

## **Expressing Emotions in Words: *Facebook* Text-based Comments in Tamil**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Language being used as a communication tool is embedded with emotions. Emotions in language are obvious in face-to-face (F2F) communication than in any other forms of communications. Media Richness Theory explains that the richer the media is the more successful communication will be and vice versa (Moczyński, 2010). This means text-based communication such as letters, e-mails, memo and so forth lacking of non-verbal cues like intonations, facial expressions, body movements and others, will not be as successful as F2F communication. On the other hand, there are also studies which have proven that computer mediated communication can convey non-verbal cues as effective as in F2F communication by manipulating the fonts with capitalization or using coloured fonts to express emotions (Mali, 2007; Boonthanom, 2004). Nevertheless, how is it possible to communicate non-verbal informations in a language like Tamil which does not have capital letters or colour code? The aim of this study is to identify the techniques used by Tamils in conveying emotions through words in *facebook*. This paper further discusses the frequent and helpful techniques used in Tamil communication. Samples chosen for this study were forty active *facebook* users who have good language competency in Tamil.

*Keywords:* communicating techniques, emotions, *facebook*, non-verbal cues, text-based communication, Tamil, *Tholkaappiyam*, verbal cues

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Being a social creature, communication is an extensive never ending event for mankind. Men communicate since birth till death even in sleep through dreams (Mokhtar Muhammad, 2008). Communication

is sending, receiving and transferring messages, ideas, opinions and feelings. We need a common shared tool such as language (verbal and non-verbal), signs and visual to convey the communicative meaning. Men intend to invent many mediums and medias to fulfil their desire to communicate. Language is the most powerful medium used by men to communicate (Jiménez-Ortega *et al.*, 2012). It may vary according to groups, yet the purpose and usage of any language is the same for all, which is to transfer one's thoughts, ideas and feelings.

Language being used as a communication tool is embedded with emotions. Emotions being distinguished in different categories also varies in numbers. Sarter (2012) explains that Darwin distinguishes eight basic emotions which were later extended and divided into subgroups and named as primary, secondary, and tertiary emotions. According to Sarter (2012), the more recent and established list of emotions by Parrot (2001), has six basic emotions and 133 subdivided emotions. Since this study focuses on emotions in Tamil language, it is proper to use the categorization of emotions by Tamil scholars.

In Tamil emotions are defined with the term **மெய்ப்பாட்டியல்** *meypaattiyal* (physicalization of feelings) in **தொல்காப்பியம்**. *Tholkaappiyam* (ancient epic). Muthukumarasami (2007) describes the meaning of *meypaattiyal* as inner feeling evoked by external factors received through sensory organs and expressed through facial and body movements, or language which can be seen and felt by the

observer. *Tholkaappiyam* the earliest work of Tamil grammar has stated eight basic emotions which can be verbalised in 32 expressions (Ilampuranar, 2001). The 8 basic emotions as stated in *tholkaappiyam* are listed in Table 1 below.

Table 1  
Emotions in *Tholkaappiyam*

In Tamil	In English
<b>நகை</b> (nahai)	humour
<b>அழுகை</b> (azhuhai)	sorrow
<b>இளிவரல்</b> (ilivaral)	satire
<b>மருட்கை</b> (marutkai)	innocent confusion
<b>அச்சம்</b> (accam)	fear
<b>பெருமிதம்</b> (perumitham)	pride
<b>வெகுளி</b> (vehuli)	anger
<b>உவகை</b> (uvahai)	joy

Ilampuranar (2001) explains emotions are influenced by four factors namely objects, feeling, actuators and expressions. Out of these four, expressions are the only factor that can be seen and understood by others. The other three are internal factors that can not be seen with the naked eye. Muthukumarasami (2007), who agrees with Ilampuranar (2001), states that emotion is the way a person uses verbal and non-verbal

language to share the inner feelings received from nature. Language is the best tool to measure the relationship between inner feelings and expressions accurately and share them with others (Muthukumarasami, 2007).

Emotions in language are obvious in face to face (F2F) communication than in any other forms of communications. Media Richness Theory explains that the richer the media is the more successful communication will be and vice versa (Moczyński, 2010). This means that text-based communication such as letters, e-mails, memo and so forth which lack non-verbal cues like intonation, facial expressions, body movements and others, will not be as successful as F2F communication. On the other hand there are studies which have proven that computer mediated communication can convey non-verbal cues as effective as in F2F communication by manipulating the fonts by capitalizing or using coloured fonts to express emotions (Mali, 2007; Boonthanom 2004).

#### *Review of Text-based On-line Communications*

Almost every youngster today is equipped with a form of telecommunication tool and most of their communications involve exchange of written text alone (Bauerlein, 2011) such as giving and reading comments on social networking sites. Computer mediated communication using verbal cues and expression of emotions through written words lacks facial expression and non-verbal cues (Casale, Tella & Fioravanti,

2013). Even though online interactions lack non-verbal cues, it still satisfy interpersonal needs. It is observed that online interpersonal communications are effective as that of face-to-face interactions and opportunities (Flippin-Wynn & Tindall, 2011). The opportunities vary from financial, relational, social networking and business opportunities.

Subramani (2010) affirms that 65% of the social meaning of the messages conveyed are using non-verbal cues, especially the emotions are transferred more effectively through non-verbal communications. Textual substitutes and symbols are used in the virtual context to compensate the missing non-verbal features such as facial expression, pitch and intonation (Omar, Embi & Yunus 2012). Cvijikj and Michahelles (2011) investigated the sentiment in the content written in Swiss German dialect on a Facebook brand page and found that emotions are expressed through adjectives or via the internet slang elements such as intentional misspelling, emoticons and interjections.

A study conducted by Omar *et al.* (2012), has investigated communication strategy used in English language among a public university students in Malaysia. Findings of the study show that onomatopoeia (Woowww!; ZZZzzz), substitution (before = b4; laugh out loud = lol), using emoticons (^\_^, :) , :P, =D), capitalizing words for stress (TRULY innocent....; THANKS a lot...) and punctuation (!!!, ???) are used as the paralinguistic strategies. Siti and Azianura (2012) examined the language features and

patterns of online communicative language used by young Malaysian *facebook* users. The respondents of their study were from three main ethnic groups (Malay, Chinese and Indian), with different cultural backgrounds, and different mother tongues but using English as medium of communication. Siti and Azianura (2012) found that the online users use spelling innovations and modifications, combinations of letter and number homophone, (before = b4; someone = sum1), reduction or omission of vowels (have = hv; please = pls), use one letter to represent a word (you = U; why = Y), acronyms and abbreviations (Oh my God = OMG; Thank you = TQ) and emoticons (:D, :P, :-P) as language features of online communication.

#### *Aims of the Study*

This study attempts to fill certain gaps in the literature. Most of the studies about computer mediated communications investigated the use of English language and its' non-verbal features. The researcher could not find any article investigating the use of Tamil language in online communication. The curious features of Tamil language which does not have capital letters or colour code in communicating non-verbal information initiated this study. Therefore this study tries to investigate the communicative strategies used by Tamil language speakers in *Facebook*. The objectives of this study are:

Objective 1: To identify the techniques used by speakers of Tamil in conveying emotions through words in *facebook*.

Objective 2: To discuss the most frequent and helpful communication techniques used in *facebook* comments in Tamil

#### *Theoretical Framework*

Lens model approach is one of the suitable approaches to investigate the techniques used to transfer emotions through word. The lens model was introduced by Egon Brunswik in 1952 to investigate problems regarding physical environment perception (Brunswik, 1956). Later it was developed and used extensively in analysing human judgment related to social perception (Boonthanom, 2004). According to Boonthanom (2004), the use of lens model expended to communication research including communication of emotions via non-verbal behaviours including facial expressions, body gestures, vocal communications, music performance and visual art. These studies examined communication using different emotion cues in different context.

The researcher has adopted Lens Model to investigate the techniques used in communicating emotions in social networking site *facebook* (see Fig.1).

#### **METHODOLOGY**

Purposive sampling method is used in this study with university students between the ages of 20 to 23 years as the target group. The samples were chosen from a university situated in the central region of Peninsular Malaysia that offers Language and Linguistic studies with a Tamil Major. Forty students who are active *facebook* users with good language competency in Tamil

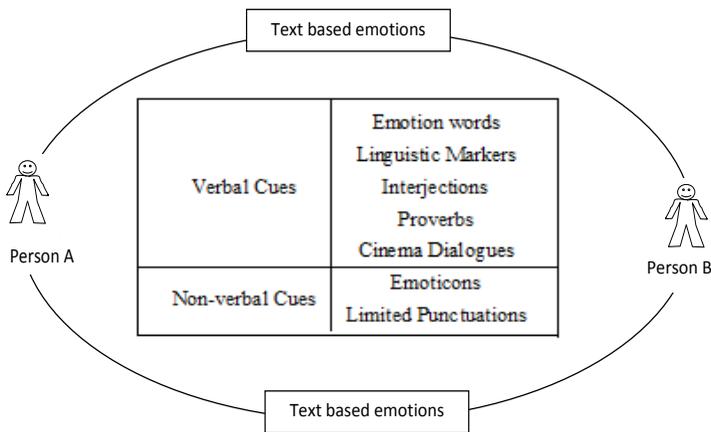


Fig.1: Text-based emotion cues in Tamil

were involved in this study. Among them, *facebook* postings of 16 students were utilised to identify the communicating techniques frequency used to express emotions. The techniques were identified essentially from textual communication rather than visual or multimedia communications. After identifying the techniques, a questionnaire was prepared and distributed to all 40 students and a survey was conducted to check among the users which technique was useful in their *facebook* communication. Two tables were created based on the frequency of usage of various techniques (Table 2) and the usefulness of these techniques (Table 3).

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

As stated earlier, the aim of this study is to identify the techniques used by Tamils in conveying emotions through words in *facebook*. Results showed the Tamil comments about wall-posts in *facebook* were made using two forms of writing. One using the Tamil script such as நன்றி (*nanRi*)

and the other using Romanized script such as “*nandri*” which means thanks. Moreover, five verbal and two non-verbal cues were found as the communicating technique used by Tamils to express emotions in *facebook* conversation. The verbal cues found are emotion words, linguistic markers, interjections, proverbs and cinema dialogues. Where as the non-verbal cues are emoticons, and punctuations.

*Emotion Words*

Emotion words are words that represent feelings such as happy, angry, sad, and so on which we could find in the dictionary (Boonthanom, 2004). Gendron (2012) explains that emotion words play an important role in understanding the meaning of expressed emotions. The results of this study show that Tamil speakers also use emotion words to express their emotions in text-based *facebook* communication.

These comments have emotion words such as *sad, angry, happy, and proud*, which were used by the writers to express their

Example 1:

Comments posted in facebook	English gloss
<b>...மிகவும் வருத்தமாக இருக்கிறது.</b> (... mihavum varuththamaaha irukkiRathu)	I feel very sad.
<b>இச்செய்தியைப் படித்தவுடன் கோவம் வருகிறது...</b> (iccheythiyaip padiththavudan koovam varuhiRathu).	I'm angry reading this news
<b>மிகவும் சந்தோஷமாகவும் பெருமையாகவும் இருக்கிறது.</b> (mihavum santhooshamaahavum perumaiyaahavum irukkiRathu)	Feeling very happy and proud

Example 2:

Comments posted in facebook	English gloss
<b>எனக்குப் புரியவில்லை... விளக்கம் தாருங்கள்</b> (enakup puriyavillai... viLakkam thaarunggal.).	I don't understand... please explain.
<b>வாழ்க்கையை விளையாட்டாகப் பார்த்தால் அதில் ஒரு சுவாரசியம் தெரியும். வாழ்வ இனித்திடும்.</b> (vaazhkaiyai viLaiyaattaaha paarthhaal athil oru suvaarisayam theriyum. vaazhvu iniththidum.)	If you see life as a game. It'll be interesting. Life will be sweet.
<b>இவர்களின் முயற்சி பாராட்டத் தக்கதாகும்</b> (ivarhaLin muyaRchi paaraattath thakkathaahum)	We should appreciate their effort.

Example 3:

Comments posted in facebook	English gloss
<b>... அதிக பிரசங்கி என்கின்றனர், ஐயோ!! ஐயோ!!</b> (athiha pirasanggi enkinRanar).	Oh! Ouch! They say I preach a lot.
<b>அந்தோ பரிதாபம்.....</b> (anthoo parithaabam.....)	Alas, it's awful.
<b>ஆஹா... என்ன அருமையான கண்டுபிடிப்பு.</b> (aahaa enna arumaiyaana kaNdupidippu)	Wow! What a fantastic discovery

Example 4:

Comments posted in facebook	English gloss
<b>பேராசை பெரு நஷ்டம்...</b> (peeraasai peru nashtam...)	Greediness will cause great loss
<b>நண்டு தன் பிள்ளைக்கு நடை கற்றுக் கொடுத்த கதை ஆயிற்று</b> (naNdu than piLLaikku nadai kaRRuk koduththa kathai aayiRRu)	Like crab teaching its young to walk straight.
<b>ஊருக்கு மட்டும் உபதேசம்</b> (uurukku mattum upatheesam)	Advice meant for others only

emotions. A native speaker will not use such words in F2F communication to elicit emotions. While it may sound unnatural and dramatic. Often that may sound a direct translation of English.

### *Linguistic Markers*

In our daily conversations emotion words are seldom used to directly communicate feelings. Instead linguistic markers are used as substitute. Boonthanom (2004) defines linguistic markers as phrases with no emotion words, which could transfer emotion between message sender and receiver.

In the first extract, emotion conveyed is *marutkai* (innocent confusion), *uvahai* (joy) is the emotion of the second phrase and *perumitham* (pride) is the emotion underlying in the third phrase. There is no emotion words used in these phrases to directly communicate the feelings, yet the reader could understand the emotions expressed by the writer indirectly.

### *Interjections*

Interjections are words or phrases used to express sudden emotions. There is a relationship between the speaking styles, for example the voice quality-related prosodic features such as intonations and the paralinguistic information carried by an interjection (Ishi *et al.*, 2012). Interjections are seldom used in formal conversation, i.e. Oh!, ouch!, alas!, and uh! are some of the interjections used in English. Where else ஐயோ (*aiyoo*), அந்தோ (*anthoo*), ஆஹா (*aaha*) are examples of Tamil interjections.

This is usually followed by an exclamation mark.

In Tamil, these interjections do not have context-free meaning on its own but they do convey meanings based on context. The interjection *aiyoo* could be used to express any emotion. The reader or receiver could only understand the meaning by relating it to a situation (as seen in the above example 3).

### *Proverbs*

It is common for Tamil native speakers to use proverbs in their daily conversation. Globally, proverbs are used to express something symbolically. They are used to express feelings, to praise, to warn, to mourn and to indicate failure (Omoera, 2013). Proverbs are usually very old and used repeatedly. In this study, the receiver or reader could understand the senders' emotions through the proverbs used in the comments posted.

The first proverb is normally expressed with negative emotions such as anger, sadness, fear or shame. This helps the receiver to understand the emotion expressed by relating it with their knowledge about the proverb. The second and third proverbs are to criticize others about their wrong behaviour. This explains that proverbs help the participants of a conversation to understand the emotion and the purpose of a proverb used.

### *Cinema Dialogues*

The influence of Tamil cinemas is undeniable in the Tamil society regardless of age. It is very normal to hear famous movie dialogues

## Example 5:

Comments posted in <i>facebook</i>	English gloss
Nee avlo nallava naada. (nii avLo nallava naadaa)	Are you so good?
Na Nalla Panreno Ilayo... Nee Nallave Panra Da!!!! (naa nallaa paNNureenoo illayoo... nii nallaavee paNNura daa!!!!)	I may not act well but you are acting very well.
Aani ye pudunge vendam (aani yee pudungga veeNdaam)	Don't have to pull the nail.

in their daily conversations. There are also people who mimic the cinema dialogues especially humorous dialogues by famous comedians. This helps the participants of computer mediated communication to interpret the emotions conveyed by the writer or sender easily.

These examples are famous Tamil cinema dialogues of modern times. The first two phrases are said by actor Santhanam one of the famous comedians in Tamil movies. These phrases were uttered to tease and to show surprise. The third phrase in the example is a dialogue by the comedian Vadiveloo in the film titled "*Friends*". This dialogue was uttered in anger to stop someone from teasing the other continuously. The listeners or readers will get the clue that they have crossed the limit.

All the five techniques stated here are used to convey the emotional message through verbal cues that use alphabets. These techniques help the *facebook* communicative participants to convey and to understand the emotions expressed as effective as F2F communications. Among these five techniques the usage of cinema dialogues are not often quoted in other languages (Das & Bandyopadhyay, 2013; Siti & Azianura,

2012; Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2011; Omar et. al., 2011; Boonthanom, 2004). Hence it seems like a unique technique used by the Tamil speakers. Any member of a Tamil community will find that cinema plays an important role in their life.

### *Emoticons*

In brief, emoticons are icons used to express emotions. According to Halvorsen (2012), emoticons were designed to convey emotions in a direct and transparent manner. Wei (2012), states that the emoticons were used for the first time in 1967 in an article in *Reader's Digest*, and this would be the first version of emoticons. Presently, text-based emoticons have been converted into graphical emoticons, which are more expressive (Jibril & Abdullah, 2013). In this study, it was found that the usage of emoticons is very limited to only phrases using the Romanised Tamil script.

The first phrase may sound as a command without the emoticon. The emoticon used here is to inform that the intention of the writer is not to command but just a reminder. The emoticon used here actually turned the impolite statement into a subtle polite

## Example 6:

Comments posted in <i>facebook</i>	English gloss
6.30kku srmbn le turun pandrom!! 😊 (6.30kku seremban le turun paNNuRoom)	We'll get down in Seremban at 6.30.
Dedicated 2 u machi... 😊	Dedicated to you brother in law
Athu yen enakku??? 😞 (athu een eankku???)	Why does it happen to me?

statement. On the other hand in the second phrase the emoticon added a special tone of teasing. If the phrase is read without this emoticon it may sound sentimental. So the writer has added an emoticon in order to avoid the sentimental feeling and made it humorous. Whereas the third example with a frowning faced emoticon shows that the writer is upset with what is happening to him. Although the usage of emoticons helps to interpret the intensity of an emotion, they are very rare and limited in Tamil *facebook* conversation.

### Punctuations

Punctuations are symbols used to indicate a pause while reading a text. According to Carey (2013), punctuations are used to indicate how to speak a text. Punctuations are also considered as a writing system that conveys information by symbols other than alphabets and numbers (Cook, 2014). Symbols such as comma (,), exclamation (!), question mark (?), are often used once or more than once to emphasize emotional expression and considered as clues for identifying emotional presence in a sentence (Das & Bandyopadhyay, 2013). Lee and Wobbrock (2012) stated that usage of punctuation symbols became more

important with the increased use of text and instant messaging. This trend is observable among Tamil usage in *facebook*.

In this study which investigated text-based communication in *facebook*, the participants were found to have used the punctuations quite frequently. They tended to use them more than once at the end of a sentence. The most frequently used punctuation symbols are full stop (.), question mark (?), and exclamation mark (!). The usage of comma repeatedly is uncommon but yet was used by a respondent in this study. The uses of punctuations more than once emphasise emotions and permit the reader to contemplate.

The non-verbal cues, such as emoticons and punctuations were used as techniques to convey a message in a text-based communication among the Tamils in *facebook*. The usage of capital letter or manipulation of fonts as found in English text-based communications (Mali, 2007; Boonthanom, 2004) were not found in this study. This is because Tamil language does not have capital letters and for cyber Tamil users colour coding in textual expressions is still new. Additionally the meaning of colour varies among various cultures.

Example 7:

Comments posted in <i>facebook</i>	English gloss
<p>வாழ்க்கை ஒரு குற்றமா??? நாம் யாவரும் குற்றவாளிகளா???</p> <p>(vaazhkai oru kuRRamaa??? naam yaavarum kuRRavaaLihaLaa???)</p>	Is life a crime? Are we criminals?
<p>தோல்வி நரகம் என்றால் வெற்றி சொர்க்கம் தானே....!!</p> <p>(thoolvi naraham enRaal veRRi sorkkam thaanee....!!)</p>	If failure is hell than success should be heaven!
<p>அதிலும் கொடுமை என்னவென்றால்,,,,, மனிதன் மனிதனைப் பார்த்தே அஞ்சுகிறான்.....</p> <p>(athilum kodumai ennavenRaal,,,,, manithan manithanaip paarththee anjuhiRaan.....)</p>	It is horrible that man fears man himself.

### FREQUENT AND HELPFUL TECHNIQUES USED

The second aim of this study is to discuss the most frequent and helpful techniques used in Tamil communication. For this, 355 comments posted by 16 respondents for duration of three months were analysed. Only posts with Tamil words (either in Tamil script or Romanised scripts) were chosen. The comments in English and Malay languages were omitted. From the data analysed, it is found out that the participants used linguistic markers most frequently, followed by punctuations, emotion words, proverbs, cinema dialogues, interjections, and the emoticons. Frequencies of the techniques used are listed in Table 2.

This proves that the participants of *facebook* communication in Tamil use linguistic markers as frequently as in F2F communication. It is very realistic to use linguistic markers to express emotions (Boonthanom, 2004) than any other techniques. Punctuations are also used at high frequency. This is used to give space and time for the reader or receiver to think

Table 2  
Communication techniques used in order of frequency

Techniques	Frequency	Percentage
Linguistic Markers	293	82.5
Punctuations	220	61.9
Emotion Words	55	15.5
Proverbs	16	4.5
Cinema Dialogues	10	2.8
Interjections	8	2.3
Emoticons	6	1.7

about the message sent. The emotion words were also used by the participants to convey the underlying emotions in their comments. Proverbs and cinema dialogues are commonly used in modern Tamil communication. This familiarity aids in quick perception of an intonation in textual context. In spite of this, these techniques were used less than 5% in Tamil comments in *facebook*. Even though interjections are used to express emotions, they are usually used in informal conversations and seldom used in written form. In this study interjections were found in only 8 comments. Emoticons which were invented

for text-based communication to express emotions were used very rarely by Tamil speakers. Out of 355 comments only 6 were found to have emoticons. These emoticons were also used only with the Romanised Tamil phrases.

To know how helpful these techniques are in *facebook* postings 40 university students were surveyed using a questionnaire. The result is listed in Table 3.

Table 3.  
Helpful communication techniques to express emotions

Techniques	Percentage
Emoticons	15.9
Cinema Dialogues	14.6
Proverbs	14.5
Emotion Words	14.4
Punctuations	14.1
Linguistic Markers	13.4
Interjections	13.1

According to the respondents, emoticons seem to be the most helpful technique in expressing emotions in text-based communication. Table 2, which is based on online observation, however, shows that emoticons are the least used technique. Linguistic markers and punctuations are the most frequently used technique in expressing emotions by Tamil speakers but they are considered less helpful. The respondents also feel that cinema dialogues and proverbs are very helpful techniques to convey feeling. In reality, however, they do not use these techniques as frequently as linguistic markers or punctuations. This proves that the result in Table 2 contrast

with the results in Table 3. Only the use of emoticons and interjections seem to have a similar result in both Table 2 and Table 3. Emotion words are listed as the fourth helpful technique in Table 3 and listed as the third frequent technique in Table 2. Interjections are considered the least helpful technique and are therefore used very rarely.

## CONCLUSION

The Tamil speakers who communicate in *facebook* use several techniques to express their emotions through text. Emotion words, linguistic markers, interjections, proverbs and cinema dialogues are the verbal cues used. Emoticons and punctuations are used as non-verbal cues in the same way as facial expressions and intonations which are used in F2F communication. Even though emoticons, cinema dialogues and proverbs are considered helpful they are used rarely in online communication. The Tamil speakers tend to use linguistic markers and punctuations more in their facebook communication.

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