

Kineticons and evoked multimodality

**Multimodal expression in written digital discourse: the case of kineticons (*to appear in Journal of Pragmatics*)**

**Abstract**

This paper is concerned with the appropriation of the affordances of text-based communication in digital media to evoke associations with multimodal communication, specifically visual, auditory and haptic experiences accompanying observed nonverbal phenomena and actions in text-messages. In order to account for these phenomena, the notion of *kineticon* is introduced and theorised from the perspective of its constitutive elements, established conventions, and functions. Through the analysis presented here, I identify a user-initiated language development serving to express multimodal meanings within a written medium often simplistically treated as mono-modal. I also demonstrate that the Goffmanian categories of *given* and *given off* expression need to be reconsidered in the light of the emergence of the expression of multimodal content in text-based digital media. The paper proposes a methodological approach to the analysis of user-initiated language phenomena, which includes naturally occurring data collection, the use of online participant observations, and detailed interviews using data as prompts.

**Introduction**

Over the years, scholars have described and quantified features of computer-mediated communication (CMC), focusing on the creative use of spelling, typographic symbols, and language more generally (e.g., Baron 2013; Cherny 1994; Danet 2001; Herring 2001, 2012; Lazaraton 2014; North 2007; Tagg 2013; Werry 1996; Zelenkauskaitė 2017), including their impact on literacy (Cingel and Sundar 2012; Grace et al. 2015; Wood et al. 2014; Zelenkauskaitė and Gonzales 2017). Research has also covered online performativity (e.g., Virtanen 2013a, 2013b) and pragmatics more generally (e.g., Lindholm 2013). There has been a prevalent focus on discourse (Page 2012; Tagg & Seargeant 2015; Tagg 2016; Vásquez 2015) and constructing identity online (Hodkinson 2017; Ling et al. 2014; Vaisman 2014). Accounts so far have mainly been descriptive and rarely considered the emergent grammar of the digital language system (but see Virtanen 2015). This paper contributes to bridging this gap by systematically analysing the use of kineticons, defined as a

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typographically marked graphical representation of actions and observable phenomena in digital communication, and theorising them from formal and functional perspectives.

Kineticons take the form of combinations of typographic symbols, such as asterisks or underscores, and lexical items; they function to activate in the readers sensory associations which they may have from their prior offline and online experience, based on specific discursive cues. They represent embodied actions and observable bodily phenomena, such as gestures, body positioning, facial expressions, as well as involuntary bodily responses to environmental stimuli, such as shivering, blushing, and yawning. Kineticons can correspond to – or function alongside – other non-textual or non-verbal forms: emoticons, emojis, and emotes, which share some of their characteristics, but are either formally or functionally different. Emoticons represent facial expressions with punctuation marks, numbers and letters. Some of the most common emoticons are :-) (a smiley face), ;-) (wink), :-( (sad face), and :-D (laughter). In contrast, emojis are ideograms, which represent facial expressions, but also places, people, animals, flags, and other objects. The main difference between emoticons and emojis is the pictorial, rather than typographically marked, character of the latter. Some examples include emojis of sushi, fairies, whales, and aubergines. Formally closest to kineticons, emotes are text entries that indicate an action taking place. In some chat clients, inserting a specific command replaces the command with the representation of an action and in online games with visible avatars, entering a specific command into the chat window will animate the avatar. Emotes are usually associated with online gaming and older chat clients, such as IRC.

Taking into account the scope of application of this phenomenon to a range of behaviours and bodily actions, the terms emoji, emoticon or emote, with their resemblance of the word *emotion* in English, can be misleading as they imply that the meaning of the actions represented are related to emotions of the author. The term proposed here, kineticon (from Greek words *kinein* ‘to move’ and *eikon* ‘image’), better represents the embodied character of this type of content of instant messaging and hence is better suited to represent it. Kineticons display formal characteristics that distinguish them from the remaining part of the messages. They are delineated from the surrounding text by the use of one of the following ASCII symbols: asterisks, angle brackets, underscores or colons, with other realisations possible among different groups of users. The use of ASCII symbols in text-

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based digitally mediated discourse is not new. Some aspects of their use correspond to the use of punctuation; others are employed creatively, e.g., in the form of ASCII art. These uses, however, either do not constitute a digital discourse novelty (punctuation) or are a design feature rather than an emergent language feature (ASCII art). Kineticons, on the other hand, constitute an emergent feature of digitally mediated language, whose use, as I show in the paper, is linked to the emergence of the phenomenon of discursively evoked multimodality.

In contrast to earlier research, which either only pointed to some of these features, described or quantified their use rather than systematically accounting for both their grammar and function, I theorise kineticons from formal and functional perspectives. I outline their formal and functional characteristics based on the analysis of text-messages (SMS) among three language groups of users. While emoticons, emojis and multimedia content undoubtedly contribute to the construction of multimodal expression in text-based media, they will not be discussed in detail in this paper (for a discussion of the function of emoticons see for example Dresner and Herring 2010, 2014). However, the focus on one feature (kineticons) may have relevance for a range of multimodal resources in text-based digital communication.

The following section begins with an outline of relevant research on meaning-making, followed by a discussion of the principles of multimodal expression in a range of contexts, including the possibility of multimodal expression in text-only digital discourse often simplistically described as mono-modal. Following the methodology section, I present the analysis and theorise the concept of kineticon. I refer to interviews which provide insights into potential transfer of language features between different digital platforms. I then problematise the Goffmanian distinction between meaning that's given and meaning that's given off in the context of text-only digital communication. Finally, I outline formal and functional characteristics of kineticons, referring to the features identified by Potts (2007) for the class of expressives, which demonstrate relevance for the present discussion.

### **Meaning making**

This paper draws on the fact that all language in use is "always and inevitably constructed across multiple modes of communication" (Scollon and Levine 2004, p.2). In face-to-face communication, meaning is conveyed through speech, non-verbal signals and elements

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influenced by the broadly understood context of interactions. In print, typography and visual features of a document influence its overall meaning (Van Leeuwen 2004), with elements such as colour and letter shape embodying aspects of meaning absent from the verbal plane of expression.

Our everyday actions, such as having lunch with friends, taking part in a chess match or cooking a three-course meal include a range of multimodal elements, which contribute to meaning-making: shaking hands, smiling, sitting down, saying 'hello', leaning forward, or averting gaze are only some of the potential elements of a friendly catch-up over lunch. Norris (2004) distinguishes between *lower-level actions*, *higher-level actions*, and *frozen actions*. Lower-level actions are the smallest units of actions which have a beginning and an end, for example, a single complete gesture. Higher-level actions are constructed from a number of lower-level actions and can further nest within other higher-level actions (catch-up with friends or a chess match). Frozen actions are actions evident in the existence and placement of physical objects (e.g., the presence of a letter on a table implies that someone has written and placed it there). All of these multimodal elements influence the overall meaning of interactions and are dependent on the communicative expectations and backgrounds of the interactants as well as the way in which different modes are used in a specific situation.

Limited expressive possibilities in a language, mode, or community may, and do, lead to the development of alternative ways of expressing the same concepts or meanings, be it in the same or other modes, whether at the same level of action or not. Familiar genres of speech and multiple semiotic modalities can also be recontextualised to a different (target) modalities. In novels, for instance, physical actions and familiar non-linguistic experiences, such as sounds, smells, and images, are conveyed through a choice of adverbs, graphic lexis and visual details (Tannen 1989; Baldry and Thibault 2006). I show that, in digital communication, typed text and technologically restricted visual forms of expression are employed to express meanings that traditionally reside along multimodal planes of expression and show examples of lower-level actions, higher-level actions, and frozen actions in the data.

Early studies into the features of the language of computer-mediated communication (e.g., Werry 1996) identified a creative use of language-based and non-language symbols in

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IRC and chatrooms which continued over the next decades. Language-based conventions include the use of grammatical forms, such as zero-subject constructions (Virtanen 2015) and the use of colloquial intensifiers, e.g., *so* (Tagliamonte 2016). Non-language symbols include emoticons (Dresner & Herring 2010) and multiplication of letters (Darics 2013). Another convention includes the use of verbal glosses of gestures and movements characteristic of face-to-face communication enclosed in asterisks (Werry 1996) or angle brackets (del Teso-Craviotto 2004). In IRC, Werry (1996, p.60) finds textual representations, or symbolic enactment, of “[h]ugs, kisses, offers of coffee, yawns, shaking hands, and the popping of champagne”, including “hugs” enclosed in multiple brackets to represent the strength of the embrace. Similarly, Crystal (2006, p.42) mentions the use of such kinesic effects as <smirk> and <laugh>. In MUDs, chatrooms, and instant messaging, environment-specific commands produce pre-programmed images, which represent actions, such as bouncing, hitting or sending kisses (e.g., Deuel 1996; Kendall 2002). Conventions vary between types of computer-mediated communication (e.g., Facebook chat, chatroom and instant messaging) and different sets of actions can be pre-programmed in various modalities. Features of computer-mediated communication found in early studies have formed a base for an idiosyncratic use across modes and languages.

I propose to differentiate between *descriptions* of actions in text-based digital environment and *discursive enactment* of multimodality and nonverbal behaviours. I propose that kineticons correspond to instances of discursive enactment and should be analysed in the context of their multimodal meaning-making potential.

The way meaning is encoded in a particular situational context is dependent on a range of factors, including interactants’ existing knowledge, preconceptions, and beliefs. As I explained elsewhere (Author 2014), while constructing a message, a sender takes into consideration their expectations of the recipient: the history of their relationship, perceived familiarity with modality conventions, availability of contextual information, and prior text (Becker 1995). Texters interpret the use of semiotic resources by their communicative partners based also on what they understand to be the sender's overall communicative preference and current intentions as well as their existing perception of the sender, including their physical features (cf Author 2014: 190-191).

In nonverbal communication, for example, through the semiotics of one’s clothing or

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elements of the environment, meaning can be transferred both consciously and subconsciously, intentionally and unintentionally. In his seminal work, Goffman (1959) distinguishes between *expression* and *communication*. Expression includes gestures, signs, vocalisations, marks, and movements produced by the mere presence of a person and inevitably tied to them. Expressions do not present any explicit propositions but “give off” (Goffman 1959, p.14) information about the expressing person. Goffman argues that expressions are unconsciously given off and that one cannot decide to stop giving off information about themselves in the form of expressions. He describes communication as the use of language for intentional transmission of a message. Research has shown that Goffman’s distinction can be applied to written digital discourse, albeit with some adjustments. Page (2012) found that participants in discussion forums, bloggers, and other users make explicit reference to their identities through mentioning, for instance, their names or nicknames, age, and/or gender (given or inscribed information). Additionally, they also index their identities through stylistic choices, such as the use of syntactic and lexical features associated with regional dialects, age or gender, and other categories (given off or invoked information).

A question remains as to how multimodal elements (observable phenomena, changing states, and actions) are conveyed in text-only digital discourse. This paper sets out to answer this question by demonstrating how multimodal forms of meaning-making, corresponding to both intentional (given) and unintentional (given off) expression, are realised through the manipulation of existing ASCII symbols and transfer of inscription conventions between different digital platforms. Contrary to the existing belief that these features are *representations* of non-verbal behaviour (Vandergriff 2013), I argue that they function as *triggers* of multimodal associations activated by recipients’ prior offline experience and familiarity with modality conventions, based on prior online experiences. I also propose a reconsideration of Goffman’s dichotomy of given and given off information in the context of written digital communication.

The analysis shows that, beyond merely *representing* actions in written form, kineticons relate to the interactants’ offline experiences, knowledge and immediate context through a complex set of features, rendering them both linked to the sender’s perspective and the moment of message construction (*principle of perspective dependence and*

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*immediacy*) as well as independent from the propositional content of messages in which they occur (*principle of independence*). As such, they share some of their features with the class of expressives: emotive morphemes, words and constructions which contain their utterer's attitude to the subject of the utterance. Some examples include expressive attributive adjectives, e.g., *I have to mow that **damn** lawn* (Potts 2007, Potts et al 2009). They are thus distinct from descriptive constructions in that their main function is to display the evaluative stance or emotion of the speaker rather than provide factual or descriptive information. This distinction corresponds to that between descriptions of actions and enactments in the case of kineticons. Just like kineticons, expressives display a set of properties that set them apart from other types of textual content. They are independent of the propositional content of the utterance and say something about the situation in which they are uttered. The expressive content is evaluated from the perspective of the speaker and an attempt at representing the content of an expressive utterance in a descriptive way is usually unsatisfactory for the speaker (Potts 2007). The analysis shows that they share these features with kineticons as employed in text-based digital discourse.

Added to the expressive characteristics of kineticons is their multimodal meaning-making potential, which examples in this paper illustrate. In order to open up the discussion to the possibility of multimodal expression, I now turn to the question of multimodality and the construction of multimodal meaning.

### **Mode de-composition**

Scholars have attempted to separate contributing modes for the purpose of analysis (e.g., Baldry & Thibault 2006, Kress & van Leeuwen 1996, Sindoni 2013), a task which has proven difficult due to the parallel and co-dependent development of modes which constitute holistic units (Norris 2004) and function as *multimodal ensembles* (Kress 2010), interpretable only in their entirety. Additionally, each semiotic resource has itself a certain level of complexity. For example, in the case of language, alongside the content plane, the expression plane includes graphology and phonology and the visual plane includes colour, framing, and perspective. It is also not uncommon for semiotic modes to migrate to other physical substrates, which involves activating metaphorical associations with sensory modes

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and representing them through other modes, creating links that can be decoded in the process of interpretation (van Leeuwen 2016). For example, visual representations of sounds, such as that of an explosion in comic books, usually represented in bold capital letters with a certain directionality and shape, activate metaphorical associations with the auditory and visual aspects of explosions (loud and far-reaching) with which readers are familiar from direct or indirect experience. At the same time, and similar to multiplying instances of expressive content in a message (Potts 2007), multiplication of written signs, for example, letters in digital discourse, activates associations with loudness or length, and, consequently, can be read as carrying emphasis (*principle of repeatability*). Features familiar from the offline context, be it communication specifically (aural aspects of empathetic speech), or sensory elements familiar from communicators' extra-linguistic experience (visual and aural aspects of explosion) are expressed in a textual form in text-only digital discourse and carried through to recipients who are expected to draw on the same associations in interpreting conveyed messages. Rather than represent multimodal phenomena, textual forms of this kind trigger associations familiar from interactants' extra-linguistic experience. This indicates a need for a multimodal interpretation of written digital communication.

In multimodal texts or interactions, meaning does not equal a sum of meanings expressed through each of the modes employed, but takes into account the interplay between them and their different organisational principles. Baldry and Thibault (2006) refer to the *resource integration principle* which refers to the way in which multiple semiotic resources co-exist and affect each other at various levels. The reference to *resource* in this context highlights the fact that semiotic forms are used for the purpose of making texts in which they fulfil a particular function. At the same time, meaning is interpreted at a higher level, beyond that of interacting smaller-scale semiotic resources. Interpretation is then governed by the *meaning-compression principle*, "a principle of economy whereby patterned multimodal combinations of visual and verbal resources on the small, highly compressed scale...provide semiotic models of the larger, more complex realities that individuals have to engage with" (Baldry and Thibault 2006, p.19). Meanings expressed in this compressed form are unpacked and interpreted with reference to these wider realities and the exact meaning of their content is not readily rephrased using descriptive language.



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Having access to the visual stimulus only, users of text-based digital media receive their input in a similarly compressed form and subsequently unpack meanings with reference to metaphorical associations they hold and their functional interpretation.

Following the discussion of methodology, the analysis presented in this paper demonstrates how multimodal meanings are conveyed in text-only forms of digital discourse through the activation of extra-linguistic knowledge and metaphorical associations. Multimodal expression in text-only digital communication is explored from both formal and functional perspectives, and its features highlighted with reference to the distinction between descriptive and expressive content.

### **Methodology**

The analysis presented here is based on a sample of nearly 2,000 text-messages collected from native speakers of English (London, UK), Polish (Warsaw, Poland) and Finnish (Oulu, Finland) who met a set of criteria outlined below. Although digital communication has evolved since text-messages were first introduced and popularised, this data set is uniquely suited for the analysis of multimodal expression in text-only form. This is because multimodal content in text messages, if present, is expressed solely through discursive means and it can therefore be analysed with no interference of other multimodal and multimedia content, which serves the purpose of this paper best. It is worth noting, however, that the discursive features discussed in this paper are not limited to text-messaging. Kineticons feature in more recent forms of instant messaging, a range of social media posts, including their use as a commentary to shared multimedia content, as well as in other types of print and broadcast media, including in advertising. This demonstrates the relevance of kineticon analysis for understanding communication beyond the purely textual digital domain.

The sample for analysis of the form and function of kineticons consists of sub-samples in three languages (English, Polish and Finnish). In all three samples, respondents were young professionals and graduate students aged 20-40, who had been regularly using text-based digital communication for at least three years prior to the data collection and described themselves as “frequent users”. These sampling criteria were motivated by the research

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focus on *established* individual communicative practices, rather than experimental use of digital communication by teenagers, who were found to be in the vanguard of the process of language change as they exploit the affordances of digital platforms (Merchant 2001).

Participants were initially recruited from among the researcher's London-based network: friends (predominantly) and colleagues outside academia (cf. Tagg 2009, 2013), who were asked to contribute at least ten recent text-messages from the Sent folder on their mobile devices. Some of the initial respondents recruited additional participants from their friendship and family networks.

Data collection took place between January 2008 and December 2009. A total of 43 (25 male and 18 female) respondents aged 20-40 who had lived in London for at least three years provided text-messages for analysis. Respondents provided their most recent text-messages, usually sent within the preceding two weeks. This has resulted in a snapshot of communicative practices of a uniform group of users at the time of data collection. The number of text-messages submitted varied between zero and 184 text-messages. There were four top contributors who provided over 100 text-messages, whose messages were traced over time to identify potential changes in the individual texting patterns. Additionally, 16 texting conversations were collected, consisting of 103 messages all together. Texting exchanges provide useful insight into the co-construction of content and meaning between interactants. The total number of text-messages in the sample collected among Londoners amounted to 1050.

Although the contributions from the four prolific texters have caused an imbalance which may be seen as problematic, it was decided to include all the text-messages in the analysed sample for two reasons:

1. Limiting the sample would mean interfering with the texters' choice of text-messages for analysis;
2. The researcher remained aware of this imbalance and checked that the observed phenomena were not limited to text-messages sent by a small number of prolific texters.

The data collection was performed in a number of ways: respondents were provided with the researcher's mobile phone number and email address, the initial group of respondents were given a questionnaire with space to copy their messages, and nine of the respondents

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chose to hand their mobile device to the researcher to allow her to copy text-messages herself.

In order to ensure that the findings are not purely language-specific, a sample of 751 Polish text-messages and 139 Finnish text-messages, collected for an earlier project (Author 2006), were analysed in addition to the London sample. The supplementary samples were collected in 2005-2006 from a group of respondents who met the same criteria as those applied to the group of respondents in London. They included graduate students and young professionals aged 20-40 in Warsaw and Oulu, who described themselves as frequent users of texting and had been avid texters for at least three years prior to data collection. The researcher maintains contact with the respondents and was able to re-interview most of them to gain consent to use their text-messages for this study and ask for clarification of use or intentions where needed. The procedures for data handling and participant interactions were consistent with those adopted with the London-based group of respondents.

During the time of data collection, some of the respondents in the London sample moved from using standard mobile phones with no internet access to using smartphones and, after its initial release in January 2009, the WhatsApp instant messaging client. In the interest of data comparability, all messages composed on smartphones (where applicable) and all WhatsApp instant messages submitted for analysis were excluded from the sample and only traditional SMS (short message service) messages were considered. The reason for this decision was twofold: firstly, instant messaging clients provide a range of modal affordances which is different from that of traditional text-messages, particularly in the context of the ease of transmitting multimodal content, e.g., audio and video files, and different types of visual content; and secondly, since WhatsApp was a newly introduced client at the time of data collection, no claims could be made about established conventions of language use in that client. This initial focus on SMS messages allows us to extract the features of kineticons and discuss their multimodal meaning-making potential without the need to consider their interplay with other multimodal and multimedia content which is present in newer digital communication.

The data collection, coding and preliminary analysis of the whole data set were followed by data-focused interviews, in which participants were asked to interpret extracts from the data and comment on their own use of discursive tools. The interviews were

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conducted in person, over the phone, through email or through an instant messenger. The interview data serves to clarify the intended use and reading of kineticons; it provides ethnographic information about the context of interpersonal exchanges, and helps explain trajectories that instances of kineticons have taken in inter-modal transfer where more than one source of typographic conventions are possible. While the participants' responses were not taken at face value and treated as unquestionable answers to the researcher's questions, they provided a better understanding of the senders' intentions, personal motivations, and in-group use of semiotic resources. I refer to these semi-structured interviews where relevant in the paper.

While numbers of text-messages are provided, the data were not collected with a view to providing quantitative results, but for illustrative purposes only.

### **Findings: Discursive enactment through kineticons**

This section introduces the notion of *kineticon*, defined as a typographically marked graphical representation of discursive enactment of actions and observable nonverbal phenomena in text-based form. It presents examples of the use of discursive tools in text-based mobile communication to evoke associations with non-verbal communication, including visual, auditory and haptic (related to the sense of touch) elements.

The term kineticon was first introduced in Author (2006) to refer to graphical representations of actions in text-messages. The same term was later used independently by Harrison et al. (2011) to refer to the moving icons found in graphical user interfaces. The term is not to be confused with that of *kineikonic mode*, coined by Burn and Parker (2003), which refers to the moving image as a multimodal form. This paper follows the original meaning of the term. In the remaining part of this section, I focus on the role of kineticons within text-messages in which they occur and the forms they take. I discuss also the syntagmatic organisation of text-messages containing kineticons in an attempt to highlight their multimodal meaning-making potential as well as formal and functional features.

#### *Expressive function*

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Kineticons in the analysed sample fall into a number of categories at two levels, relating to the complexity and intentionality of actions they refer to. The complexity-related distinction broadly corresponds to Norris' (2004) *lower-level actions*, *higher-level actions*, and *frozen actions*, that is, isolated instances of the use of individual modes, complex actions consisting of multiple lower-level actions, and actions evident in the existence of objects or their positioning. The level of intentionality is related, but does not directly correspond to, Goffman's (1959) distinction between *communication* and *expression* or information that is *given* and information that is *given off*. Traditionally understood, information that is *given* is seen as intentional, whereas information that is *given off*, i.e., stemming from how messages are conveyed, how speakers appear and what their bodies do during interactions, is seen as unintentional, since speakers are not usually aware of these aspects of their communication. One element that is often given as an example is facial expressions, such as those in examples (1) through (3), where kineticons are enclosed in asterisks:

- (1) Congratulations! I knew it though - I had a dream **\*blush\*** is that indefinitely?  
Sooo happy for you! Xx
- (2) Not to worry sweetie. You need to relax now and take it easy. You must not spend the whole weekend working though! **\*strict face\*** xxx
- (3) Hey. I've had to change my plans and leave...and then I discovered I left my diary in Anna's office. Could I ask you very nicely to pick it up and take it with you on Sun? Pretty please...**\*fluttering eyelashes\*** Maya

Functionally, kineticons in all the three messages, and similar messages elsewhere in the data, serve to express the sender's stance to the proposition in the preceding part of the message, rather than describe their actual physical reaction. The recipient is invited to align with the sender's stance based on the familiarity with modality conventions and associations with the nonverbal behaviours which the kineticon designates. This is achieved through the syntagmatic relationship between the kineticon and the rest of the message: the scope of the kineticon extends over the preceding part of the message. In (1), the kineticon conveys the sender's embarrassment at having a dream about the recipient. In (2), it emphasises the

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command to take some time off from work that weekend. Finally, in (3), it reinforces the pleading nature of the request.

Interviews provide more insight into the intended function of the kineticons employed in these exchanges. For example, text-message (1) was sent by a female to her male colleague whose fixed-term contract at work had been extended. As reported in the interview, the sender enjoyed a “familiar and somewhat intimate” relationship with the recipient, which she saw as a justification for communication extending beyond the professional. As – reportedly – their friendly relationship was a relatively new development and had not been validated, the message could be seen as too forward and therefore unacceptable. In order to mediate that potential outcome, the sender includes an indication that what she is admitting to is embarrassing through the employment of the word *\*blush\** enclosed in asterisks. She then continues in an affective fashion by multiplying the final vowel in the word ‘Sooo’, and adding two kisses ‘xx’ at the end. The employment of the kineticon *\*blush\** shows awareness that boundaries may have been crossed. It does not serve to describe the look of the sender’s face, but to demonstrate their emotional response to the situation. Similarly, text-message (2) forms part of an exchange between a couple in which a planned get-together was cancelled due to the recipient’s busy schedule at work. The sender of (2) expresses understanding and strongly suggests that the recipient should take time off. The sender’s potentially face-threatening act is mediated with the kineticon *\*strict face\**, which is intended to trigger an image of the sender’s playful strict expression, with which the recipient is familiar from their offline interactions (*CMC users – alterae personae link*). Finally, Maya’s text-message in example (3) includes the kineticon “fluttering eyelashes”, which represent nonverbal behaviour often associated with playful, coy or flirtatious interactions. It helps mediate Maya’s potentially troublesome request for collecting her diary from a colleague’s office.

### *Intratextual relationships*

Example (1), as well as examples (4) and (5) below, clearly show that the placement of kineticons in a message is not random: they follow the part of a message they refer to. In (4), the sender provides information about the upcoming round of the contract review process at his workplace and indicates his attitude to it through a verbal representation of a

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helpless sigh (\*sigh\*), which – performed discursively at the time of typing it, i.e., directly after the first part of the message – frames this part as worrying, just like the suspicious glance in (5). The enacted meanings of kineticons do not refer to any time other than the present (*principle of immediacy*); they convey the meaning of an action in progress. Kineticons do not apply to hypothetical or imagined situations (*principle of temporal nondisplaceability*).

(4) To be reviewed again in march **\*sigh\*** same for everyone — even Ben and Tony, though no real doubt with theirs

(5) Ermmmm podejrzana sprawa ahem **\*spogląda podejrzliwie\*** Pytania wezmę...I kamerkę, jak sie naładuje. Buźka! Do jutra x

'Ummmm fishy business ekhm **\*glances suspiciously\*** I'll take the questions...and the camera, when it's charged. Kisses! See you tomorrow x'

Both of these instances convey the senders' attitudes to the content of their messages and trigger associations with familiar nonverbal behaviours: helplessness leading to letting out a sigh and the use of gaze to indicate that we are not certain about facts we are presented with. This *real-world link* is present in all instances of kineticon use in the data.

It is important to reinforce that from a grammatical point of view, kineticons do not constitute an integral part of adjacent propositions and that removing the kineticons from the text would not alter the propositional content of the message (*principle of independence*). Instead, it would limit its expressive content. Kineticons are, however, syntagmatically integrated in the content of a given message based on a functional relationship with the surrounding text. As part of the syntagmatic organisation, they hold the preceding stretch of text in their scope and modify it from an attitudinal point of view. In example (1), the kineticon *\*blush\** holds in its scope the sender's preceding declaration (that she had had a dream about her colleague), framing it as embarrassing. In example (4), *\*sigh\** refers to the need to go through another round of job applications in March, framed as a worrying hassle, and in example (6) below, the **\*\* hug \*\*** emphasizes the supportive content of the whole text-message. Despite the variation in form in example (6) (repetition of typographic symbols is associated with the strength of emotion, rather than redundancy,

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as found already in Werry 1996), the function of the kineticon remains the same. It is used to express the sender's attitude to the preceding part of the message by providing a discursive equivalent of embodied action performed at the time of typing and reading messages. As a result, associations with familiar sensory experiences are activated.

(6) youre a trooper...[college] will be lucky to have u. will share my cigar with [petname]... ;-) xxx **\*\* hug \*\***

The formal properties of kineticons mark them as carrying a different status from the rest of the content of a given text-message. Enclosing a word or a phrase in asterisks (most commonly in the English language sample), angle brackets (in the Polish sample), and colons or underscores (in the Finnish sample) removes their syntactic and grammatical function within the text and adds a performative meaning to it. This form of *discursive enactment* is intended as "more realistic" (as stated by one of the respondents in an interview) than *descriptions* of actions and observable phenomena (i.e., verbal descriptions which have not been typographically marked as kineticons) and encourages the recipient to form an internal evaluation of the proposition. Pragmatically, their function is similar to that of non-verbal content of face-to-face exchanges: they provide attitudinal cues as to the interpretation of the co-occurring text. While kineticons are formally verbal, the associations they trigger when following particular typographic conventions are non-verbal, evoking past extra-linguistic experiences in the interactants. For example, discursive blushing in (1) is performed by the sender's constructed persona at the time of writing. After the kineticon has been read by the recipient, the association with existing image of the sender's nonverbal behaviour cannot be undone (*CMC users – alterae personae link*).

### *Beyond simple gestures*

Norris (2004) argues that lower-level actions, such as a single complete gesture or an utterance or gaze shift, can occur in chains and create higher-level actions such as e.g., baking a cake or delivering a public address, which involve a chain of lower-level actions that need to occur in order for it to be complete. Higher-level actions can further nest within each other. All actions can also be frozen, individually or in chains (frozen actions), rendering



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themselves visible in the presence of objects in the physical context of an interaction. For example, unfinished letters on a table indicate a prior action of letter writing and a tray of muffins on the kitchen countertop suggests that muffin baking has taken place.

Kineticons in text-based interactions are used to express not only lower-level actions, but also more complex structures of higher-level actions and frozen actions. The kineticon *\*mental note to self\** in text-message (7) is an example of a frozen action. The action of making a mental note is implied in the noun phrase *\*mental note to self\**, which can be compared to the instance of letter writing mentioned above. Text-message (8), on the other hand, is an example of a higher-level action – a combination of lower level actions (gestures, position shifts, actions, etc.).

(7) I'll bring you December from home. **\*mental note to self\*** it might fit into your "curious incident" slot. I know it's tough with PAM @ [college1] but hopefully sth will come up before you settle in with the [college2] crowd more than with us...

(8) Aisha: Ben, save me!

Ben: From?

Aisha: From all the madness

Ben: Ummmm **\*saves\***

Aisha: ^\_^

In both cases, the actions represented in the quoted text-messages involve a number of constituent actions that have to be performed in order to complete them. The existence of a mental note, while metaphorical, involves taking a piece of paper, scribbling, and leaving it in a visible position. Saving someone involves a chain of lower-level actions dependent on the situation.

### *Formal properties and inter-modal transfer*

Example (8) above highlights an important feature of multimodal expression in text-based digital communication. When Ben texts Aisha with the kineticon *\*saves\**, he uses a zero-pronoun verbal construction with the verb *saves* in the third-person singular. Through this

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construction, he refers to the discursively performed action of his own digital self. This self-referential third-person zero-subject verbal construction can be enclosed in asterisks or other delimiting symbols. Virtanen (2015) proposed that this construction, found in CMC studies as early as in Cherny (1994) and Danet et al (1997), is both grammatically and pragmatically innovative in English, where double marking of third person singular (with a pronoun and a third-person suffix -s) is the norm. The lack of person marking in CMC contexts is linked to accessibility hierarchies based on the relative saliency of discourse participants and the co-referentiality between the message author and the referent of a zero-subject construction (Virtanen 2015). Both in the contexts described by Virtanen (2015) and in the present study, these self-references evoke the senders' *alterae personae*. These *alterae personae* are the senders' discursively constructed selves, which exist in discursively constructed virtual realities (Author 2015). This is clearly evident in examples (9) and (10) – both expressing visible embodied phenomena beyond the level of simple gestures or facial expressions. In both instances, the senders construct playful images of themselves: hitting the remotely located recipient in example (9) and looking smug in example (10). While in (9) the self-reference is performed through the earlier discussed third-person zero-subject verbal construction, example (10) achieves a similar result through a third-person possessive pronoun.

(9) Slysalam ze mialas byc u naszego fryzjera a jakos Cie tu nie widzimy! Gdzes jest babo?! **<wali patelnia po fryzurze>** ;)

'I heard that you were supposed to be at our hairdresser's but we can't see you here somehow! Where are you, woman?! **<whacks the hairstyle with a frying pan>** ;)'

(10) \*proud of her cunning self\*

The origin of the forms which kineticons take can be traced to other forms of early computer-mediated content, such as HTML or programming code, where commands were included in angle brackets, but also to earlier digital platforms and gaming (Virtanen 2015). These can be culturally and contextually determined by the accessibility and popularity of platforms supporting specific typographic conventions. In some of the examples found in the

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Polish sample, enactment appropriates the conventions characteristic of two-way conversations through the Polish internet communicator Gadu-Gadu (GG) and early chatroom conventions, a phenomenon I refer to as *inter-modal transfer* – transfer of formal features of expression from one mode of interaction to another.

The sender of (9) – who described herself as a former frequent user of Gadu-Gadu in an interview – appropriates the phrase <bije> [Eng. hit-3.SG], used in GG to obtain an animated picture of one creature hitting another one on the head with a hammer. She uses a more emotive near-synonym of the GG code, i.e., ‘wali’ [Eng. whack-3.SG]. The phrase which refers to the action of hitting is enclosed in angle brackets and the main verb maintains the form of third person singular, both associated with GG and some other forms of digitally mediated discourse.

While the conventions can come from a range of online platforms and digital environments (e.g., chatrooms, forums, online games), interview data provide invaluable information about users’ practices. The sender of (9) reported that both she and the recipient were frequent users of GG and that it was her intention to evoke associations with the relevant animation through the use of GG conventions. In this way, meaning-making was achieved by both interactants taking into account the context of interaction. Even though idiosyncratic, the discursive enactment was seen as clearly referring to a virtual action, rather than just its description. This is an example of inter-modal transfer of conventions, i.e., the appropriation of formal conventions of representation from one digital modality to another: from Gadu-Gadu to texting in (9) or from LiveJournal to texting in (11) from the Finnish sample.

(11) Enpä oikein usko tohon, sillä oli meinaan maalattu se pippeli vihreäksi. (kuten koko mies) **:virne:** Ja tuskin olet vihreätä pippeliä nähnyt missään

‘I don't really believe this of course, for, I mean, the pee-pee was painted green. (like the whole man) **:smirk:** And you would hardly have seen a green penis anywhere’

Characteristic of the Finnish sample, examples of the use of colons to bracket a kineticon were found alongside some examples of underscores fulfilling the same function. Despite the fact that the typographic symbols differ, kineticons across the three data sets follow the

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same general principle of *formal unity*: they are enclosed in one of a range of typographic symbols which contribute to triggering associations with nonverbal behaviour in text-only digital communication. Example (12), which comes from an interaction between users who communicated primarily via MSN Messenger and later extended their interactions to email and text messaging, captures the moment when formal conventions are negotiated between interactants in the process of inter-modal transfer from MSN to texting.

(12)

Sami: Sowwwyyy, yes im in Helsinki now! Watching a movie with Mikko **brows**

Emma: I know you're only doing this coz I've been telling you about Ray! **\*brows\***

The kineticon *\*brows\** was introduced into Sami and Emma's texting repertoire to activate associations with an unusual animated emoji they used in their MSN communication, where typing *brows* (typographically unmarked) resulted in the appearance of an animated face which repeatedly raised its eyebrows (hence "brows"). Even though there was no such visual result in text-messages, the users reported regularly including the same written trigger in this platform as well. This helped them reinforce in-group feeling and activate visual reference to the MSN emoji.

Interestingly, despite the fact that the MSN convention to which both messages in (12) refer does not require enclosing the word *brows* in asterisks, Emma chooses to appropriate the convention, aligning with other forms of embodied digital communication which require enclosing action-related content in asterisks. In a data-focused interview, Emma explained that seeing the word *brows* in Sami's message "didn't feel right" due to the lack of demarcation from the remaining part of the text. She introduced a pair of asterisks to visually distinguish the kineticon from the surrounding text and highlight its embodied meaning striving for *formal unity* in the expression of kineticons.

## Discussion

Kineticons are employed in the text-messages investigated for this study to represent actions in progress, which are performed discursively at the time of typing and reading messages (*temporal nondisplaceability* and *immediacy*) alongside the verbally expressed propositions.

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Interestingly, none of the instances of kineticons include linguistic forms usually associated with progressive actions, i.e., continuous forms of verbs, which would provide a grammatical link between the speaker/sender and the reported action. Instead, there is a mix of nouns (e.g., *brows*) and verbs in third person singular of simple present tense (e.g., *saves*). In a few instances, the forms are ambiguous and could equally represent non-progressive verb forms or nouns (e.g., *hug* or *sigh*). In neither case, however, do they hold a strong grammatical link to the sender. Instead, kineticons represent properties perceived externally (e.g., smile or raised eyebrows) or actions performed by someone other than the speaker (e.g., through the use of verbs in third person singular in *\*saves\**). In most cases, there is a direct reference to an identifiable sensory experience, such as a triggered image of someone blushing in embarrassment or the supportive warmth of a hug. Through these connections, kineticons express senders' attitudes to the content of the propositions and constitute a discourse-represented physical response to the communicative situation. While not grammatically embedded in the clauses with which they occur (*the principle of independence*), they are syntagmatically integrated in text-messages based on their functional role as attitudinal indicators, with scope extending over stretches of preceding texts.

Users draw on available discursive tools to construct a textual (visual) representation of the nonverbal meanings they are trying to evoke. Representation of actions and observable bodily phenomena in this context can take a number of forms: in texting, these are verbal description or instances of enactment. If appropriate inscription conventions are followed, actions or states take the form of kineticons, which formally consist of words or phrases and pairs of typographic symbols which demarcate them (*the principle of formal unity*). Integrated into such textual syntagms, kineticons have performative and evaluative functions: they serve to evoke experiences or recollections of actions or states to which they refer (through a *real-world interpretative link*) as well as convey senders' attitudes to the preceding part of their messages, inviting the recipients to share the represented stance. Performative and evaluative meanings are achieved in situationally relevant ways, based on the sender's and recipient's familiarity with socially recognisable and interpretable forms of nonverbal behaviours (blushing, smiling, etc.). These interpretations are based on their background knowledge and familiarity with modality conventions (*perspective dependence*).

This study identified a number of types of kineticons at the level of complexity and

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intentionality. At the level of complexity, kineticons fall within three categories which correspond to those proposed by Norris (2004): lower-level actions, higher-level actions, and frozen actions. Just like Norris' actions in an offline context, all three types of actions can be discursively performed in the form of kineticons in text-based digital discourse.

The question of categories based on intentionality is more complex. The difficulty in applying Goffman's categories of *given* and *given off* content to kineticons stems from the fact that, from the point of view of content, meanings conveyed via kineticons correspond either to intentional (e.g., *\*\*hug\*\** or *\*saves\**) or unintentional (e.g., *\*blush\**) embodied actions. As pointed out earlier, typing is necessarily intentional and senders have full control over whether to include a particular lexical or typographical unit in the content of their text-messages<sup>1</sup>. In the analysed sample, some kineticons represent nonverbal behaviours which would be classified as given off, for example blushing, or ambiguous, e.g., sighing or smiling, which can be either intentional or involuntary. In the light of this, there emerges a need to reconsider the Goffmanian dichotomy. I propose that this is done by distinguishing between the *intentionality of the sender* and the *(implied) intentionality of their discursively constructed alterae personae*. The content of text-messages is intended from the point of view of their senders but the nonverbal behaviours included in them can be either voluntary (*\*saves\**) or involuntary (*\*blush\**) from the point of view of the alterae personae that is discursively constructed by the senders.

Throughout the paper a number of features of kineticons have been identified, which are collected into a single list of features below. Kineticons share some of their features with a class of expressives – emotive verbal constructions which contain their utterer's attitude to the subject of the utterance – which in turn have been likened to non-verbal communication (Cruse 1986). In this discussion, I borrow a number of the labels from Potts' (2007) discussion of the features of expressives and add additional ones which are characteristic of discursively performed embodied actions only. The principles listed below apply to all examples and all kineticons in the sample.

1. *Independence*: The expressive meaning of kineticons is independent of the overall propositional content of the text. Consequently, the propositional content of the

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of simplicity, I exclude the potential impact of typos on the expressive potential of kineticons here.

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utterance is not affected by the removal of a kineticon and the meaning of a kineticon is not affected by the surrounding content. They do, however, provide contextual information for each other's interpretation.

2. *Temporal nondisplaceability*: Kineticons express an action discursively performed at the time of the writing and reading of the message and cannot refer to past or future events, mere possibilities or suppositions. Their meaning, similarly to that of expressives, is "valid only for the utterer, at the time and place of utterance" (Cruse 1986, p.272), a feature it shares with non-verbal communication. It is important to note that there may exist an objective displaceability related to the fact that the sender and recipient may not access the content of the message at the same objective time, however, at the time of either of the participants engaging with the message, kineticons are nondisplaceable.
3. *Perspective dependence*: Kineticons are understood from a particular perspective: that of the sender at the coding stage and that of the recipient at the decoding stage. Contextual information and prior online and offline experiences provide information as to the interpretation of kineticons.
4. *CMC users – alterae personae link*: Rather than describe actions, the sender and the recipient construct a joint communicative space in which actions indicated by kineticons are discursively performed by their respective discursively constructed alterae personae, i.e., users' discursively constructed digital selves.
5. *Real-world interpretative link*: Descriptions of actions discursively performed via kineticons are not objective; their interpretation depends on the interactants' respective prior real-life experiences. This feature links to the principle of perspective dependence in that kineticons can be understood and interpreted differently by the sender and the recipient.
6. *Immediacy*: Like performatives and expressives, kineticons are discursively performed immediately through being coded and decoded in a message. When a kineticon has been typed and delivered to the recipient, it cannot be undone: the recipient cannot be unhugged or unsmiled at. Functionally, the corresponding attitudinal framing happens at the same time.
7. *Repeatability*: Repetition of typographical symbols, for example asterisks in example

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(6) (as well as letters in CMC) strengthens the force of a kineticon rather than resulting in redundancy (Virtanen 2015).

8. *Formal unity*: Formally, kineticons are always enclosed in one of a range of typographic symbols. These symbols trigger associations with nonverbal behaviour in text-only digital communication.

These features and principles show that kineticons are a uniform group of CMC language units governed by a fixed set of emergent rules, whose development path can be traced through the analysis of digital conversations and through data-based interviews.

## Conclusions

Through its focus on discursive enactment, as well as formal and functional features of kineticons, this paper contributes to the field of pragmatics, computer-mediated communication and multimodal studies. From the point of view of interactional sociolinguistics, this paper advances our current understanding of the distinction between meaning that is given and meaning that is given off in the light of the emergent features of text-only digital communication. Methodologically, it proposes a new way of analysing text-only digital discourse from a multimodal perspective of evoked nonverbal behaviours.

As digital communication has entered the communicative landscape of personal interactions, users have developed creative ways of appropriating the affordances of technology to construct mental models of themselves, their communicative partners and the three-dimensional storyworlds in which they interact (Author 2015), drawing heavily on real-life knowledge and multimodal experiences. In such interactions, even if they are purely textual on the surface, non-verbal content is evoked through the creative appropriation of discursive tools, such as font and typeface choice or the use of particular typographic symbols.

The aim of this paper was to demonstrate how multimodal meaning-making is achieved in text-only forms of digital discourse. Referring to the distinction between meaning that is given and given off (Goffman 1959), I distinguished between *descriptions* of actions in text-based digital environment and *discursive enactment* of multimodality and showed that users employ a set of typographic symbols to demarcate textual elements



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intended as triggers of nonverbal associations from the surrounding text. I refer to the resulting typographically marked language units as kineticons and define them as typographically marked graphical representations of actions and observable phenomena in digital communication. The analysis demonstrated that kineticons are characterised by a set of formal and functional features which distinguish them from mere description of actions and phenomena. Syntagmatically, kineticons form part of the organisational structure of text-messages in which they occur. Functionally, they serve as attitudinal indicators whose scope extends over the preceding stretch of text.

The range of kineticons in the sample represents – from the point of view of complexity of multimodal content they refer to – digitally performed lower- and higher-level actions as well as frozen actions (Norris 2004). In terms of intentionality, kineticons demonstrate a complex relationship to the sender and their discursively constructed alterae personae which led to the need to revisit the established categories of content that is given and given off in written digital discourse.

Importantly, the analysis demonstrated that, rather than treated as *representations* of non-verbal behaviour (Vandergriff 2013), kineticons should be seen as *triggers* of multimodal associations familiar from prior online and offline experience. As such, instances of discursive enactment expressed through kineticons should be analysed in the context of their multimodal meaning-making potential and seen as linked to the emergence of the phenomenon of discursively evoked multimodality, with the potential to convey associations with complex multimodal ensembles, integrated in a typographically marked lexical unit.

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