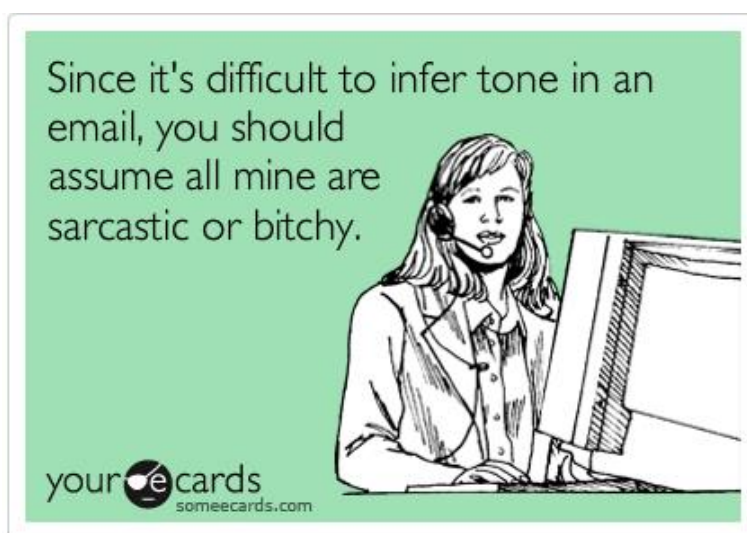
for example, the text message

displayed above on the left, from a

friend of mine to me. She started

the conversation with, "Hey, don't

forget about work tomorrow 6:30 0:)", reminding me to give her a ride to work. However, if she



had said the same phrase without the smiley face featuring a halo, the message could have come across as selfish, nagging, and possibly even condescending. With the addition of a simple smiley face, especially an angelic reference of innocence, I know that she is kindly reminding me and is thankful for my giving her a ride. Clarifying emotional context is important, both in personal communications as well as business communications, not only to further express what is meant, but even more importantly to make sure that the message is not misinterpreted tonally (Sherwood 1, 7). Judith Meyer says that “[t]he faster the communication, the more acceptable is the use of emoticons. In chats and SMS they are very acceptable and have prevented some big misunderstandings.” Punctuation also helps clarify tone and emotional ground in text messaging, but some of the punctuation marks are beginning to take on new meanings with new tone and significance.

In text messaging the characteristics of brevity, speed, and simplicity are the name of the game, and with this purpose much punctuation is often dropped, leading to many punctuation marks acquiring new meanings. The primary and most important example is the period. The line break has replaced the period as a separator of speech, and the period has slowly shifted to accept a new meaning (Crair 2). Additionally, “The unpunctuated, un-ended sentence is incredibly addicting,” says Choire Sicha, editor of the Awl. “I feel liberated to make statements without that emphasis, and like I'm continuing the conversation, even when I'm definitely not” (qtd. in Crair 2). In text messaging and even in IM messages, the default way to end your phrase is to just end

Are you angry?

Really?

No.

No.

Delivered

it, no period involved. I mean, why would we use a period when everything we are typing is usually one sentence and is just meant to represent conversation? Thus,

since the appearance of a period is rare in the texting world, it adds new meaning when it is used because the reader tries to figure out why it was used. The period is not used as a punctuation mark anymore but rather as a tone differential, subliminal message, or indication of the end of the conversation (not just the sentence) (Crair 3). That tone differential has come to have a negative connotation, usually either to indicate that the writer is upset, angry, or another similar emotion. Ben Crair explains that “people use the period not simply to conclude a sentence, but to announce ‘I am not happy about the sentence I just concluded’”(1). It is truly an amazing innovation, in that a punctuation mark that was used to express separation and pause in speaking and literature has now adapted to indicate tone (Crair 3).

What this all means is that people have over time developed a completely different language than that of standard conversation to be used in CMC, specifically in text messaging. The visual letters of the alphabet are emoticons and emojis, the words of the alphabet are standard English words (although many have been abbreviated or made acronymic), and the audio letters of the alphabet are punctuation marks that have taken on a new meaning in the world of CMC. Tom Fanelli refers to this adaptation as “a new set of communicative dimensions that haven’t existed in the past. This kind of light-speed evolution of our language will only accelerate as technology advances and becomes further integrated into our way of life” (2). It is not just the period, either. As far as punctuation goes, another example is the exclamation point, which has turned into a sincerity marker: “I really mean what I am saying!” This change in meaning for the exclamation marker is also due to tonal ambiguity, specifically whether a message is relayed as sarcastic or not. The new role for the exclamation mark was created to leave no room for sarcastic ambiguity (Crair 4). Ben Crair states, “as problems of tone kept arising on text and instant message, people turned to other punctuation marks on their keyboards

rather than inventing new ones” (4), which is what led to punctuation acquiring new meanings in computer-mediated communication. One final example on the punctuation side is the ellipsis mark. In traditional writing, an ellipsis is used to indicate trailing away, uncertainty, etc. In the CMC world, however, the ellipsis mark has come to mean a secret message. That secret message could be in the form of reading between the lines to figure out something the texter was trying to say without actually saying it (Greenspan 12), or it could be in



the form of a more quiet and open-ended



negativity similar to the period (Crair 4).

The unique CMC language does not stop with punctuation in what it has altered either. Two popular examples of this include “k” and “fine.” Of course, if the newly declared sincerity marker is used after these expressions, then the meaning is



parallel with that of standard English. When it is not is when the two expressions can mean something entirely different, especially with the addition of the period. “k” is one simple letter and was created as a simple shorter version of “ok,” but in the world of text messaging, it can be loaded with lots of different meanings. The general sense of meaning, however, is that of detachment. “k,” when used in the evolving new CMC definition of the phrase, is almost always



not positive (and usually negative), and the possible modes of detachment could include disinterest, depression, annoyance, anger, frustration, or one of many other emotions. The latter of the two expressions, “fine,” is very similar, although it is usually used in the depression realm to actually talk about not being fine. However, “fine” has almost been evolving both in spoken conversation as well as typed conversation at the same time since its origin, so this is not a language change unique to CMC.

Even more interesting than the ways that the emoticon and emoji enhance texting and tone

is how it does so. It enhances and supplements tone through a simulated visual representation of ourselves. Words are words, punctuation functions as audio tone, and then emoticons and emojis work to bring about the visual aspect of the conversation. Chad Tossell states that emoticons are “[s]imilar to facial expressions and other non-verbal communications” (et al. 660), and I would venture to say that the link between the two is closer than we think. As we type out a text

message, our facial expression is expressed through a facial icon on our correspondent's screen, showing that person what we looked like visually as we read and replied (or simply sent) the message. Take, for example, the difference in use between men and women. The common consensus across all women and men is that women are normally more emotional and expressive than that of men. In text messaging, we see the exact same thing as we study amounts of emoticons and emojis sent by females as compared to males (Tossell et al. 659, 662). This in turn shows that emoticons and emojis are a natural representation of ourselves, work effectively, and make text messaging a more human and interactive experience. But, do emoticons, emojis, and punctuation really work as well as we want them to?

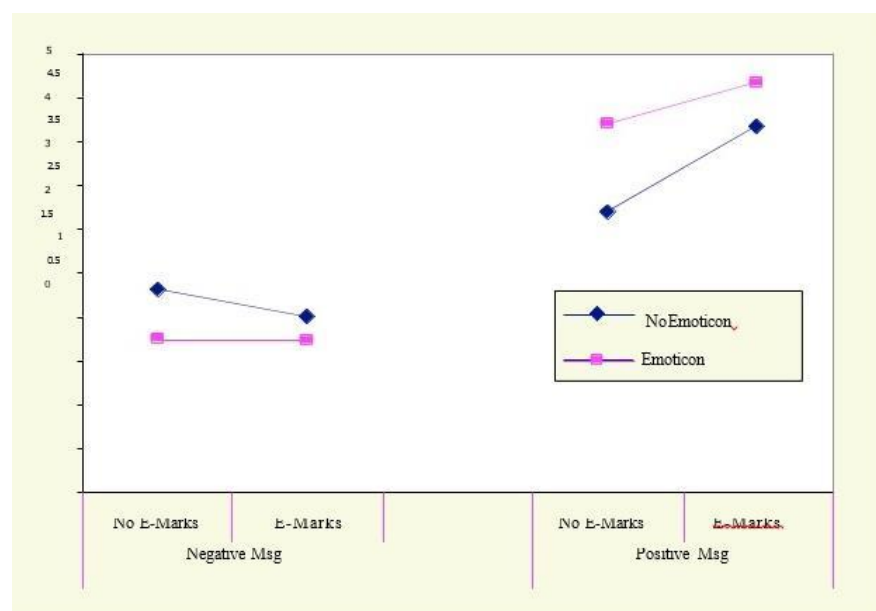


Figure 2. Effect of Emoticons on affect rating of IM messages

The simple and short answer is yes. The emoticon, emoji, and use of punctuation all have great effect emotionally and tonally on text messaging. However, when emoticons/emojis and punctuation are used

together as opposed to when they are not makes for a very interesting relationship. Take, for example, the graph below, which plots the emotional and tonal effect of emoticons and exclamation marks. Interestingly enough, if you are trying to portray a negative message, your best bet is to use an emoticon. However, if you use an exclamation mark without an emoticon, your negative effect will go up, and if you use an emoticon to start with, you will have an already

more negative effect, but it will not change if you add any exclamation marks. On the other hand, if you are trying to portray a positive message, your best bet is to use both an emoticon and exclamation mark. Without the emoticon, the addition of the exclamation point makes a huge jump in effect, and with the emoticon, the effect already starts quite high and then rises more from there (Ip 2). Amy Ip additionally says, “The results of this study show that, despite the simplicity and brevity of IM messages, emoticons and punctuation marks can make a significant difference in how people interpret the message” (2).

However, effect is a very general term, and applies to different people in different ways. In relation to emoticons and emojis, different emoticons and especially emojis can have different effects based on with whom they are used. Alice Rob explains, “Friend groups fall into the habit of using certain emoticons, just as they develop their own slang” (2). A particular group of friends may stumble upon an emoji that means nothing to them literally but becomes almost like

an inside joke, and

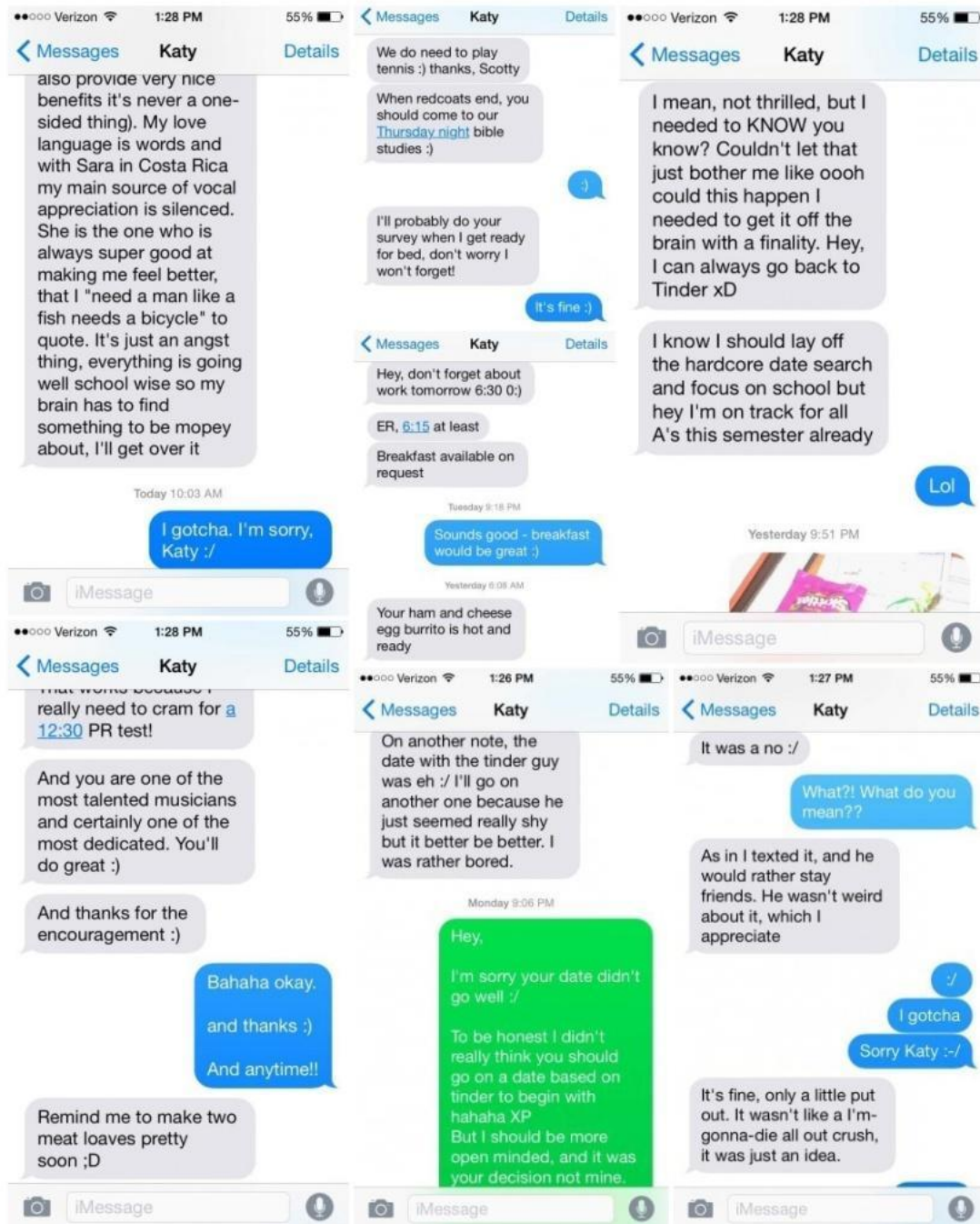


therefore sticks. So while the CMC language is changing as a whole, that change is different based on the groups involved. For example, when I text my dad, he texts as though it were normal writing: punctuation used for



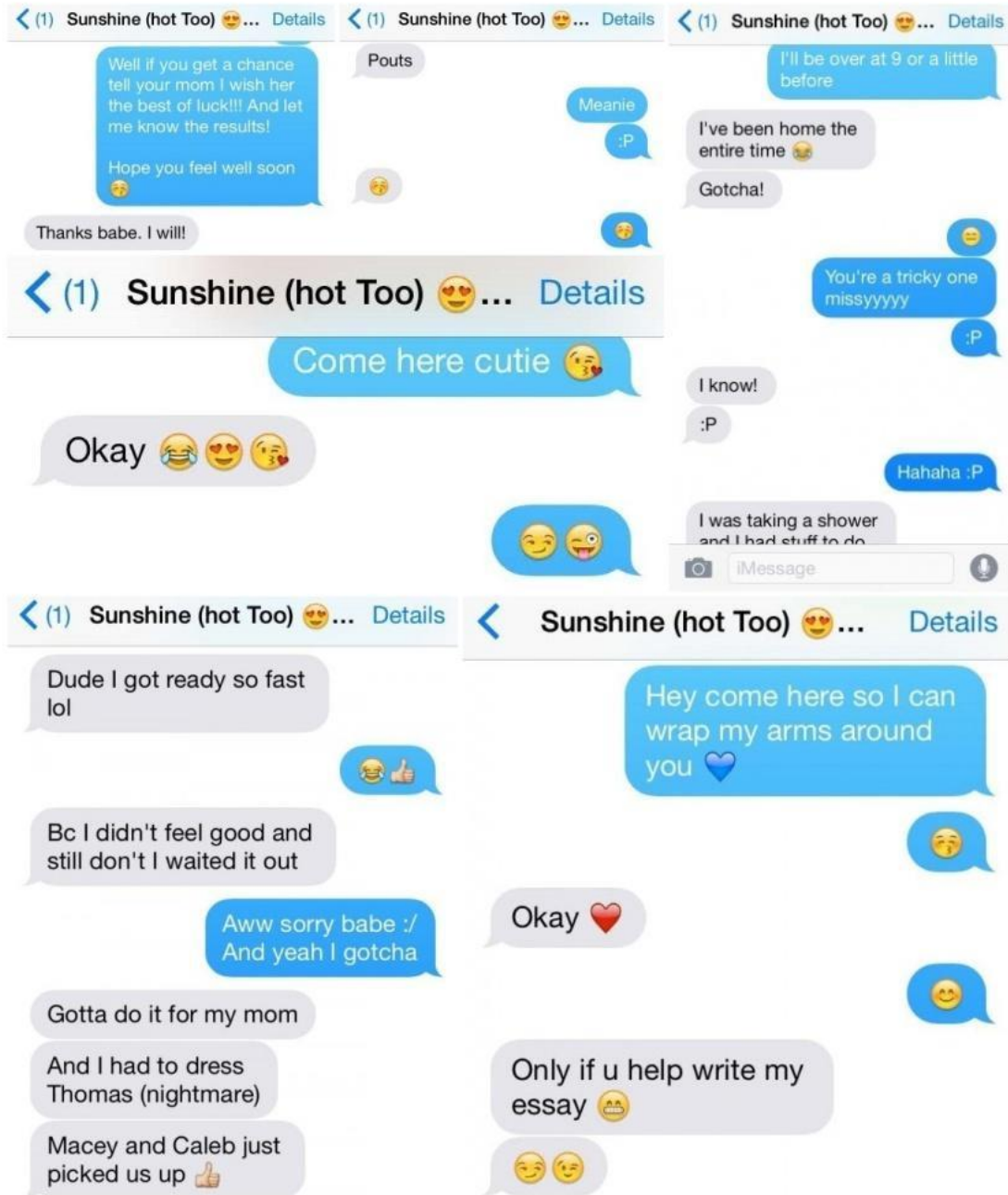
original purposes, usually not many emoticons, and just typing things out (and not trying to

sound sarcastic or disconnected or anything negative in the process). When I text my friend Katy, there are a certain set of emoticons that we normally use with just each other because



they describe our conversation and friendship best. Finally, when I text my girlfriend, there are also a certain set of emojis that we use between us way more than the others, because over time

we have developed our own CMC dialect, just like every group has done over time.



All in all, computer-mediated communication requires something additional as it represents everyday conversation in short bursts of text. CMC lacks the visual and audio components of conversation that we have face-to-face, and therefore it is hard to express these parts of conversation that directly lead to overall tone. Because of this difference, the emoticon and emoji were invented, and have served well to enhance tone in texting by representing people visually. This usage has led to text messaging becoming more human and becoming a more natural extension of our everyday conversation. For the audio components of everyday speech, we use punctuation, some of which we use with new definitions exclusively for CMC, such as the period and ellipsis. These techniques have been effective, and they work because they parallel our actual understanding of conversation and provide a good substitution for such elements in the text world. Additionally, the changing language of CMC, which has evolved to adapt visual and audio “letters,” has been further extended into innumerable dialects created by the fact that there are many different groups of people, all different in connections between one another. It seems that we as a people are beginning to speak a foreign language without even realizing it.

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