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Abstract

This study evidences turn actions done by ellipsis marks-only turns and blank turns as employed in quasisynchronous chats that are not discussed in prior literature. A brief introduction to the research background of ellipsis marks in online chats is followed by a description of the data collected before delving into the actions done by ellipsis marks-only turns and blank turns. Data were culled from multi-party chats among tertiary students during a critical reasoning class. A Conversation Analysis-informed approach is applied in this article to analyze the preference organization of elliptical turns that illustrate several turn actions which include responses signaling disagreement, confusion and disapproval besides initial actions of eliciting responses and holding the floor. More than punctuation marks or paralinguistic restitution of silences, their interpersonal meaningfulness in sequential context and differentness/similarity vis-a-vis temporal silences are demonstratively shown in microscopic and interpretive description of chat excerpts.

Keywords

computer-mediated communication, conversation analysis, ethnomethodology, preference, silence, Singapore, Singlish

1. Introduction

This study investigates the pragmatic uses of contextualized typographic cues in multi-party quasisynchronous chat (QSC), where turns cannot be viewed by participants other

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than the sender while they are being typed unless they are sent to appear on the main chat interface (Markman, 2009), although other researchers like Simpson (2005a, 2005b) labeled electronic discourse that is quasisynchronous in nature (e.g. Internet Relay Chat) as synchronous. QSC is described by Thurlow (2003) as a hybrid medium between written text and spoken language: a textual discourse typed in the style of face time talk (Rintel et al., 2001). Furthermore, several linguists observe a blurring of differences between spoken and written registers in computer-mediated texts – that the language found in computer-mediated discourse does not strictly belong to traditional definitions of either writing or speech (e.g. Baron, 2008; Crystal, 2001). Simpson (2005b) remarks that it is not a simple hybrid of speech and writing, but a generation of speech-like textual features found only in QSC. Consequentially, these features are unique and not shared exclusively with either verbal face-to-face conversations or conventional writing.

The Social Information Processing (SIP) theory, which is empirically substantiated by recent studies, postulates that textual resources or paralinguistic cues are often exploited by QSC users to convey socio-emotional meanings (Walther, 1992; Walther et al., 2005). Most QSC analysts agree that there is richness in textual resources viewed as constraints and affordances that participants use on QSC to convey nonverbal meanings (e.g. Shortis, 2007; Squires, 2010; Walther, 1996; Walther and Tidwell, 1995; Werry, 1996). These paralinguistic cues encompass chronemics (e.g. Kalman et al., 2006; Kalman and Rafaeli, 2011; Walther and Tidwell, 1995), primacy and recency effects (e.g. Rintel and Pittam, 1997), frequency and duration (e.g. Liu, 2000, 2002) and typographic marks and emoticons (e.g. Bolliger, 2009; Darics, 2010; Dresner and Herring, 2010; Hård af Segerstad, 2003; Krohn, 2004). As the last category, viz. typographic marks, is most relevant in this study, the discussion that follows will focus on it.

Lea and Spears (1992) found that socio-emotional meanings were conveyed by typographic marks in QSC. For example, the recurrence of typographic marks can suggest the author's spontaneity, sprightliness or carelessness and linguistic inadequacy. Furthermore, typographical marks were found to be directly involved in impression construction and that their interpretation is largely reliant on the context of the online interaction (Lea and Spears, 1992; Shortis, 2007).

Recent QSC research tends to focus exclusively on the effects of verbal cues and ignore the rich meanings generated by paralinguistic cues used in QSC (Liu, 2002). Although typographic and paralinguistic cues shape impressions of online users, prior studies have paid scant attention to these cues and their semio-pragmatic meanings (Darics, 2010; Jacobson, 1999; Walther et al., 2005). A recent exception is research done on emoticons, their nonverbal functions and social contexts of their occurrences (e.g. Darics, 2010; Dresner and Herring, 2010). This article aims to address this gap in research by examining the interpersonal meanings indicated by two types of paralinguistic/typographic cues which I termed as 'ellipsis marks-only turns' (EOTs) and 'blank turns' (BTs) that have not been reported in prior research literature.

Prior studies focus on the use of ellipsis marks as punctuation marks with online text. Hård af Segerstad (2003) studied chat transcripts extracted from a popular Swedish web chat and found that ellipsis marks are used just like conventional punctuation in writing. Similarly, Simpson (2005b) found that ellipsis marks, or what he calls 'suspension dots' in QSC were used exactly like their rhetorical functions in writing and that ellipsis dots act as a cohesive device to link content between turns from the same participant. Extracts (1) to (5) are taken from Simpson (2005b).

- (1) Maggi: Where else silly...online...
 (2) Maggi: I'll be here too...so this is not the last time
 (3) Ying-Lan: Vance is on his Vatican... Does he go back to USA with his family?
 (4) Maggi: like I feel...
 (5)
 01 Maggi: there is still so much to do....
 02 MichaelC: I wasn't invited anywhere by anyone!
 03 Ying-Lan: That's wonderful to have a special Christmas in Norway.
 04 Maggi: but i AM NOT MAKING MYSELF CRAZY

(Simpson, 2005b: 176–7)

According to Simpson (2005b), the dots in (1) indicate omission of unnecessary text, denote a pause in (2), and indicate aposiopesis at the end of a sentence and turn respectively in (3) and (4). Simpson (2005b) further elaborated that suspension dots act as a conjunction in linking two separate turns from the same participant, 'Maggi' in (5). Correspondingly, Bolliger (2009) found that 'multiple periods' were typically used to connect disjointed turns from the same sender, based on her online corpus of threaded discussion postings and QSC data. Also, Baron (2008) further found that ellipses on electronic discourse substituted for the punctuative functions of periods, questions marks and commas. Generally, it can be seen that the punctuative function of ellipsis marks is extended to indicate intra-turn silences and pauses in QSC.

However, their analyses are limited to 'word-bound ellipsis dots', or ellipsis dots that occurred with text within a turn, as illustrated in (1) to (5). There are no analyses of turns that consist of only ellipsis marks or EOTs, and text-free turns or BTs and their interpersonal meanings and floor functions. An illustration of actions accomplished by EOTs and BTs is shown in excerpt (6) taken from an online multi-party chat amongst tertiary students in a critical reasoning course that I taught. Note that each student participant is coded as 'S' and a second letter to denote the individual identity of each student. The assigned discussion topic was 'E-learning is the most effective method of teaching today. Do you agree?'

- (6)
 01 SG: WOW the wonders of technology -_-
 02
 03
 → 04 SI:
 → 05 SH:
 06 SH: nonsense

SG exclaimed about 'the wonders of technology' involved in e-learning with mock awe as cued by a sheepish look emoticon to hint that his statement was sarcastic (line 1). The relevance of a response here is to agree or disagree with SG's assessment. SI responded with a string of ellipsis marks or EOT at line 4 which indexed a contrived silence in response. A delay in response or a non-response to an assessment typically signals disagreement (Pomerantz, 1984a). SH similarly indicated his disagreement by

intentionally delaying his response to SG's remark with a blank turn (line 5). The interpretation that SH disagreed with SG's assessment is supported by SH's following turn when he dismissed SG's remark as 'nonsense' (line 6).

A review of QSC literature showed that semio-pragmatic meanings and floor managing functions that EOTs and BTs can generate have not been investigated. This study fills this gap in prior research by demonstratively identifying multiple actions accomplished by ellipsis marks-only turns and blank turns in QSC.

2. Method

The research data in this article are extracted from saved multi-party chats from an electronic Class Management System called XClass Teacher System, during a critical reasoning lesson I conducted with a class of 16 first-year polytechnic students in Singapore. The lesson was aimed to give students an online platform to exchange their views through persuasion and rebuttals on a controversial topic of their choice. The participants were aged 16 to 17, and they are classified as part of what Krohn (2004) terms as the 'Millennials' – those who are born after 1980, and were deemed very technologically savvy, more adaptable to electronic technology than earlier generations, and are generally familiar with chatspeak. The 16 students were divided into three groups, where each group ranged from four to six students. Each group pre-selected an argumentative topic out of a list of 20 topics arranged according to themes. After a topic was elected, every student in the group was required to read an opinion article on the chosen topic before coming to class.

The Singaporean student discussants tended to employ the local vernacular, Colloquial Singapore English or Singlish in the chats. The prevalent use of the vernacular in online typographic communication is a trend noted by Gupta (2006) and Warschauer (2002). The participants are also English-Chinese bilinguals who are prone to codeswitch in informal conversations among themselves (Ong and Zhang, 2010). Predictably, they typed several English-Chinese codeswitched sentences. To maintain intelligibility of the chats, translations of Singlish and Chinese expressions are provided in text boxes aligned next to the chat excerpts. Additional words and phrases that are helpful in the translation of Singlish turns are enclosed in parentheses. Singlish is most evident in the use of particles such as *la* (and its orthographic variant *lah*) and *leh*. These particles have been shown to modulate the meaning of an utterance (e.g. Gupta, 1992; Low and Deterding, 2003). Hence, modulations of contextual meanings by Singlish particles are included in the discussion. Singlish expressions including particles that lack Standard English equivalents are reflected in italics within translation boxes.

Netlish was also frequently used in the chat exchanges. Netlish or chatspeak is an intelligible code that has a predictable set of mutually agreed symbols in order to facilitate communication (Hård af Segerstad, 2003; Squires, 2010). Shortis (2007) found that Netlish or 'txt spelling' is generic of the language practices found in chat, emails, instant messaging and other new digital communications and across diverse countries such as Singapore and Britain (see Gupta, 2006). Translations of Netlish based on Tagliamonte and Denis's (2008) corpus-based study are provided in the text boxes alongside Singlish translations. Additional words or phrases are added in parentheses to certain turns to clarify meaning.

Contemporary methods used in analyzing QSC discourse are typically modified from their original purposes of analyzing traditional spoken or written discourse

(e.g. Androutsopoulos and Beißwenger, 2008; Simpson, 2005a; see Berglund, 2009, Stommel and Koole, 2010). Conversation Analysis (CA) is applied in this study to structure the discourse and make sense of social meanings indexed by EOTs/BTs respectively. CA is an ethnomethodological approach that uncovers the organizational practices of spoken discourse which shares several features with QSC discourse. CA allows the thorough examination of procedures that participants employ to achieve 'interactional tasks' like topic changing and disagreement (Li, 2005). Furthermore, most micro-analytical QSC studies adapted CA as the analytic norm in examining chat transcripts (e.g. Markman, 2009; Rintel et al., 2001; see Panyametheekul and Herring, 2003). This study shares the CA-based assumption that meaning making can be reconstructed by microscopic and interpretive description of chat logs that interactants rely on for reading and understanding the other party's messages. EOTs and BTs are characterized by their *prima facie* ambiguity although they are socially meaningful in sequence and in context. Hence, quantitative coding of the turns alone may not be fruitful because empirical classifications of their interpersonal meanings are not easily established without close CA-informed inferential readings.

It is also noted that the XClass Teacher system does not provide time stamps or temporal coding of the participant's typing and appearance of turns on the chat interface. However, I argue that the lack of temporal information is not germane to this study as the apparent deficiency does not hamper the interpretive work done on EOTs/BTs – they are not temporally marked like gaps and silences but visually marked by the contrastive absence of text in the form of dots or blankness.

Tsui and Ki (1996) defined a message on electronic textual discourse as a unit of analysis, similar to the notion of turn in CA as defined by Sacks et al. (1974). This study concurs with Tsui and Ki's (1996) turn-message synonymy. An adjacency pair refers to two message lengths or turn constructional units (TCUs) consisting of a first pair part (FPP) and a second pair part (SPP), each produced by a different person, with an achieved relatedness in the sense of an organizational template for intersubjectivity (Heritage, 1984; Schegloff and Sacks, 1973). Nearing the completion of a first TCU or FPP, transition to a next speaker/sender is relevant, which is called the 'transition-relevance place' (TRP). In QSC, the TRP begins after the FPP appears on the chat interface and ends with the appearance of an adjacent SPP. A possible limitation of analyzing multi-party QSC data as successively sequenced is what Garcia and Jacobs (1999) call 'phantom adjacency pairs' or 'disrupted turn adjacency' (Herring, 1999; Simpson, 2005a, 2005b) – where turns may not be visually adjacent to statements or questions intended. The explanation is that the sequence of turns is determined by the server based on the order they were sent and processed (Markman, 2009). However, Garcia and Jacobs (1999) argued that turn-taking is still present albeit as a different system which is critically needed to make sense of contextual meanings in QSC. Responses to messages posted prior to the most recent message are normative, resulting in two or more separate and interwoven 'streams' or 'floors' of conversation (Garcia and Jacobs, 1999; Simpson, 2005a; see Nilsen and Mäkitalo, 2010). A floor is defined as co-constructed by at least two participants and delineated by topic, communicative action and discussants' mutual understanding of what is being discussed (Simpson, 2005a). It can be seen that a floor, as a collaborative space, is a cohesive group of pragmatically adjacent turns. Thus, floor analysis complements turn-taking analysis of QSC in clarifying pragmatic adjacency of disrupted turns in multi-party QSC.

Nevertheless, Garcia and Jacobs (1999) among others claimed that it is still crucial to integrate screen capturing or recordings of computer screens as described by Beißwenger (2008) so as to glean real-time information on the sequential context of chats which can resolve potential misinterpretations of turn adjacency. The assumption is that SPPs are typed right after the appearance of FPPs on the chat interface. However, Garcia and Jacobs (1998, 1999) conceded that there are limitations to the validity of relying on message input information to clarify turn adjacency, including the inability of participants to respond to newly posted messages while typing responses to prior messages, and the simultaneous appearances of multiple FPPs which would make it difficult to pair FPPs with SPPs based on timing of typing alone.

Recently, Nilsen and Mäkitalo (2010) argued that participants used two strategies in maintaining coherence in QSC – addressing selected next sender by name and recycling or reformulating partial content of a previous turn. However, these strategies are not shown to be consistently applied in QSC for every disrupted turn adjacency. Furthermore, they conceded that disrupted adjacency pair parts could not be paired with certainty in their analysis.

In this study, I conducted a focus group discussion with student participants in clarifying turn adjacency of chat excerpts which are proximate to where EOTs/BTs occurred. The focus group discussion was carried out a week after the chat session with printed chat logs made available to the student participants. The turn-by-turn clarification by the students substantiated and validated the analysis of sequential contexts in the chat excerpts discussed in this article. Additionally, I also used the post-mortem to clarify typed misspellings and ambiguous forms of words.

Preference is a key CA concept that typifies the relationship of the SPP to the FPP. It is important to note that preference organization in CA refers to the structure of actions and not individual motivations or psychological desires. This study uses Pomerantz's (1984a) practice-based usage of preference which is described by conversation analysts as arguably the established model of preference (Bilmes, 1988; Boyle, 2000; Schegloff, 1988, 2007) and has been integral in CA-framed research in QSC (e.g. Raclaw, 2008; Rintel et al., 2003). Sacks (1987, 1995) elaborates that for most adjacency pair types, there are two relevant SPPs for every FPP. FPPs condition or project the relevance of SPPs (Sacks et al., 1974). A FPP type imposes a normative preference for a certain SPP type (the 'preferred') instead of the alternative SPP (the 'dispreferred'). If a relevant next action or SPP is not produced at the TRP, particularly when the 'current speaker/sender selects next' rule applies, its noticeable absence is accountable and attributable to the selected recipient (Sacks, 1995, 2004). Consequently, the silence is interpretable – it indicates that the recipient has a problem with the FPP. The visual contrast of EOTs/BTs with electronic text parallels the temporal contrast of gaps/silences in speech and electronic text. Silences and non-responses in QSC have been documented in research as similar to attributable silences in oral conversations (Rintel et al., 2003; Kalman et al., 2006, Kalman and Rafaeli, 2011). As SPPs, EOTs and BTs can be considered as somewhat analogous to gaps/silences in oral conversations and computer-mediated communication, although it is stressed that the markedness of the former is visually-based while the latter is temporally conspicuous.

Building on Sacks's work on attributable silence and its noticeable absence and accountability, Pomerantz (1984a) describes two turn shapes that house actions – one that immediately follows a prior turn with a conditionally relevant next action called

preferred-action turn shape while the other type is characterized by delays or silences and is called dispreferred-action turn shape. The former is unmarked as it is structurally simpler, while the latter is marked by complexities or 'dispreference markers' like silence, signaling unstated problems or delay features prefacing stated problems. As SPPs, gaps and silences indicate conditionally relevant actions or problems such as disagreements and knowledge shortfalls or confusion with initial assessment, although they may indicate agreements with self-deprecations, a distinct action-type housed in the form of assessments (Pomerantz, 1984a, 1984b). While face theorists infer the psychological motivations and effects of silences or non-responses as face-threatening because of their uncooperativeness in communication (Laver, 1975, 1981, reported in Rintel et al., 2003), CA proponents are concerned with the structural markedness of silences and non-responses as displays of communicative trouble or problem that recipients have with FPPs (Davidson, 1984; Kotthoff, 1993). Importantly, Bilmes (1988), in agreeing with Pomerantz's view that not all agreements are invariably preferred responses, emphasized that the situated nature of the interaction or practices of the interactants needed to be considered in determining the preference statuses of sequential actions rather than first stereotyping FPPs as projecting predetermined preference statuses of relevant next SPPs.

In this study, Pomerantz's associative criteria of structural markedness are used to identify preference statuses of responses in a context-sensitive micro-analysis. A caveat to this approach will be discussed in the concluding section of this article. It is noted that Pomerantz studied only the preference organization of assessment pairs, and while other CA researchers like Davidson (1984) examined invitations, offers, requests and proposals, preference organization has yet to be extended to still other adjacency pair types in electronic-based discourse that may reflect features not predicted within the preference model. Grounding on CA-informed findings, the premise of this study is that recipients' problems with FPPs are marked by silences or delays visually indexed by EOTs and BTs. The problems as sequentially possible next objects are not clarified by the ellipsis marks or blankness per se but by the sequential contexts in which the elliptical turns were typed.

However, some EOTs/BTs occurred as FPPs where preference organization does not apply. FPPs are not obligatory responses so delays are not accountable actions. They set constraints on the actions of SPPs (Sacks et al., 1974), entailing the requirement of informative textual turns. Consequently, owing to the text-free nature and *prima facie* ambiguity of EOTs/BTs, it is observed in this study that they did not occur as complete FPPs but were sequenced immediately before or after supporting proximate textual turns from the same sender.

3. Results

Data consist of saved chat transcripts of a 45 minute-long session as part of a critical reasoning class. Some 1674 turns generated by the three groups of students were recorded of which 37 were EOTs and BTs with deducible actions. However, there are eight additional EOTs and BTs that imply unstated problems and whose actions are weakly deducible and are consequently not listed in Table 1. Ellipsis dots-only turns and blank turns were found to be used for various actions, as a FPP, SPP or a minimal post-expansion – from eliciting responses to prefacing stated disagreements. Table 1 summarizes the findings.

Table 1. A summary of incidences of ellipsis marks-only turns and blank turns and their identified actions

Typographic cues	Adjacency	Action	No. of turns
Ellipsis marks-only turns	FPPs	Turn Elicitation	4
	SPPs/Minimal	Disagreement	7
	Post-Expansions	Confusion	4
		Disapproval	6
Blank turns	FPPs	Floor holding	6
	SPPs	Turn Elicitation	2
		Disagreement	8

It is observed in Table 1 that EOTs accomplished more turn action types than BTs. This could be accounted for by the higher number of ellipsis-marks turns vis-a-vis blank turns. Unique to BTs is their floor-holding function, which is not shared with EOTs. Further research may show that BTs share more similar functions with EOTs.

I will argue that the turn actions are internally validated and should be viewed as integral of a surprisingly wide array of uses that EOTs and BTs were being employed to do. Although all the identified action types of EOTs and BTs as listed in Table 1 will be discussed and illustrated with selected chat excerpts in this article, a full analytic description of every EOT and BT for each turn action would require more space than is available. In what follows, I will first present data fragments where elliptical turns and blank turns are identified as marked responses or dispreferreds of assessment pairs indicating disagreement which are accounted for in preference organization and discuss the extent of parallelism between elliptical and blank turns on QSC and delays and silences in oral interaction. The discussion will move to other pragmatic meanings and sequence types not covered in Pomerantzian preference scheme. The discussion will then shift to initial actions that are indicated by blank turns. I will then propose an augmentation to the Pomerantzian model of dispreferred-action turn shapes for QSC.

For the purpose of this study, each student discussant is coded with two initials – ‘S’ represents ‘student’, and a second initial to differentiate the 16 student participants. ‘TE’ indicates the teacher. Names of students referred to in the chat transcripts were replaced by their initialized pseudonyms.

3.1. Turn actions of disagreement as dispreferred responses

In excerpts (7) and (8), the discussion topic was about the question of banning pornography totally or permitting it with education. In excerpt (7), ellipsis marks, as used by SL (line 10), are shown to do the dispreferred action of disagreement with SK’s argument. In earlier turns prior to excerpt (7), SK argued that pornography should be viewed as art and a source for admiration for attractive people. SL disagreed with SK’s assessment. However, SK continued to proffer her controversial assessment (line 1).

(7)

- 01 SK: NO!!! its like a form of ADMIRATION. it
 02 can be a form of motivation.
 03 SN: yes
 04 SL: wads wif ur motivation!!
 05 SM: eh
 06 SL: la gal
 07 SK: put it in a more artistic way
 08
 09 SL: 4om juz now
 → 10 SL:
 11 SK: i mean if you were to look at a woman with
 12 hot bofdie, wouldnt you be motivated to work
 13 hard and achieve tt?

Tr.

- 01 SK: NO!!! It's like a form of ADMIRATION. it
 02 can be a form of motivation.
 03 SN: yes
 04 SL: what's with your motivation (argument for
 not banning pornography)!!
 05 SM: eh
 06 SL: *la* gal
 07 SK: put it in a more artistic way
 08
 09 SL: (You argued that it is a) form
 (of admiration) just now
 10 SL:
 11 SK: I mean if you were to look at a woman with
 12 (a) hot body, wouldn't you be motivated to
 work
 13 hard (to) achieve that (hot body)?

SK argued that pornography was an art form for admiration and that it also provided motivation to look good at line 1. However, SL disagreed with SK's assertion by questioning SK's 'motivation' argument (line 4) and extending it with the Singlish particle '*la*' (line 6) to indicate that it was self-evident that SL's argument did not hold water. The particle '*lah*' and its orthographic variant '*la*' denote self-evidence in this context (Brown, 1999; Low and Brown, 2005). However, SK continued to elaborate on her deviant view at line 7. SL remained skeptical of SK's argument by questioning the apparent incongruence between the ideas of pornography as an art form for admiration and as a form of motivation (line 9). SL then used ellipsis marks (line 10) to append her stated disagreement with SK's opinion. This interpretation is further supported as the EOT with the stated disagreement evoked a defensive explanation from SK (lines 11 to 13). Pomerantz's preference organization predicts that delays preface stated disagreements. In this case, it is interesting to note that the delay device succeeded rather than preceded the stated disagreement. It can be seen that the visual nature of the elliptical turn permits flexibility in its sequential placement without undermining its impact in contrast with delay devices or gaps in oral interaction and online pauses where their impact is limited to the precedence of stated disagreements.

In excerpt (8) below, a blank turn was used by SK (line 6) as a response to indicate disagreement.

(8)

- 01 SK: so SL, re you supporting or not
 02
 03 SL: th way guyz look and gals look its different
 04 SL: c I be NEUTRAL
 05 SL: can!!
 → 06 SK:
 07
 08 SM: hahaa
 09 SK: NO
 10 SL: ok

Tr.

- 01 SK: so SL, are you supporting or not
 (supporting our stance ?)
 02
 03 SL: the way guys (view) it and gals (view) it's different
 04 SL: see (?) I (can) be NEUTRAL
 05 SL: can!!
 06 SK:
 07
 08 SM: hahaa
 09 SK: NO
 10 SL: ok

SK and SL had agreed to support the stance that pornography should be viewed as an art for admiration and motivation to look good, and hence should not be banned. However, SL soon proffered a different assertion, stating that men may exploit pornography for nurturing lustful thoughts and actions. SL avoided giving a direct answer to SK's question (line 1) and instead justified her shift in stance by stating at line 3 that the male perception was different from that of the female perception, continuing to state her claim of gender neutral outlook (line 4) and to stress her insistence (line 5). SL's defensive behavior was strategic in attempting to reduce vulnerability to disagreement from SK. The FPP constraint on SK's response is either to agree or disagree with the assertion. At the TRP, SK used a blank turn (lines 6 and 7). Taking note that the relevance in response is agreement/disagreement, the blank turn can be seen as an equivalent of 'no immediately forthcoming talk' Pomerantzian delay device – a dispreferred to indicate disagreement as the hesitance to respond coherently indicated that SK did not agree with SL's assertion. SK then explicitly disagreed with SL's view (line 9). It can be seen in excerpts 6 and 8 that both EOTs and BTs are similar to temporal delays in prefacing stated disagreements with assessments as dispreferred-action turn shapes in oral conversations.

Excerpt (9) below shows the use of EOT as an unstated disagreement although there were no supporting textual turns from the same sender.

(9)	Tr.
01 SJ: so we all agree to abolish e-learning?	01 SJ: so (do) we all agree (that) e-learning (should be) abolish(ed)?
02	02
03 SI: from beginning xD	03 SI: (We agreed) from (the) beginning xD
04 SJ: lolz..ok	04 SJ: laugh out loud..ok
05 SH: yup	05 SH: yup
06 SI: btw e learning for me is a holiday also lolx	06 SI: by the way e-learning for me is also a holiday
07 SI: on e learning week u can very slcak wad ¹ haha	07 SI: (During) e-learning week, you can (be) very slack <i>what</i> ¹ haha
→ 08 SG: ...	08 SG: ...
09 SP: we r e-learning now...so tats no t as effective	09 SP: we are e-learning now...so (is) that not as effective
10 as non e-learning methods?	10 as non e-learning methods?
11 SI: ya	11 SI: ya
12 SJ: hmm...I sitll prefer face to face camversation	12 SJ: hmm...I still prefer face-to-face conversations
13 as u can clarify things easier	13 as you can clarify things easier
14 SH: ya	14 SH: ya

In turns prior to excerpt (9), the students raised several points that opposed the topic statement. This led to SJ's question (line 1) calling for affirmation of the opposing stance from the other discussants. SI affirmed SJ's question (line 3) by claiming that the consensual stance on e-learning as an effective teaching method started right from the beginning of their chat, coupling his statement with an emoticon of a laughing out loud face to indicate that SI found it amusing that consensus was already reached in the first few lines of the chat. Both SJ and SH ratified SI's claim (lines 4 and 5). However,

SI proffered a contrarily favorable assessment of e-learning week as a holiday and time to be slack at lines 6 and 7 with ‘lolx’ or laugh out loud and ‘haha’ indicating that his comments were made with tongue-in-cheek. SI was aware that his comments were irrelevant to the debate on whether e-learning was the most effective teaching method. Bearing in mind that the FPP constraint on SG’s response is to agree or disagree with SI’s tongue-in-cheek assessment, SG then responded with an EOT (line 8) that is analogous with Pomerantz’s ‘no talk’ device, marking the response as a dispreferred which likely indicated disagreement. It is noted that the TRP where SG’s EOT occurred involves the ‘any listener/recipient self select’ rule which may have reduced the accountability of SG’s action, rendering it as seen but unnoticed despite the visual attributability to SG. However, a floor shift at line 9 could have diverted attention away from the elliptical turn, sequentially deleting a possible elaborative turn from SG and a response from SI.

3.2. Turn action of confusion as a dispreferred response

In excerpt (10) below, two main floors ran parallel with each other – Floor A at lines 1, 5–7, 10, 12 and 14–16, addressed SN’s question and subsequent confusion on what the group’s discussion topic was while the other floor (Floor B) was on nominating SK as the group leader. Only Floor A will be discussed in relation to the finding that the EOT (line 10) was used as a response to indicate confusion.

(10)	Tr.
01 SN: what’s our topic?	01 SN: what’s our topic?
02 SL: SK BE THE LEADER	02 SL: (Let us nominate) SK (to) BE THE LEADER
03 SL: KKKK	03 SL: OK OK OK OK
04 SL: Y7UPZ	04 SL: YUP
05 SM: Youth. qn 1	05 SM: (Refer to) Youth (theme). question 1
06 SK: BNO!! SN!	06 SK: (The question on) PORN!! SN!
07	07
08 SL: OK	08 SL: OK
09 SL: walo.....	09 SL: walo.....
→ 10 SN:	10 SN:
11 SL: start topkin leh ²	11 SL: start talking leh ²
12 SM: Pornography – prohibition is impossible, only education is.	12 SM: Pornography – prohibition is impossible, only education is.
13 SK: So SM, re we doing on prohibition or porn?	13 SK: So SM, are we (arguing for) prohibition (of pornography) or porn (with education)?
14 SL: porn	14 SL: porn (with education)
15 SN: I dun know what’s our topic a	15 SN: I don’t know what our topic (is)

At line 1, SN was clueless of the discussion topic, and he posed a question for clarification. SM replied to SN at line 5 by highlighting ‘Youth’, which was the theme that subsumed the selected group discussion topic and the specific question number ‘qn 1’ (line 5). SK responded to SN’s question too (line 6) but mistyped PORN as ‘BNO’ to allude to the discussion topic on pornography. SK’s use of exclamation marks suggests SK’s impatience at SN’s apparent cluelessness despite the shared knowledge of the

topic among the other participants. SN subsequently used an ellipsis dots-only turn (line 10) as a dispreferred response to hint that he remained confused after SK's incoherent turn. This interpretation is supported by SN's preceding turn (line 1) and subsequent turn at line 15 stating that he was clueless about the topic. This is further substantiated by SM's response to SN in stating the topic in full (line 12), reflecting SM's understanding that the elliptical turn indicated SN's continued confusion over the discussion topic. This case fits a type of problem first described by Pomerantz (1984b), where silence is employed to indicate confusion resulting from a wrong assumption of shared knowledge.

3.3. Turn actions of disapproval

In excerpt (11), ellipsis marks were used as a sequence-closing third by SB to indicate disapproval with the other participants who had strayed away from the main discussion topic. The participants in both excerpts (11) and (12) were discussing about the possibility that games are killing machines that breed violent tendencies in gamers. At preceding lines before this excerpt, there was a humorous allusion to the *Star Wars* movie trilogy about the affinity of anger with the 'dark side' by SB. SB joked about being on the 'light side' and used the expression in Hokkien dialect, "*wa si ni eh lao pei*" (trans. "I am your father") twice to mimic a line uttered by Darth Vader in the movie titled *Stars Wars Episode 5 – The Empire Strikes Back* and index mock seniority and superiority relative to the other participants, ending off with a 'haa' that represented laughter. SF then exclaimed in mock horror with an expletive. The extract begins after SF's turn.

At lines 1 to 3, SB soberly admonishes SF in a post-completion musing not to jest casually as it was the Chinese traditional period of the Hungry Ghosts' festival, referred

(11)

- 01 SB: please
 02 SB: now is qi yue
 03 SB: don anyhow talk
 04 SE: start ardi arh³
 05 SE: today 7 month atrh³
 06 SD: ya
 07 SD: for 2 months
 → 08 SB: ...
 09 SE: fast sia⁴
 10 SE: cool man
 11 SD: gd luck at nite
 12 SE: its fun
 13 SB: one blink all gone liao⁵
 14 SA: exciting
 15 SB: all come back lah⁶
 16 SA: u the 1 hu lead us there wan⁷ lor⁸
 17 SE: lol
 18 SD: lol

Tr.

- 01 SB: please
 02 SB: now (it) is (the) 7th lunar month
 03 SB: don't anyhow talk
 04 SE: (Has it) start(ed) already arh³ (?)
 05 SE: (Is) today (a part of the) 7th month arh³ (?)
 06 SD: ya
 07 SD: for 2 months
 08 SB: ...
 09 SE: (Time passed so) fast sia⁴
 10 SE: cool man
 11 SD: good luck (to all of you) at night
 12 SE: it's fun
 13 SB: (In a) blink (of an eye) all (of you have strayed off topic) liao⁵
 14 SA: exciting
 15 SB: all (of you) come back (to discussing our topic) lah⁶
 16 SA: you (are) the one who lead us there one⁷ lor⁸
 17 SE: laugh out loud
 18 SD: laugh out loud

to by SB as '*qi yue*' (line 2), a romanized Chinese expression denoting the seventh month of the Chinese lunar calendar. It is a traditional Chinese belief that taboo issues such as death and misfortune that are discussed during the seventh month will rebound on the speaker and the community with dire consequences that are equally morbid. This superstitious belief provided the context of SB's admonishment (line 3).

At lines 4 and 5, SE sought confirmation from the other discussants regarding SB's statement at line 2 that the Hungry Ghosts' festival had begun. SD responded to SE's news mark by a confirmative '*ya*' (line 6) and elaborated that it started two months ago at the next line. At the end of a completed paired action, SB responded with an EOT (line 8) as a third-position object. The silence indicated a problem similar to the dispreferred marker called 'no immediately forthcoming talk' (Pomerantz, 1984a). Despite being the first mentioner of the seventh lunar month, SB expressed his disapproval that the group strayed from the main topic to chat about the seventh month and directed the group to return to discussing their original topic (lines 13 and 15). SB's disapproval is notably indicated by the use of the Singlish particle '*lah*' (line 15). *Lah* is an assertive particle typically used to convey disapproval (Low and Brown, 2005), particularly when it is used in a directive (Gupta, 1992). It is likely that the EOT at line 8 reflected SB's stated disapproval of the digression from the discussion topic at lines 13 and 15. There was a building up of intensity from the obscure expression of disapproval indicated by the EOT to its more explicit manifestation. The message of disapproval implicitly conveyed by the EOT was seen but not noticed by the other participants who continued to stray off topic. Furthermore, the EOT is not conspicuous given that it is not an obligatory response. Only in its explicit manifestation at lines 13 and 15 was SB's expression of disapproval noticed, as it provoked a friendly protest from SA that SB was the initiator of the side topic about the seventh month at line 16 and that he should rightly not be annoyed. The other participants did not sanction SB's action as they did not interpret SB's action seriously, as indicated by the 'laugh out loud' replies (lines 17 and 18), especially when the participants were primed by SB's joking frame prior to the beginning of excerpt 7.

The reason for the dispreferred-action turn shape to be seen but unnoticed by the other participants is the sequential placement of EOT – the EOT appeared as a minimal post-expansion after a completed question–answer sequence pair. Although silence as indicated by the EOT is visually attributable to SB, it is not a non-minimal post-expansion FPP in that it does not project an obligatory SPP. Furthermore, the EOT was contextually unexpected to index a negative message given that SB was seen to have initiated the digression. It can be seen that indicating a change of stance using an EOT will not be a noticeable or accountable action because the other participants were not oriented to the negative response.

In excerpt (12), an EOT is employed as a dispreferred response by SD to indicate disapproval at the lack of attentiveness of the other student participants to read and understand the content of his disagreement (line 16).

A new floor was constructed at line 4 as a result of a topic shift when SD disagreed with SA's use of the expression 'digital world' (line 2) and offered a replacement term, 'virtual world' (line 6). SA dismissed SD's replacement term at the following line by stating that

(12)	Tr.
01 SA: sumtimes they play too much until they cant tell the differences between digital and the real world	01 SA: sometimes, they play too much until they can't tell the difference between (the) digital world and the real world
02 SB: ya	02 SB: ya
03 SC: i think it is possible for them to be addicted 24 hrs, but unlikely they will follow wat is in the game..	03 SC: I think it is possible for them to be addicted 24 hours (a day), but (it is) unlikely (that) they will follow (the violent actions found) in the game(s)..
04 SD: virtual world	04 SD: (It's) virtual world (and not digital world)
05 SA: same lar ⁹	05 SA: ("Digital" and "Virtual" are) synonymous <i>lar</i> ⁹
06 SB: ya lah ⁹	06 SB: ya <i>lah</i> ⁹
07 SD: i don agree	07 SD: I don't agree
08 SE: cool~y?	08 SE: cool~why?
09 SB: y u don agree?	09 SB: why don't you agree?
10 SC: u dont agree to wat?	10 SC: what don't you agree?
11 SE: wadddsupp?	11 SE: what's up?
12 SF: wat izzit that you disagree with?	12 SF: what is it that you disagree with?
13 SB: ya...	13 SB: ya...
14 SE: woo hoo yeah	14 SE: woo hoo yeah
15 SA: wat u dun agree??	15 SA: what don't you agree?
→ 16 SD:	16 SD:
17 SB: i wan go home slp	17 SB: I want (to) go home (and) sleep
18 SF: say...	18 SF: say....
19 SE: lol	19 SE: laugh out loud
20 SB: wat say	20 SB: what (do you want to) say?
21 SF: say ur ass	21 SF: say your ass
22 SC: huh? say thing dont say halfway leh ¹⁰ SD	22 SC: huh? (When you) say (some)thing don't say (it incompletely) <i>leh</i> ¹⁰ SD
→ 23 SF:	23 SF:
24 SE: 7 month got chost la ⁹	24 SE: 7th month (is the period when there are) ghost(s) <i>la</i> ⁹
25 SE: ghost	25 SE: ghost(s)
26 SB: ya i know	26 SB: ya I know
27 SE: its coming ur way	27 SE: It's coming your way
28 SD: wa lao eh ¹¹ . look carefully	28 SD: <i>wa lao eh</i> ¹¹ . look carefully

both terms are equivalent in meaning. However, the other students failed to infer the point of SD's disagreement in line 7, probably owing to their lack of careful reading and interpretation of the exchanges between SA and SD. The question for clarification of SD's disagreement which set the constraint of a reason as the relevant SPP occurred six times at lines 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, and 15. Despite the requirement to type an answer, SD delayed his answer by choosing to use an EOT (line 16). Although Pomerantzian preference organization accounts for assessment pairs but not why-question-answer pairs, it can be seen that SD's uncooperative answer is structurally a dispreferred and similarly marked like the 'no immediately forthcoming talk' delay device. The elliptical turn hints at a problem that SD had with the questions which is strongly suggested in SD's latter supporting turn in line 28, when he finally responded with '*wa lao eh*', a Singlish exclaiming expression classified by Goh and Woo (2009) as a polite variation of '*wah lan*' which is literally translated as 'oh penis'. An equivalent expression '*wah piang eh*' is used typically to express frustration (Hanna, 2003). It is thus reasonable to state that '*wa lao eh*' as used by SD indicated frustration or exasperation in this context where the interactants failed to comprehend the point of SD's statement at line 7. This is followed by an imperative from SD to read carefully his earlier turns and understand the context of his disagreement. Hence, the EOT was a

response indicating SD's disapproval at the other participants for their inattentiveness to the context of his disagreement.

SD's EOT occurred as a noticeable silence indicating the absence of an obligatory answer which prompted the other participants, as predicted by CA and preference organization, to pursue an articulated response. SD's marked response also provoked sanctions – a chastisement from SC (line 22) for SD's lack of cooperation in giving a full answer and a fallacious speculation from SE that SD's lack of a clear textual answer was an act of avoiding taboo topics during the seventh month to ridicule SD's uncooperativeness. The noticeable absence of an obligatory action incurs negative inferences and sanctions (Boyle, 2000).

Excerpt (12) shows an EOT by SF (line 23) which was used as a turn elicitation device. SF's turn at line 12 joined a chorus of questions to SD for clarification but SF and the others did not receive an immediate answer from SD. After SD's EOT, SF reworked his demand for clarification to SD at line 18 with the single imperative verb 'say'. It is noted that the exchange between SF and SD at lines 20 and 21 constitutes a side floor and is consequently discounted from the analysis – the apparent redundancy of SB's question (line 20) on the obvious but omitted referential object of SF's truncated imperative at line 18 led to a dismissive answer from SF (line 21). It can be seen that SF's EOT at line 23 is a reworked FPP to elicit a response from SD, unlike SD's use of ellipsis marks as a SPP to imply disapproval. The turn elicitation function of a BT will be discussed in the following section.

In the case of excerpt (13), ellipsis marks are employed by SN as a minimal post-expansion implying disapproval with a mock exchange of love between SK and SL who are both females.

- (13)
- 01 SK: I love you SL
 02 SL: I love u 2
 03 SK: mucakzz
 04 SM: yuriiiiiii!
 05 SK: LIPS!!!!!!!!!! <3
 → 06 SN:
 07 SL: toungue!!
 08 SM: YURI in action!
 09 SK: SO SMOOCHIESSS, how is it goibng?
 10 SN: lesbian
 11 SL: wateva
 12 SM: hahahahahaaaaa!!

- Tr.
- 01 SK: I love you SL
 02 SL: I love you too
 03 SK: muacks
 04 SM: yuriiiiiii!
 05 SK: LIPS!!!!!!!!!! <3
 06 SN:
 07 SL: tongue!!
 08 SM: YURI in action!
 09 SK: So SMOOCHIESSS, how is it going?
 10 SN: lesbian
 11 SL: whatever
 12 SM: hahahahahaaaaa!!

SK and SL are female students who jokingly appeared to be intimate with each other (lines 1 to 5). In an earlier turn that was not included in this excerpt, SK supported and agreed with SL's view that sex education was necessary for youths, and in mock humor, she declared love for SL (line 1). SL reciprocated SK's declaration of love at line 2. SK then followed up with a reworked FPP to express her love with 'mucakzz' (line 3), an onomatopoeic word for kissing, to mean she planted a 'kiss' on SL. A post-expansion from SM followed, in which SM expressed her disapproval with SK and SL's intimate exchanges by referring to them as "yuri", a Japanese female name-turned-cover term used to refer to lesbianism as depicted in pornographic manga and anime (lines 4 and 8). SK also mentioned 'lips' (line 5), alluding to the 'kiss' at line 3. SK also used a rebus,

'<3', that resembles the shape of a heart, to represent mock lesbian love for SL. SN then used an ellipsis dots-only turn (line 6) to imply disapproval with SK and SL's intimate exchanges. This interpretation can be inferred from SN's subsequent turn at line 10 where SN labeled the affectionate act between SK and SL as 'lesbian' – a false claim acting as a derogatory remark. Similar to the sequential placement of the EOT in excerpt (12) which appeared as a minimal post-expansion after a completed paired action, the EOT in this excerpt is an obscure post-expansion from an observer. The non-consequential nature of the post-expansion and obscurity of message render the EOT as seen but unnoticed by the other participants. At line 7, SL reworked her reciprocation of love by extending the imagery of kissing, with the mention of 'tounge', a misspelling of 'tongue' to suggest the highly intimate contact of tongues during French kissing, prompting a response from SM. SK typed another non-minimal post-expansion FPP at line 9 which projects a SPP from SL. The extended action of declaration-reciprocation of love provokes the second post-expansion from SN (line 10). The latter is a consequential action prompting a dismissive response from SL at the following line. It can be seen that the extended mock exchange of love between SK and SL was likely done to provoke disapproving responses, particularly when both SK and SL are platonic and heterosexual friends and not lesbians or lovers.

3.4. Initial turn actions of eliciting responses and holding the floor

In extract (14) below, SK used a BT as a FPP to elicit responses from the floor.

(14)

01 SK: We shld have done e-learning
 02 SM: mmmm
 03 SK: HEYS!
 04 SK: talk
 → 05 SK:
 06
 07
 08 SN: e-learning?? I can do when I'm home a

Tr.

01 SK: We should have discussed the e-learning topic
 02 SM: mmmm
 03 SK: HEYS!
 04 SK: talk
 05 SK:
 06
 07
 08 SN: e-learning? I can do (it) when I'm (at) home

SK expressed her regret in not choosing the discussion topic on the advantages and disadvantages of e-learning (line 1). SM used the continuer 'mmm' (line 2) as a back-channel to signal that she was listening and thinking about what SK typed at line 1. SK's call to the other discussants to 'talk' or contribute messages online (lines 3 and 4) implied that a significant period of time lapsed with no responses from the other participants. Apparently failing to receive a response from the other participants, SK used a BT (lines 5 to 7) as a turn elicitation device to evoke a response from the other students. A BT in this case is used as a reworked eliciting device calling for a SPP of the summons–answer pair. SK's BT is noticeable as SN subsequently responded to SK's summon at line 8 by responding to SK's earlier statement (line 1).

A series of BTs was employed by SB to hold and dominate the floor as a FPP to preface an initial assessment in excerpt (15).

(15)
01 TE: can agree or disagree but with supporting
 details
02 SB: no
03 SF: lol
→ 04 SB:
05
06
→ 07 SB:
08
09
→ 10 SB:
11
12
→ 13 SB:
14
15
→ 16 SB:
17
18
→ 19 SB:
20
21
22 SB: sian¹²
23 SB: later peee must walk back all the way
24 SB: we try to drag
25 SD: lol. sure

Tr.
01 TE: (You) can agree or disagree but with supporting details
02 SB: no
03 SF: laugh out loud
04 SB:
05
06
07 SB:
08
09
10 SB:
11
12
13 SB:
14
15
16 SB:
17
18
19 SB:
20
21
22 SB: bored
23 SB: later (we) must walk all the way back (to our classroom venue for the PEEE module)
24 SB: we try to drag
25 SD: laugh out loud. sure

TE joined in the chat at line 1 to instruct the student discussants to provide supporting details such as experts’ views they had read in books and articles as evidence to back up their arguments. However, SB rejected TE’s statement (line 2). SF’s ‘lol’ or ‘laugh out loud’ turn (line 3) can be seen as a sequence closing third. After the completion of the sequence, SB used several BTs as a floor holding device or ‘attention-seeking tool’, from lines 4 to 21, apparently as a way to gain visual attention from other participants to preface his stated boredom at the thought of a long walk to reach the next class venue (lines 22 and 23) and his call on the other discussants to delay in proceeding to the next class (line 24). SB received a favorable response from SD at the following line. Data show that only BTs were used as attention-seeking tools but it is not inconceivable that ellipsis marks can accomplish the same effect.

4. General discussion

The present findings constitute an important step forward in understanding how silence and delays as indicated by semiotic devices are made socially meaningful in electronic communication while expanding on the CA literature on preference organization of QSC. The preceding micro-analytic discussion of conspicuous cases demonstratively reveals that ellipsis dots do not function merely as punctuation marks as reported in prior literature but index a number of pragmatic meanings and floor functions in different contexts and sequences. These results demonstrate that there is

partial parallelism and divergence in function between EOTs/BTs and gaps/silences in oral conversations and computer-mediated data. As SPPs of assessment pairs, they function similarly to their oral conversational counterparts as 'no immediately forthcoming talk' delay devices and 'no talk' devices to index disagreement with a prior assertion or confusion caused by unshared knowledge. However, the visual markedness of EOTs/BTs engenders visible and constant attributability across all sequential placements contrary to the temporal attributability of silences which is limited to 'current speaker selects next' governed TRPs. Another entailment of the visual markedness of EOTs/BTs is their transformability. In an oral conversation, an inter-turn silence or gap is transformed to an intra-turn silence or pause if it is curtailed by talk of the same speaker who was talking prior to it (Sacks et al., 1974). However, typographic silences cannot be minimized and transformed in a similar manner because of their inherent markedness and attributability. The results show that the sequential placement of EOTs and BTs affects their noticeability. EOTs/BTs' conspicuity is limited like their temporal counterparts to obligatory SPPs that are expected by participants, particularly where 'current sender selects next' rule applies. It can be seen that similar to attributable silences, sequence organization and accountability are prerequisites of EOTs/BTs' noticeability as SPPs.

It can also be seen that EOTs/BTs as used in electronic discourse differ in a few ways from the predictions of Pomerantz's preference organization of oral interaction. The visual markedness of elliptical turns permits the case of an elliptical turn appending a stated disagreement without affecting its effectualness in contrast to temporal gaps or delays which are limited to prefacing stated disagreements to be impactful. In the case of a why-question-answer pair discussed in excerpt 12 which is a sequence pair type not analyzed in traditional preference organization the EOT indicates disapproval, a problem type which was not discussed in prior studies. Further research may show that EOTs/BTs convey problems beyond disagreements, confusion and disapprovals in other still unexamined pair types. Also, EOTs/BTs occurred as post-expansions and initial actions that are not accounted for in preference organization. As minimal post-expansions, EOTs are inconspicuous and do not project responses or further expand sequences. As FPPs, they are not accountable actions but rather acted as turn elicitation devices or attention-seeking tools in managing the floor, largely owing to their visual contrast with text.

Superficially, elliptical and blank turns as SPPs may appear to resemble non-responses on Internet Relay Chat (IRC) in indicating sender avoidance as described by Rintel et al. (2003) or response latencies in violating response expectancy at TRPs in asynchronous computer-mediated communication (Kalman et al., 2006; Kalman and Rafaeli, 2011). However, there are significant distinctions. Firstly, EOTs/BTs are visually marked by their presence whereas non-responses and online silences, like their temporal counterparts in oral conversations, are temporally marked by the absence of turns. Furthermore, online silences studied by Kalman et al. (2006) and Kalman and Rafaeli (2011) are significant time lapses in email correspondence that were quantified in hours and days based on asynchronous buffered transmissions which are slower than quasisynchronous communication between sender and receiver interacting in real-time. Another notable difference is that elliptical and blank turns can convey specific and deducible meanings or functions whereas non-responses are shown to be ambiguities

broadly attributed to an array of medium constraints like medium-related lags and/or fast-moving typographic scroll besides sender intentions like deliberate avoidance and indifference. It is also hard to discount environmental circumstances of temporal silences like distractions. It can be argued that EOTs/BTs are deliberate cues that are more likely to convey pragmatic meanings than temporal silences. Yet another distinction is that the turn actions that are demonstratively achieved by EOTs/BTs do not overlap with the functions of non-responses that were specially afforded by IRC-specific commands and software limitations.

It can be seen that EOTs/BTs are more economically produced vis-a-vis textual turns, in that they are easier and quicker to produce by repetitive pressing of the dot key and completed by the pressing of the enter key than sentential turns which require more typing and time for psychomotor manipulation of alphabetic keys. In computer-mediated discourse which is governed by the maxim of brevity and speed (Werry, 1996; Thurlow, 2003), the appeal of EOTs/BTs lies in their relative efficiency in accomplishing actions – it is more expeditious to produce EOTs/BTs than temporally marked delays/silences to imply disagreements, confusion or disapproval on a fast-scrolling typographic chat interface. However, the preceding discussion on the differentness of EOTs/BTs vis-a-vis temporal silences shows that the former cannot be strictly classified as paralinguistic restitution of silences.

This study shows a relationship between ‘dispreferred’ and non-acceptive actions (disagreement, confusion and disapproval) and marked responses (EOTs/BTs). Increasingly, conversation analysts view structural markedness as one aspect of a multi-dimensional conceptualization of preference but are divided on the definitive criteria of preference and the bases for ascribing preference statuses to actions (e.g. Bilmes, 1988; Boyle, 2000; Lerch, 2005; Pomerantz, 2008). It is acknowledged that dispreference markers do not invariantly index dispreferred messages and may accompany preferred actions (Bilmes, 1988; Taylor, 1994). However, the controvertible nature of preference does not detract the micro-analysis of this study as dispreference markers are well established in CA literature to indicate recipients’ problems with initial actions and their perceived reluctance in producing explicit responses. Bilmes (1988) went further to argue that dispreference markers or reluctant markers are a different and partially autonomous phenomenon from the concept of preference. Furthermore, the identification of preference statuses is peripheral to the analysis and understanding of the turn actions done by EOTs/BTs which are uncovered by context-sensitive reasoning based on clues derived from the contexts of floors, inter-turn cohesion of adjacency pair parts, and preceding and/or subsequent proximate turns from the sender of the elliptical turn.

The findings corroborate a core SIP tenet that chat users adapt computer-mediated cues to convey interpersonal meanings that are typically expressed through nonverbal cues in face-to-face interactions. Interestingly, the *prima facie* ambiguity of EOTs/BTs did not lead to any perceived misunderstanding among interactants as they picked up the contextual clues that add up to singly viable interpretations. It is likely that as Millennials, they negotiated and shared the contextualized Netlish meanings in prior real-time chats and these meanings were subsequently conventionalized and inferred easily. It is noted that the lack of proximate textual turns elaborating on the indirect meanings conveyed by elliptical turns considerably weakened the latter’s deducibility.

The results of this study are shown to transcend specificities of the Singaporean context by their relation to CA findings on temporal silences and dispreference markers. Nevertheless, it is noted that further studies may show culture-specific practicality of various turn actions of EOTs and BTs. The findings of this study are culled from the Singaporean context and the pragmatic meanings described in this study may be peculiar to the culture in which they are used, particularly when it was shown that Singlish expressions contribute to the interpretive work on EOTs/BTs. It is established that silences are interpreted differently by different cultures (Basso, 1970; Lebra, 1987; Tannen and Savile-Troike, 1985, reported in Rintel et al., 2003; Spencer-Oatey and Xing, 2005); it can be extrapolated that the variance in interpretations/intentions of pauses/silences extends to inferred meanings indicated by EOTs/BTs. The recommendation is that future research comparatively describes the hypothetical differences and similarities in semio-pragmatic meanings attached to semiotic delays and silences in QSC as used in intracultural and intercultural communication.

The underlying goal of this study is to demonstratively show that the interactants were creative with the use of ellipsis marks and BTs as attention-seeking tools and non-acceptive responses that are not explored in prior literature. More than just adaptations to medium-related constraints of QSC, these socially meaningful devices formed part of an expressive repertoire of Netlish that bears testimony to human creativity with contextualized language. EOTs/BTs cannot be simply classified as paralinguistic restitution of silences in light of their uniqueness based on their hybridity of speech and writing characteristics. The in-situ multiple meanings generated by the absence of text within a turn as discussed in this study cannot be ignored or glossed over in our understanding of online human communication. As this study has demonstrated, in-depth CA analyses of the actions accomplished by typographic devices in QSC are paramount in explicating the linguistic repertoire that is unique to online communication.

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Notes

1. *Wad* is a variant of *wat* or *what*, which is used to convey a strong assertion or indicate the obviousness of an information item (Low and Brown, 2005; Platt and Ho, 1989; Wee, 2004). Additionally, it “carries the force of a contradiction to something that has previously been asserted” (Wee, 2004, p. 1069).
2. *Leh* (and its orthographic variants *le* and *lei*) are assertive particles used in directives to convey an expectation that the interlocutor should comply with the command (Gupta, 1992).
3. *Arh* or *ar* marks a question that requires a response (Low and Deterding, 2003).
4. *Sia* or *siah* is used as an emphatic device (Brown, 1999).
5. *Liao* is a Hokkien tag which means ‘already’ (Goh and Woo, 2009).
6. *Lah* (and its orthographic variants *la* and *lar*) is an assertive particle used in directives to convey an expectation that the command should be adhered to (Gupta, 1992), likely showing disapproval (Low and Brown, 2005).
7. *Wan* is a homophone of *one*, which is a Singlish ‘nominalizer’ that strengthens an assertion and is similar in sense to *la* (Gupta, 1992).

8. *Lor* denotes obviousness or a sense of resignation (Low and Brown, 2005; Wee, 2004).
9. The particles *lar*, *la* and *lah* are used to express senders' positive commitment to their claims (Gupta, 1992), typically to indicate self-evidence or obviousness (Low and Brown, 2005).
10. See footnote number 2.
11. The Hokkien expression *wa lao eh*, as a variant of *wah lan* and *wah piang eh*, indicates frustration (Hanna, 2003).
12. The Singlish word *sian* of Hokkien origin denotes 'bored' (Brown, 1999).

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