# Iconicity in the Digital World

## An Opportunity to Create a Personal Image?

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Popular culture is always in process; its meanings can never be identified in a text, for texts are activated, or made meaningful, only in social relations and in intertextual relations. This activation of the meaning potential of a text can occur only in the social and cultural relationship into which it enters. (Fiske, 1991a: 3)

## 1.  Introduction

New media and new technologies are creating an openness which allows their users to establish new forms of interpersonal communication. Some of these communication forms are usually grouped together under the term 'Internet communication'.[1] Internet communication means the possibility to interact over great distances, to communicate transculturally without considerable effort and across national borders – but it is also used in communication from one office room to the next.[2] Internet communication is a tool that surmounts physical distances (often not well-distinguished from cultural ones). On the other hand, interpersonal communication on the Internet *lacks* non-verbal information, it is 'reduced' to the verbal level only, for by now most users obviously communicate by means of texts or line by line. Internet users often are considered quasi-anonymous interlocutors, because Internet communication is not as close as face-to-face communication. For this reason, Internet communication is at the centre of attention at the moment. It is found interesting not only because of the novelty of the medium, but because of its inherent contradiction: its similarity to oral

face-to-face communication that stands against the fact that it is *written* communication (cf. Krämer 1997: 88f.). The more common the use of Internet communication becomes, the more the written word (and the characteristics hitherto associated with: its artificiality, consciousness, definitiveness and visual fixity [cf. Ong 1982: 81]) will lose the importance that it has traditionally had.

## 2.    Linguistic characteristics of Internet communication

Electronic mail is a communication tool that was instituted for interpersonal communication when the first node of the network ARPANET was installed at UCLA in 1969. By 1972, thirty-seven universities and government research organisations in the U.S. had joined the network, and today, all continents and fifty-seven million Internet users (January 1997) are connected by satellite links, fiber optic cables and telephone lines creating the network commonly called the 'Internet' (cf. Reid 1994; statistics from Quarterman 1997). Due to the great interest in interpersonal communication – the first users of the network spent most of their time in writing and reading electronic mail (e-mail)[3] – other tools were invented: USENET, Internet Relay Chat (IRC), Multi User Dungeon (MUD), Multi User Dungeon Object Orientated (MOO), etc. (cf. Reid 1994, see note 1).

These inventions may be regarded as totally or partly new forms of communication that define and demand new modes and styles of communication (Cf. Collot and Belmore 1996), different manners, rules and rituals – and therefore also new text types. When we compare Internet communication with oral and written text types we are already familiar with, the talk/phone chats may be regarded as written phone calls; the IRCs as written informal discussions (cf. Werry 1996, Feldweg et al. 1995); e-mail messages may be anything from informal notes to official letters (cf. Günther and Wyss 1996); Mailing Lists resemble notice-board messages or advertisement sections in papers and magazines. Newsgroup communication is akin to written and public group discussions, but it also resembles a notice-board on which advertisements are posted. The communication in a MUD resembles the communication found in board and adventure games. Despite these similarities, which may be defined as intertextual relations, there is not yet an accepted linguistic explanation of the inherent conflict between orality and literacy.

Herring (1996b) makes us understand why it is not surprising that the users of Internet facilities call some forms of computer mediated communication (e.g.

IRC and Newsgroup communication) 'discussions' or 'conversations'. She describes the new communication habits from a sociolinguistic point of view: Relying on a corpus of two different types of discussion forums, she shows that quite a lot of e-mail-messages (87%) lack a greeting that is conventional in letters. This lack could show that the users consider the individual message as a conversational turn. But on the other hand, the new text types show a high level of written coherence features such as the creation of intertextuality by the use of quotations and linkings to other messages as well as in addressing other users. This induces Herring to call the texts interactive not only on the intratextual but also on the intertextual level. She concludes:

> The pure exchange of information, narrowly defined, is of secondary importance [...] The basic electronic message schema thus more closely resembles that of interactional text types such as personal letters and conversational turns than that of expository texts, although moves of the expository schema are sometimes found in the message body. (Herring 1996b: 92)

As Yates (1996: 40–45) shows, similarities to oral communication can also be observed on a quantitative lexical level. In comparing the lexical peculiarity of three corpora, one consisting of oral, one of written and one of Internet communication, he observes that Internet communication has such features of orality as, for example, a higher frequency of personal references (1st and 2nd person) and modal auxiliaries.

The very special feature of this visual medium is that it enables the user to communicate without paper 'on screen': the messages are both written and read on the screen. Because there usually is no fixation of a text on a hardcopy, communication takes on an aura of volatility as we know it from face-to-face dialogue. The fact that there is no paper involved could be a reason why oral features can be found in the written texts. But the misspellings, the elliptic style, the lack of greeting formulas, the interlinear writing into existing messages are also phenomena comparable to handwritten notes and memos. They are proof of a colloquial and an informal yet written style in asynchronous communication.

Although computer mediated communication is often understood by help of the paradigm of face-to-face communication, the typing (and reading) of messages in all the facilities mentioned above characterises the communication as *written* communication. The more the communication is synchronous – as it is in Internet Relay Chat and MUD – the more the features of Internet Communication are considered to be aspects of orality. The features of *informal* written

language with its conversational links or references lead us to conclude that the Internet is not so much a means to exchange information as it is a medium to communicate (Cf. Herring 1996). When we look at Internet communication against the background of face-to-face communication, all new features become compensations or surrogates for the four characteristics that Kiesler et al. (1984: 1125) mention: absence of regulation feedback, dramaturgical weakness, few social status cues and social anonymity.

There could indeed be an interrelation between, for example, smiley faces and the lack of regulation feedback. But it is also necessary to consider the smiley faces as an Internet code, as a medium specific symbolic performance, which should show us (and indeed does) the communicator's knowledge of the (insider) Internet codes as well.[4] To account for this polyfunctionality and historicity of symbolic signs it seems much more interesting not to offer the simple explanation that 'virtual' communication is really synchronous, face-to-face communication, but rather to accept them as new text-types and to describe their linguistic features (cf. Table 1). I believe, therefore, that we should under-stand Internet Communication as a new mode of communication which uses the medium Internet as a means or as a space of communication (cf. Reid 1994) where written text-types *and* oral interactional modes and rituals are brought into contact with each other.

Table 1. *Internet communication facilities*

|  | 'talk'/ 'phone' | IRC | E-mail | Mailing List | Newsgroup | MUD/MOO |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| synchronous | + | + | +/– | – | +/– | + |
| computer as space | + | + | – | – | – | + |
| computer as means | + | + | + | + | + | + |
| similarity to written and oral text-types | phone call | conference phone call, discussion | from informal notes to official letters, direct mail | (message) board, journal ads | board, (public) group discussions | game, role-play, drama |
| subjects/ topics fixed | – | +/– |  | + | + | +/– |
| communication is controlled by a (system) operator | – | + | – | + | + | + |

## 3.    Writing restrictions on the Internet

There are some restrictions in writing that should be mentioned. All keys of the keyboard can be used: different characters, alphabetical and alpha-numeric symbols, and even punctuation. To avoid transmission errors because of different coding schemes, interlocutors can only use the following U.S.-American standard, the ASCII character set (American Standard Code for Information Interchange, cf. Table 2):

Table 2. *ASCII Character Set*

---

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z
a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
! " # $ % & ‘ ( ) = — ~ ^| \ { } [ ] _ ‘ @ + ; * : < > , . ? /

---

The writer usually cannot use character formatting like bold or italics, or such fonts – proportional types – as Times and Helvetica. There is no possibility of choosing larger or smaller letters, or different colours. The choice of the medium is not left to the writer, as is possible when writing letters on paper.

    The electronic message (sent to individual people, sometimes posted to Usenet-discussion-Groups or to a list-server as public messages, where they are forwarded to multiple subscribers of a mailing list) has two or sometimes three parts. First, there is the *header*, where the writer or the e-mail software puts the necessary information to send the message to the right place. Name and address are separated by the commercial 'at' character, also called ape-sign. The header also contains the *subject* of the message. After the header there is the *message text* (also called the *body*). The third part is the *signature*. This is a short message (kept in a separate file in some e-mail software) and tacked onto the end of the message. The signature usually consists of one to four (or more) lines of text and contains the sender's e-mail address, his/her employer or university, a favourite quote and other personal information.

    There are other rules that can be seen as restrictions: the lack of space and time to write. In IRC – a very fast tool – the messages or turns are usually not longer than one line. E-mail messages should not exceed the monitor width. At this point, the typographic standards overlap standards of politeness, the Internet-Etiquette called 'Netiquette'.

## 4.  Iconicity in Internet communication

Quite a lot of written iconic features are used to fulfill one or another function to overcome the above mentioned medium specific restrictions. This limitation of one's individual creativity could be one reason why Internet communication contains so much variety of such varied types. But it should also be taken into account that the computer is primarily a visual, iconic medium.

Thus, Internet Communication features many types of iconicity. We find iconic forms well known from avant-garde poetry, from the language of comics and from urban graffiti. Smiley faces – an allusion to the Seventies – or emoticons, special abbreviations and ASCII-art are the best known icons and iconic codes of Internet Communication. But also simple typographical features, text structuring features and layouts may be seen as forms of iconicity. The examples that I will discuss below will illustrate those iconic features that can be said to show the personality of their user.[5] Iconicity is here considered as visualized or visualizing (and also often metaphorical) presentation of function and meaning using alphabetical and alpha-numeric signs.

### 4.1  Typography

The repetition of characters, the use of capitals, the space between letters, underlining, and other forms of typography may be interpreted as iconic forms used to emphasise important information, to show what is important.

```
(1)   ============================================
      Note: Please do not reply to FName-SName.
                               ^^^
      but to the addresses below.
      ============================================
```

In this note (1) the important word 'not' is underlined with interlinear carets. The whole information is emphasized by a band of equation marks (=) over and under the written text.

```
(2)   @@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@
      @                                                        @
      @ Vxxxx Lxxxxx                e-mail: xxxxxxx@xxxxxxx.hfi.hr  @
      @ Xxxxxxxxx 19                       xxxxxxx@xxxxxxx.ffzg.hr  @
      @ 41000 Zagreb           v-net: 000 00 000-000 (home)    @
      @ CROATIA                        IRCnick: Xxxxxxxx        @
      @                                                        @
      @              HELP! I'm surrounded by apes!             @
      @                                                        @
      @@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@
```

In this signature (2), a more ornamental way of text-structuration is shown. The band around the address is made up of 'apes' or '@'s, a colloquial name for the commercial 'at'-sign. The apes here iconically reflect the cry: "Help! I'm surrounded by apes!" which has an obvious double meaning because it refers to the war in Croatia where the writer lives. The interrelation between text and typographical band transforms the border into a visualisation of the final line. Iconicity is more than a text-structuring device here. For the writer it is a possibility to express and show her emotional feeling of powerlessness. At the same time, it presents an artistic satirical picture of reality, a possibility to dissociate herself from the situation.

### 4.2 Smiley faces

Another form of iconicity is represented by the more famous smiley faces. (You have to read them as an image turning the paper ninety degrees to the right.) The smileys are combinations of punctuation marks. The colon makes the eyes, the hyphen the nose, the closed or open brackets the mouth (cf. Sanderson 1993). They are ASCII-versions of the decals of the Seventies and very similar to the visual grammar of comic-strip faces. And of course one could establish a reference to conventional or even stereotypical human mimic expressions of western society. Commonly they are used as a commentary on the text (e.g. the winky smiley) or even as supplementary non-verbal information. They are often called 'Emoticons',[6] as they give some information about the emotional tone of the verbal text.

```
(3)   :-)  Your basic smiley. This smiley is used to inflect a sarcastic or
           joking statement since we can't hear voice inflection over Unix.
      ;-)  Winky smiley. User just made a flirtatious and/or sarcastic remark.
           More of a 'don't hit me for what I just said' smiley.
      :-(  Frowning smiley. User did not like that last statement or is upset
           or depressed about something.
      :-I  Indifferent smiley. Better than a Frowning smiley but not quite as
           good as a happy smiley

      :<  — what?
      :(  — what?
      :O  — Yelling
      :C  — what?
      :Q  — what?
      :,( — Crying
      []  — Hugs and
      :*  — Kisses
                                          (Collected by whenry@lindy.stanford.edu)
```

Example (4) shows the place of smiley faces. Very often they are put at the end
of an utterance or a speech act, as a sort of a final act or final observation. The
contextualisation though is ambiguous. The smiley could refer to the ironical
"little", or to the whole humourous ironical sentence, "Actually, I think the
header says a little too much!" It could be read after the sentence, paraphrased
as 'laughs and laughs and laughs and laughs', or as a commentary on the text:
'it's very funny'.

```
(4)     Date: Wed, 9 Aug 1995 10: 29: 27 -0600
        Reply-To: "Interpreting (and) translation" <LANTRA-L@SEARN.SUNET.SE>
        Sender: "Interpreting (and) translation" <LANTRA-L@SEARN.SUNET.SE>
        From: Cx Dxxx <CCDESANTIS%ISD022%XFER%UTLVAX%YVAX%WPGATE@YVAX.BYU.EDU>
        Organization: Bxxx Yxxxx University
        Subject: "Molly screw" => French? -Reply
        To: Multiple recipients of list LANTRA-L <LANTRA-L@SEARN.SUNET.SE>

        Actually, I think the header says a little too much! : ))))

        -ccd
```

Although the term 'emoticons' used for smileys would imply that they supply
para- and non-verbal information, it is very rarely possible to read them as para-
verbal information because they come 'too late': The smiley is placed at the end
of the sentence, so it will be read after the relevant words. Example (4) also
shows a morphological principle of the smileys. The quadruple repetition of a
unit – here the mouth – expresses a sort of emphasis. Thus, smileys are produc-
tive because they are seen as morphologically structured. The writer makes use
of this structuring feature as if he used verbal expressions, as if he used letters
and words to write. It would be an over-interpretation to read this use only as a
demonstration of the knowledge of Internet codes for he creates an individual
expression by playing with the structuring mode. The range of the expressions
achieved by means of smileys is continually expanding to further levels because
the whole character set may be used. Smiley faces may even become a one-line
form of ASCII-art. Depicting faces – constructed in the same way as emoticons
– of public, historical and mythological persons or figures (5) is more a work of
smiley fans than part of the e-mail messages.

```
(5)     7:^!         Ronald Reagan
        C]:-=        Charlie Chaplin
        4:-)         George Washington
        @-)          cyclops
```

What we earlier called a limitation or a restriction must now be seen as a very
productive feature of the Internet code. With regard to the presentation of

personal images, there is an interplay between codification and personal expression. It is sometimes problematic to separate common use from a demonstration of Internet code knowledge because of the fact that many new users (called 'Newbies') spread smiley faces over their text to show their knowledge of Internet discourse, whereas insiders often do not use them in e-mail messages, or only sparingly.

## 4.3  *Language of comics and onomatopoeics*

Iconicity may be used as a means to transfer features of speech to written language as is known from the language of comic-strips (cf. McCloud 1994). These features are essentially onomatopoeic in nature.

The writer conveys an everyday exclamation in example (6). The 'o' could stand for length or loudness, shouting or yelling. The accumulation of the letters therefore is ambiguous. The expression of emphasis by a repetition of characters (see also Section 4.1.), as it is used in the language of comics to imitate spoken language, here also indicates the writer's ironical attitude to the succeeding humorous and hyperbolical statement.

```
(6)    [...]
       Well, not to brag or anything, but Donahue went to my High School (as
       if it makes a difference)... even played clarinet in Band.

       Oooooh. Excitement overcomes us all.
       [...]
```

Without context the "brrr..." in (7) would not make sense. It indicates disgust, but it is also used in comics and everyday language to indicate shivering:

```
(7)    Subject: brrr...
```

With the help of the context in the body of the message it is possible to find out how to read the text in the subject line, for in the message below it the writer mentions the cold weather.

In the same way, emphasis is iconically expressed in (8) by means of the repetition of the exclamation mark. The exclamation marks and the capitals as they are used in Internet Culture are stereotypical language features of comics.

```
(8)    FirstName!!!!! Are you there? I am, finally ON-LINE. Send a line if you
       get this message.
```

### 4.4 Reduplication

Reduplication phenomena can be considered as a form of iconicity. Reduplication indicates a double or secondary coding, which in colloquial style indicates an intensification of what is meant by the word, e.g.: oldold = very old. It may also indicate plurality or a collective; or increase, continuation or completion; or diminution (cf. Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

```
(9)     Subject: Re: kinokinokino
        (Engl. cinemacinemacinema)
```

The triple use of "kino" (cinema) in (9) is a good example of intensification. The sender was writing an e-mail message about her longing to go to the cinema. Note that the interpretation of the reduplication sign in this case is provided by the context and not by the repetition itself.

```
(10)    liebe FirstName, welcome welcome
        (Engl. dear FirstName, welcome welcome)
```

The repetition of „welcome" in (10) could be seen as a plural form (a lot of welcomes), an intensification (very welcome) or a continuation (welcome now, welcome tomorrow), or even simply as an idiomatic phrase. Only the context can give a clue to its meaning.

### 4.5 Images and ASCII-art in signatures and text

A playful and sometimes truly imagic iconicity in e-mail messages are the images used in signatures, in texts as illustrations, and in ASCII-art collections and exhibitions on the Internet.[7] The *images* or *drawings* are also made up of characters and punctuation marks.

For love mails, the well-known rose on one line (11) may be useful:

```
(11)    @-'-,-'-
```

But more often, images are not as standardized as abbreviations and smiley faces. In (12) the writer creates two highly individual lines, which he calls "fog". The image here is only comprehensible with the explanation given in the text.

```
(12)    [...] Good luck, and here's some symbolic fog: ( ( () ( ) ) ) )
                                                      ) ) ) ( ) ) ) (
```

As the *signature* has the function of a letterhead attached to the end of the e-mail message, one could expect iconically created personal images. However, most
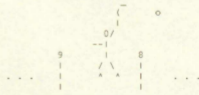
Internet users do not use the signature option. When they use it, they often put in name, institution, addresses, phone numbers and e-mail address in a purely formal style. Humorous, informal or artistic signatures are not very common. Most of them can be found in Usenet Newsgroups where signatures also reflect the social affiliation to a group.

The signature (13) depicts firework from the left – from the west – in four lines. The picture itself is connected to the quotation from the Polish poet and satirist Lec. "Ex oriente lux, ex occidente luxus". This quotation is satirical rather than simply humorous. The pun is more like a political statement and it is represented in the image as well.

```
(13)    __. .'*'.'*         Pxxxx Pxxxx     xxxxxx@         Ex oriente lux,
        |__.'*'.'**'.*      Pxxxxxx 00 X    xxxxxxx.oulu.fi ex occidente luxus.
             '*'.*'.*       FIN-90650 OULU  xxxxxx@
             *'.*'.*        FINLAND         xx.oulu.fi   - Stanislaw Jerzy Lec
```

The signatures in (14) and (15) depict the hobbies of the writers, but they are also related to the newsgroup where the message has been posted. In this way, the writers demonstrate their 'membership' of the newsgroup as well as of the group of tennis-players or surfers.

```
(14)   |---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
       | Cxxxxx X. Cxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx       | Phone: (XXX) XXX-XXXX           |
       | Nxxxxx Xxxx                      | Email: xxxxxx@xxxxxx.xxx        |
       | Mxxxxx xx Xxxxxxxxxx Xxxxx |     |                                 |
       |---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
       | The comments stated above are mine and mine alone.                |
       |-------------------------------------------------------------------|


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                            \
                          0/
                         --|
                9          |         8
                  '.'.'.'. |   / \   |
                           |  /   \  |
                          ---------------
                          ---------------

                              Gora Pilota !!
```

(Newsgroups: rec.sport.tennis, alt.tennis, Subject: Need help finding racquet!!, Date: Fri, 26 Sep 1997 10: 32: 03 -0500)

```
(15)              .-'''.        Xxx Xxxxx, Xxxxx Xxxxxxxxxx Xxxxx, Xxxx
               .' .'~            http: //www.xxx.xxx.xxx/~xxxxxxxxx/
         _.-' '._    "From the essence of pure stoke springs all creation."
```

(Newsgroups: alt.surfing, Subject: Re: A wink's as good as a nod to a blind
Nora, Date: 29 Sep 1997 19: 46: 50 GMT)

Another form of ASCII-art in message signatures is the *self portrait*. In the
signature of (16) the writer gives us a portrait of herself. Picture and signature
are fused together. It shows a childlike, friendly face, and the symmetric
formation of the shape signals harmony. Due to this form the informal, conven-
tional greeting formula "love and hugs" acquires a special, funny and ironical
meaning if we consider the face's margins to consist of kiss-smileys ':*'.

```
(16)    *: Love and hugs:*
          *:            :*
          *:Jennierose:*
           *:  @   @ :*
            *:   J  :*
             *:\__/:*
              *:   :*
               *::*
```

The participants in the alt.ascii-art newsgroup though show themselves to be
amateurs of ASCII-art or even ASCII-artists. Their aim is to create pictures (17).
In these pictures one encounters effects that are similar to those found in the art-
works of such movements as Op-art, Fluxus and Lettrism in the Sixties.

(17)  'the kiss'



(Newsgroups: alt.ascii-art, Date: Tue, 30 Sep 1997 13: 38: 25 -0700)

In this newsgroup some members – unlike other newsgroup discussants – change their e-mail signature very often (see 18 and 19, the signatures of Joan Stark), some even do so in relation to the subject of the message (in 19). The subject of this message is 'Donald Duck', and in her signature, Joan Stark puts another Disney character, Mickey Mouse.

```
(18)    'Flying Elephants'

      (\(\                                        /)/)
     ( \ \.,-.  \\   -«I will have seen everything ,    / / )
    ( ,/,  '\,_//   when I see an elephant fly»-   \\  .,-.( )
    ( ,\  '-/ /                                    '\--' '\\.__,-,«'
    (_/  _ ,-.                    joan stark        '-.,  \__/ ,_.-'
     / '.__/ _____      <xxxxxxxxx@xxxx.com>     ,-',   '  '-'
    '-\   '\ '\                                    / /// /·-,_,·'-'-'
     '/ / /  / / ASCII ART GALLERY: <http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/7373/>
      jgs '·/·/
```

(Newsgroups: alt.ascii-art, Subject: Re: need a signature, Date: 25 Sep 1997 21: 12: 14 GMT)

```
(19)    'Donald Duck'

In article <xxxxxx@xxxxx.xxxxx.xx>, xxxx@xxxx.xx (Firstname2 Name2) writes:

>   .------.
>  /      \ \.-.
>  \_,-¡====/; _,)
>  .'/'',.''\', \\
>  | ¡¡  ¡¡  | |
>  ¡ ¡¡  ¡¡  ¡ ¡
>  ¡ ¡ 0 ¡¡ 0 ¡ ¡
>  .'_,-.__''.__,_,)
> (__,-'------'-._,_)
>  '-.__.-------'-'     dlK
>
>
This is GREAT!  Wow-- I wish I would've made this one!
-Firstname1
--
           .-''''-.
          /        \
        .-''''-.'.·.-.<_         joan stark
      .·-''-.\ ·.-\ ()()__/¡)    <xxxxxxxx@xxxx.xxx>
      \     \   \._,   /
       '-..-¡ \-.__,_./          ASCII ART GALLERY:
        \  '-.,__,-'.'  <http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/7373/>
         jgs  '-.__,-''
```

(Newsgroups: alt.ascii-art, Subject: Re: Donald Duck, Date: 25 Sep 1997 21: 14: 14 GMT)

The frequent change of signatures (18 and 19) shows that the group's or members' ideals or goals of 'creativity' are treated in an informal manner. So in this context the signing of the pictures ("jgs" or "dlK") is no longer astonishing for the creators of the pictures would like to be recognized. This may be compared to a painter signing his or her artwork. The newsgroup-member hence performs as an artist. In this context of artistic iconicity, the signature is a means of expressing one's originality or creativity, a way of distinguishing oneself.

On the other hand, ASCII-art may also serve in a very conventional way as (20) makes clear. It shows a stereotypical icon of an Easter-bunny in order to refer to Easter ("ostern") mentioned in the message:

(20)
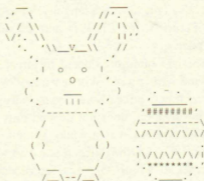


wir waren zu ostern in kaernten.
wie gehts? wann ist die pruefung? wir freuen uns schon aufs feiern.

alles liebe
claudia

(Engl: at easter we were in kaernten.
how are you doing? when is the date of your exam? we're looking forward to the party.

love
claudia)

## 5.   Conclusion: Types and functions of iconicity

Cyberculture considered as a new form of popular culture shows that iconicity is strongly connected with the context, its intra- or even intertextual relations of pictorial and verbal elements. We have seen that in different Internet communication facilities, one may observe many different types of iconicity:

There is a frequent use of typography – comparable to the olden times when the mechanical typewriter was used to write letters – to emphasize words or even parts of a text. Typographical iconicity gives a gestalt to the text itself, it structures the text in a fundamental way. This type of iconicity also interrelates with proverbs and quotations in signatures, with the body text, with the subject of the message, with the topic of the newsgroup, and even with previous messages or questions. Some features of typography (e.g. the repetition of characters) resemble the onomatopoeic expressions in comics – expressions derived from spoken language and other features of orality. The simple typographic features (e.g. underlining) are used in everyday machine-written texts, whereas the more artistic features – they do not occur that often in e-mail messages – are also typical of the language of modern poetry as exemplified by Mallarmé, the Futurists, the Dadaists and the representatives of constructivist contemporary poetry.

Smiley faces are often considered to infuse explicit para- and non-verbal behaviour into the written text. Whether a smiley is put at the end of an utterance and whether it may be read as a commentary on the text or as supplementary non-verbal information, does not depend only on the position of the 'emoticon' but also on whether it is a winky smiley or a yelling or a what-smiley. The latter replaces a word, the others replace non-verbal behaviour. In interpreting smiley faces one has to take into consideration that even smileys have different ways of referring. Smileys are also features of popular culture. They are used in different languages, and of course in advertising language too.[8]

The language of comics and onomatopoeics are very common in Internet Culture. They establish intertextual relations to other popular texts (cf. Fiske 1991b). The 'Cyberese' is not only nourished by the language of comics but also by features from fantasy and science fiction stories, which are also widespread in the Comics Culture and present all over the Internet. The language of comics and the their use of onomatopoeic sounds often indicate insider knowledge as well as the fun of mixing different codes within the text proper.

In a way, a colloquial style is established by using the iconic feature of reduplication, which is not only playful and 'borrowed' from everyday language, but creates at the same time the possibility of intensifying semantic meaning.

ASCII-art represents purely visual iconicity in Internet Communication. ASCII-art means drawing with limited tools, the ASCII character set. Some drawings use only few lines, some use more lines. The writers/painters use this art form in signatures in order to illustrate their personal slogan; some prefer to

create an iconic representation of their hobby and others draw their own portrait. This form of iconicity, as part of a text, also has an ornamental function, which is shown in the decoration motifs of 'virtual' greeting cards. The ASCII-artists, however, give a demonstration of their originality and creativity within their newsgroup.

Iconic elements spread (even sparingly) over the text may be used to create an informal style. As parts of the whole, iconic elements and features show and visualize verbal information. Used in this way, they confirm and offer a visual context to embed information.

From a sociolinguistic point of view, iconicity in general shows that even with restricted possibilities is a means to create a playful (productive) artistic environment (cf. Fiske 1991b). It means that quite a number of people overcome, or intend to overcome, formal conventions of stereotyped written communication, and their use of iconicity shows their huge pleasure in creating (written) texts. And, of course, there are new features, new conventions, new text-types cyberpeople create and learn.

The phenomenon of iconicity may also be seen as an attempt to create a personal image. There are many different iconic ways to generate a personal image in a text, as has been mentioned before. The most imagic iconicity are the e-mail signatures. Signatures illustrate the personal profile of a writer. By means of distinctive slogans the signature expresses a writer's attitude, gives us information about his or her personal interests, and political opinions. A final remark should be made concerning signatures: In signatures, the personal image of writers may be condensed. The signature's intensified visual literacy is a virtual 'materialization' of its function. In terms of the iconicity of signatures it could be called an auto-icon: the Internet signature is *the* signature.

## Notes

1. I would like to thank Olga Fischer, Max Nänny, and Steven Wedema for their help with the English translation.

   For this article, I have considered the following facilities as Internet communication: e-mail, Internet Relay Chat (IRC), phone/talk, Usenet Newsgroups, Mailing Lists, Multi User Dungeons (MUD) and Multi User Dungeons Object Orientated (MOO). (See also Section 2.) Although the World Wide Web (WWW) is an Internet communication tool, it must be excluded here, because it uses a whole new set of technological features for visual and verbal communication.

2. Although English ought to be called the *lingua franca* of the Internet, the interlocutors are using other languages, i.e. Greek, German, French – some of which are difficult to reproduce when using only the ASCII Signs. The chosen language for translingual or transcultural communication depends on the language knowledge of the interlocutors and of course the knowledge they have of each other's language knowledge.

3. A standard spelling for the term 'e-mail' has not yet been established. On the Internet and in scientific publications the forms 'email' and 'e mail' are other commonly used spellings.

4. As time goes by, codes are changing, and using smileys is no longer a sign of being an insider.

5. The validity and reliability of data collections from the Internet remains a problem. For this paper I chose Glaser and Strauss's theoretical sampling (cf. Strauss 1987) I have collected over three thousand private, official and public electronic messages (e-mail, newsgroup, mailing list) to obtain categories of iconicity. In specifically searched through newsgroup postings and messages from mailing lists to extend the first categories and to illustrate the types of iconicity discussed here. I have decided to mask all identities (e-mail addresses) of Internet communication participants by the use of 'x' or 'Firstname', 'Name', even if they were published in open-access electronic forums, as the Usenet newsgroups are. (For some ethical observations on Internet data collecting, cf. Herring 1996a: 5f., Introduction).

6. A portmanteau word derived from 'emotion icon'. In FAQ-files (Frequently Asked Questions) or Netiquette information on the Internet the most common smiley faces are explained. (Netiquette /net'ee-ket/ or /net'i-ket/ [portmanteau word based on 'network etiquette'] are conventions of politeness recognized and published on the Internet or Usenet, cf. Rinaldi 1996, Shea 1996, Templeton n.d.)

7. Cf. the USENET newsgroups alt.ascii-art and alt.ascii-art.animation.

8. It is a characteristic feature of commercial language that all the peculiarities of popular language are used both in print and tv-advertising.

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