

EMOJIS: NEEDLESS or GENIUS?

For the first time ever, an emoji was given the Word of the Year Award by The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) in 2015. The 'face with tears of joy' emoji was chosen not only due to the rapid increase of the use of emojis as a visual communication tool, but also because it was the most used emoji globally, across all cultures in 2015 (Oxford Dictionaries, 2015). This is significant when you compare the social and political differences between cultures, yet there is a common understanding of the 'face with tears of joy' emoji. Even though this is the case with the 'face with tears of joy' emoji, the same rule does not apply to all. Some cultures use emojis differently to others. One thing however is common, and that is their ability to transform and support text by posing as digital body language.

As a predominantly digital culture in the 21st century, we are visually driven and possess a need to better express ourselves through the digital interactions we participate in daily, which mostly, lack physical human interaction. This essay will argue that emojis, despite their criticism amongst some, have the ability



Figure 1. 'Face with tears of joy' emoji (KissPNG, 2018)

to galvanize, transform and support intended meaning in text and can be observed through the higher level of understanding by the recipient when they are used.

To better understand emojis, I will investigate their role and classification in semiotics, explore their creation and interpretation, how they transform and support text and their social and political applications in our society.



Figure 2. 'face with tears of joy' - word of the year in 2015 (Oxford Dictionaries, 2015).

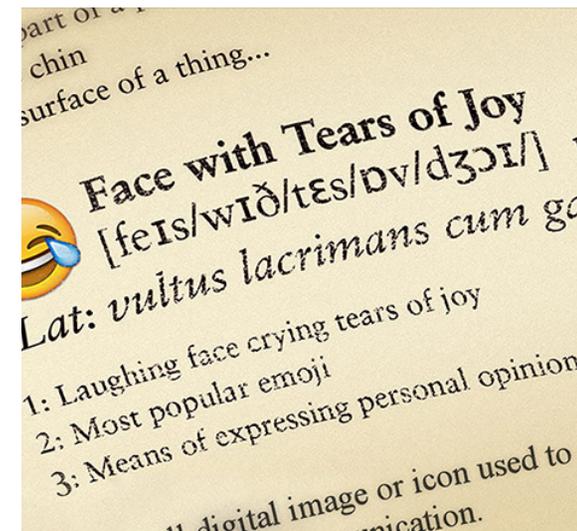


Figure 3. 'face with tears of joy' dictionary page (CNN Tech, 2015)



Smileys & People



Figure 4. Keyboard example of emojis. (Quora, 2017)

An emoji is defined as a two-dimensional pictograph “or icon used to express an idea or emotion in electronic communication” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2015). Developed in Japan in 1999 by Shigetaka Kurita, their intended purpose was to assist communication in the digital landscape (Alshenqeeti, 2016). Despite the similarity to the English word for emotion, the term emoji is derived from Japanese origins,

“e”, meaning picture and “moji” meaning letter or character in Japanese.

Physical cues such as tone of voice, facial expression or gesture are body language tools which are critical to our understanding of others and this is lacking when we communicate digitally. Emojis attempt to bridge a communication gap between the sender and the recipient through visual writing code and may be considered a digital substitute for body language.



Icon

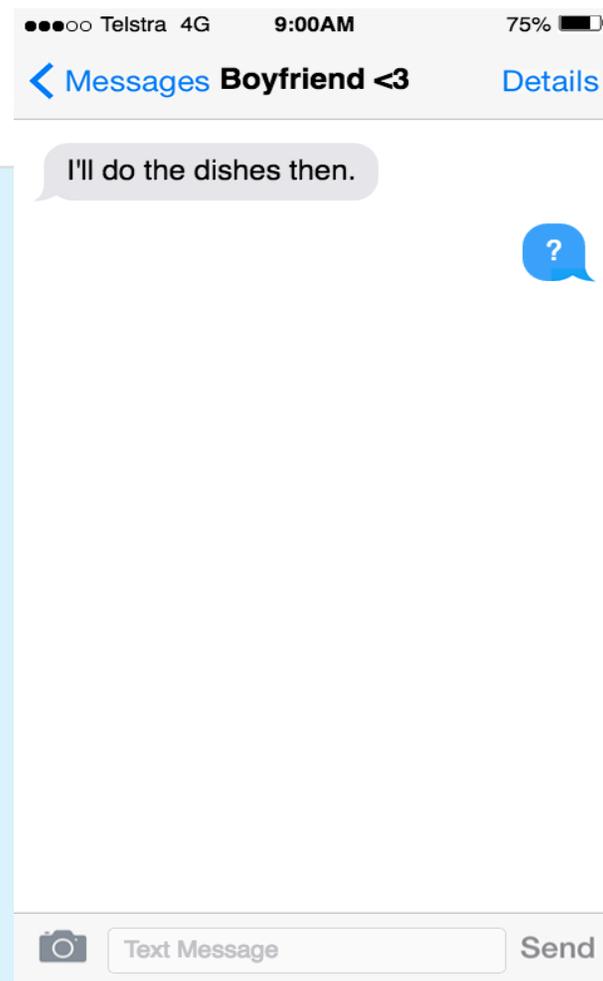


Index



Symbol

When reflecting on emojis’ place in semiotics, it quickly becomes clear that emojis are icons, indexes and symbols. They are icons because some of them are literal visual representations, an example of an icon as an emoji is the sun. They are also indexes because they can point to human behaviour such as the camera icon with the flash. Lastly, at times they can be symbols because some require taught knowledge to understand, such as the range of flags available. An emoji can affect the semiosis experienced by the recipient because by using an emoji to accompany text, it assists in conveying the intent of the sender in a highly expressive format (Alshenqeeti, 2016). You could use a sentence by itself and convey one meaning:



Imagine you’ve just received a text...

“I’ll do the dishes then”. In this sentence there is only text with no emoji present. The recipient may misunderstand the intent of the sender. Are they being passive aggressive? Are they simply not bothered by this task? There is no easy way to convey the tone of the message.

Figure 5. Text with no emoji. What’s the tone?



Figure 6. Text with “grinning face with big eyes” emoji. What do you think the tone is now?

How would the sentence be understood with an emoji?

“I’ll do the dishes then 😄”

In this sentence the text is accompanied by a happy/smiley emoji. The sender is conveying that they are not bothered by this task, and there is no issue. In this example, the recipient is most likely to understand that the sender is happy to do the dishes.



What happens then, if we use the opposite emoji to accompany the text?

“I’ll do the dishes then 😞”

In this sentence the opposite emoji to the happy/smiley emoji has been used, the “weary face” emoji. The sender is conveying that they are unhappy with the task at hand and may be unwilling to do it. The recipient is most likely to understand that the sender is unhappy.

Figure 7. Text with “weary face” emoji. What do you think the tone is now?



All of these scenarios would have an effect on communication between two people, with emojis adding depth to the text. Much like face-to-face communication, different emojis or different digital body language can alter the meaning of the same sentence. This can apply to every sentence imaginable, so it makes the use of emojis significant in the digital age that we live in today. Another interesting point is that emojis are independent of language meaning that the semiosis of them is not reliant on your ability to understand a language, other than the language of emotion which is global and mostly understood quite easily by the average viewer. This may be seen to bridge the gap of understanding between languages and may be seen as one answer to the constraints of language.

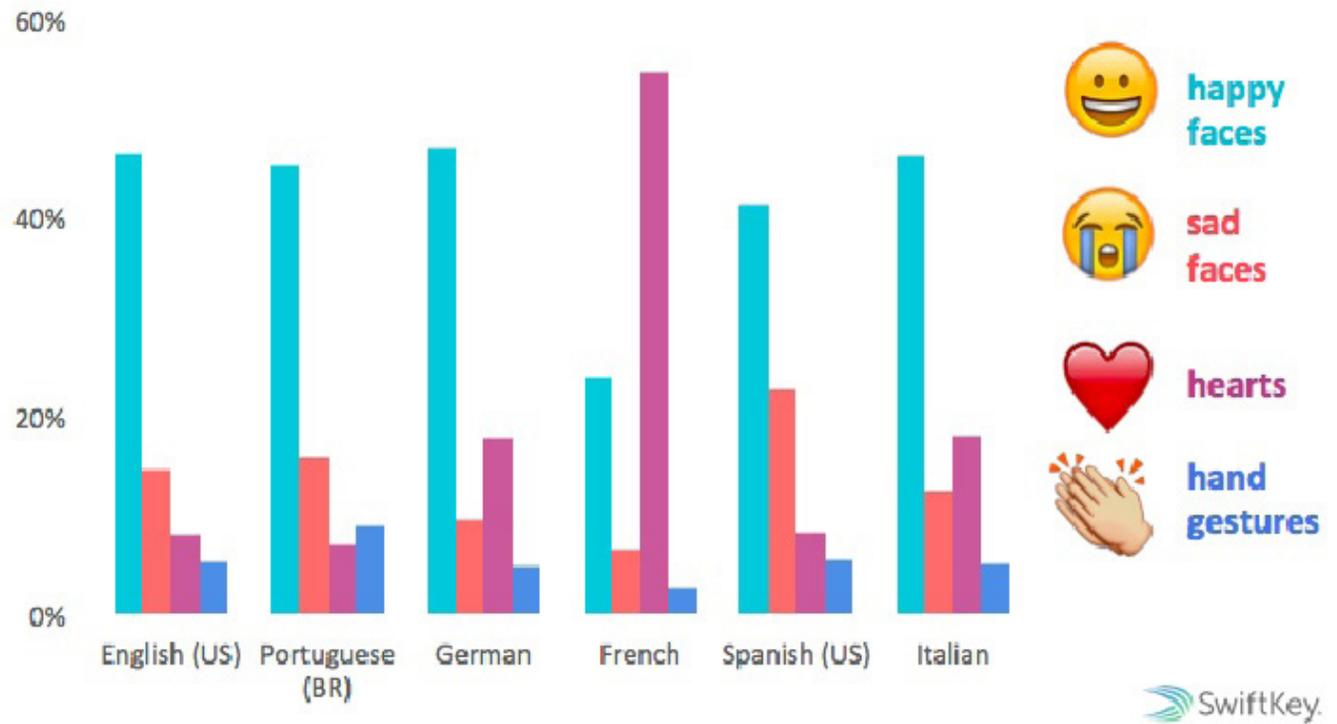


Figure 9 (A & B). A: Emoji sentiment graph (SwiftKey Report, 2015)



Figure 8. “Which emoji does your language use more than others?” (SwiftKey Report, 2015)

SwiftKey, the company behind the design of the keyboards on our phones have been studying our use of emojis and the different trends amongst different languages. Their results are quite interesting... Can you guess which language leads the world in their use of the heart emoji? “The French use four times as many heart emoji than other languages, and it’s the only language for which a ‘smiley’ is not #1” (“SwiftKey Emoji Report”, 2015). Australia is seen as “the land of vices and indulgence”, with double the use of alcohol emojis, and leads in use of junk food and holiday themed emojis (“SwiftKey Emoji Report”, 2015). It is fascinating to compare cultures and make links to their use of certain emojis. Americans lead in use of LGBT pride, skulls, birthday cake and female orientated emojis. Despite differences in popularity between countries, one thing remains steady, and that is the

popularity of happy faces, followed by sad faces and then by love hearts. This supports the theory of their use to convey emotion and body language.

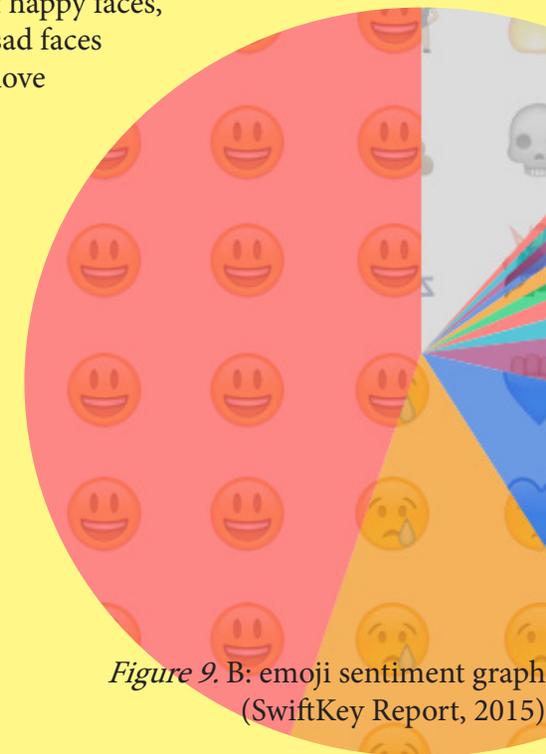


Figure 9. B: emoji sentiment graph (SwiftKey Report, 2015)

Emotion is not easily conveyed through text, sometimes leaving a gap in understanding the writer's meaning. An interesting adaptation of emojis to support text has been their application in a book series called "OMG Shakespeare" by authors Courtney Carbone and Brett Wright in which the classic literary works of Shakespeare, which are famously known to be written in a complex way, have been translated into a different format through the use of emojis, slang and alike.

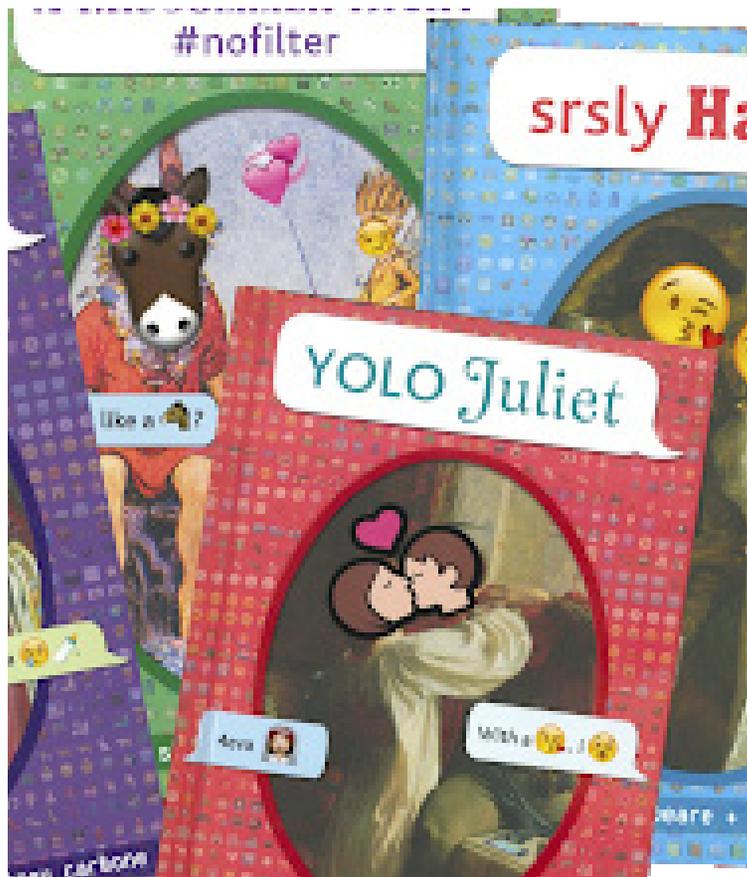


Figure 10. "OMG Shakespeare Book Series" (The Shakespeare and Film Microblog, 2016)

Some academics have been left horrified as they believe that it has tarnished the works, not doing them justice. However, I believe it would be beneficial as a secondary resource, with the primary resource being to read the original works. It is also notable that Shakespeare's works were intended to be theatrical productions, which rely on the use of body language to convey a story, something that the original texts lack by themselves. By exploring the works in a new way, intended context can be easily understood.

Additionally, it opens up the opportunity for those who struggle to read Shakespeare to actually read it. Not surprisingly, the "OMG Shakespeare" book series has been used in classrooms as an aid to teach Shakespeare to children at a younger age and provides a new way for knowledge to be transferred. Emojis have a bad reputation amongst some due to their use alone instead of when accompanying text. I propose that when used with text they are beneficial to our ability to communicate. This can be demonstrated in the "OMG Shakespeare" book series.

ROMEO

I don't want to get there on time anyway. I have a bad feeling about tonight. 🙄

But I'm outnumbered. Sigh. Let's go.

[Scene 5]

✓ Romeo has checked into Capulet's Mansion.



Romeo

At a party I'm not supposed to be at lol.



REPLY

Romeo: Whoa! Spotted a hottie. She. Is.

#PERFECT. ✨❤️✨

Tybalt: 😡

tybalt

What is our enemy doing here?!👁️👁️ This guy's definitely a Montague and he's staring at Juliet! 🙄

capulet

Is it Romeo? 🙄

Figure 11. A sneak peek of Scene 5 from "YOLO Juliet" (The Digital Reader, 2015)

Emojis are available for use in a standard Unicode format across multiple platforms, including phones, email and social media (Kerslake & Wegerif, 2017). This has assisted with their popularity and increase of use. Everyone from celebrities, to politicians, to regular everyday people have access to them and there are even different skin tones and hair colours to better portray their sender.



Figure 12. Introducing ginger emojis. (Business Insider Australia, 2018)

Some celebrities have even released full sets of emojis designed in their likeness! An example is media mogul Kim Kardashian, who has released KIMOJI on the apple app store for purchase and use on user's phones ("KIMOJI on the App Store", 2018).



Figure 13. KIMOJI App screenshot. (Apple App Store, 2018)

Ex-presidential candidate Hillary Clinton has even taken to Twitter in the past and used them to solicit feedback from the American People during her campaign in 2015. She asked



"How does your student loan debt make you feel? Tell us in 3 emojis or less". More than 8,000 people commented on her tweet (Oxford Dictionaries, 2015). This proves that emojis are making head in the social forum and even politicians are taking notice of them.

Perhaps to better understand emojis and their significance, it would be beneficial to reflect on their similarity to ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, a historical form of communication.

Hieroglyphs are defined as "a picture or symbol that represents a word, used in some writing systems, such as the one used in ancient Egypt" (Dictionary, 2018). When compared to emojis, there are various



Figure 14. Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphs. (PBS, 2016)



resemblances and an evolution of communication is observed (Alshenqeeti, 2016). These hieroglyphs depict humans with expressions, symbols, activities and animals and try to tell a story visually, rather than with words.

Emojis are intended for the same purpose, and

similarities between the hieroglyphs and the emojis can be observed when comparing the eyes and even the hash symbol.

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