Do You Speak Emoji? The Language of Emojis

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Language is a living tool of communication that is constantly adapted to enable the exchange of information. Language changes based on geography to situation, but mainly by cultural contexts. These cultural contexts are a result of complex organisational relations, based on knowledge and rules predominant in specific groups. This repertoire is directly related to the sense of belonging (Combi, 2016). Technology is one of the aspects of this cultural repertoire and it is reflected on different aspects of daily life, such as methods of production, transportation and, of course, communication. For that reason, the introduction of new technological developments goes beyond the individual adoption and can impact social structure in different degrees.

It is easy to understand the diffusion of innovation process when observing what happened in the last 30 years, with the quick adoption of digital technologies, especially regarding personal devices such as computers, tablets and mobile phones, especially

smartphones. This technological shift had global reverberations. One of the main reasons is because the ubiquitous technology impacted the way humans communicate: 95% of all information available in the world is digital (Castells, 2014) and part of the content is also humans communicating digitally. In fact, 4.66 billion people use the internet, with 92.6% of the access via mobile phones (Johnson, 2021), consolidating computer-mediated communication (CMC) as part of the everyday life with its own rules.

This fluidity of communications has reduced distances and, to a certain extent, enabled the creation of communities of interest, disconnected from geographical contexts (McLuhan, 2016), increasing the contact of individuals from different cultural contexts. However, at the same time as this virtual proximity increased the information exchange, it removed one of the main layers of the human communication: the non-verbal elements. Non-verbal communication covers a set of elements that help information exchange,

such as gestures, facial expressions, space, manners, eye contact among others. It differs among cultures but as a common ground, it can regulate relationships or even replace verbal communication (Phutela, 2015).

The process of understanding CMC goes beyond cultural backgrounds and requires users to adapt their own communication style to converge towards those involved. In real-life interactions, there is a speech accommodation that increases the level of understanding and validation (Gallois et al., 2005). The same process happens in different levels in a digital context, with the emulation of the interlocutor language through the writing style and the use of pictograms. The risk is that the cultural cues might not be evident enough to complete the information exchange, as the communication only happens if all those involved are able to decode the used language.

In some ways, this introduction of conversational elements in CMC constitutes almost a new language, a "cyberlanguage – nonstandard English replete with abbreviations of all kinds and surrogate face-to-face cues such as emoticons" (Christopherson, 2011, p. 1). However, the grammar of this new language has different rules and varies according to geography, language, gender, age, and it is not even consolidated among individuals from more hegemonic groups. Thus, despite the attempts of artificially creating an international visual system (Neurath, 1974; Takasaki, 2006), a universal pictographic language does not exist (yet).

There are suggestions that emojis could be considered an international language but, as this chapter will explain, the communication is intimately connected to cultural backgrounds. The word 'emoji' emanates from the Japanese and means "picture character". 絵 (e ≅ picture) 文 (mo ≅ writing) 字 (ji ≅ character). Emoji can be defined as "a shorthand for a facial expression" (Kralj Novak et al., 2015, p. 1), despite the fact that they can also represent other elements and actions.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Pictograms are the most ancient human attempts to register and communicate experiences. "The term pictograph is used here to mean a graph that encodes a word (or a linguistic unit) through the medium of depiction" (Bottero, 2004, p. 251). Before the development of alphabets, drawings and symbols were the only graphic elements that registered aspects of the ancient life style. First, through petroglyphs (rock carvings), and later on hieroglyphs (a system of pictorial writing). The tradition of pictographic representations followed the evolution of graphic communication itself. For example, during epochs with low literary rates, such as in Europe during the medieval period, visual signs were largely used to identify human groups, by the adoption of crests and guild symbols. However, graphic communication was mainly a written domain until technology enhancement enabled the register of real-life imagery with the first daguerreotypes (the first commercial photographic process, using silvered copper plates) in the 19th century. Overall, "communicating visually is what we have done for the vast majority of human history" (Dewan, 2015, p. 2). One reason behind it, is that it is easier for the human brain to process and recall images over words.

Visual signs are indeed an important part of communication. But different from photography, pictograms are a language of synthesis (Costa, 1987), increasing the communication speed. Despite not being an international language, pictograms can sometimes replace written words. To be effective, they must be as monosemic as possible, preventing misinterpretation caused by double meanings (Rosa, 2010). Good examples can be found with the Swedish furniture chain Ikea or the Danish toy company Lego. Their assembly instructions use a complex set of visual directions but not verbal language, combining a multisemiotic visualisation strategy

(Consonni, 2020). Another example is the pictography used on the Olympic games. The first attempts to represent the different sports by using symbols in 1936 were more illustrations than pictograms, still connected to the medieval heraldic tradition. Over time, they changed to the now consolidated iconographic format (Rosa, 2010). A live representation of the Olympic pictograms was part of the official opening ceremony of Tokyo 2020.

Pictograms are also important on public spaces and help individuals to navigate in different scenarios or to behave according to specific rules. Traffic signs and airport boards are among the most popular pictograms used on signage. The idea is that the pictograms can communicate the necessary information regardless of the use of text (Clara and Swasty, 2017), as shown in Figure 20.1. It is important to understand that not only the cultural background but also the surroundings and the context can change the meaning of a specific pictogram. For that reason, the principles of semiotics must be considered (Hassan, 2015).

Principles of Semiotics

As a broad definition, semiotics studies the process of creating meanings. There are different theoretical approaches and for visual analysis, a good starting point is the definition of sign by Pierce as "something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity" (cited in Nöth, 1998,

p. 42). He also formulated the *Triadic Components of Visual Communications*, determining that each visual object has three components: Representamen, Object and Interpretant. The first is the object or sign itself; the second, the Object, stands for the idea being represented; and finally the Interpretant refers to how people will understand its meaning (Josephson et al., 2020).

To illustrate the Triadic Components of Visual Communications, consider the traffic sign of 'Stop'. The Representamen will be the physical sign itself, hexagonal, red and with white lettering. The Object is the idea of stopping. The interpretant is the mental process that leads to the action of stopping. It reflects the idea that the communication process will only happen if the receiver of the message is able to decode the object, leading to an interpretation.

Pierce also classified the signs into different types: Icons, Index and Symbols. Iconic signs resemble the object they are representing; indexical signs show the evidence and are directly connected to the object they represent; and symbolic signs have a relation that must be culturally learned, as the image does not have any resemblance of the object it represents. It demonstrates why it is important to understand the use of pictograms in computer-mediated conversations, especially considering that many symbolic signs are culturally internalised. For example, it happens with the use of male and female icons to indicate a toilet instead of the icon of a
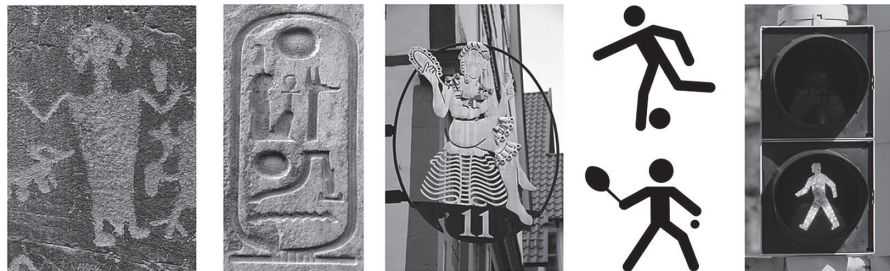

Figure 20.1   Examples of pictograms' use through history (Images references: Pixabay.com – Free for commercial use – No attribution required)

toilet itself. The signs can be also classified as pictograms and ideograms (Haldemann, 2014). Pictograms convey meaning due to the resemblance to the object itself. Ideograms represent a more abstract idea or concept – such as the forbidden sign (a crossed red circle) or the toilet example.

Sometimes, ideograms are used over iconic signs (pictograms) to create a new layer of meaning. It happens, for example, when the ideogram of forbidden is placed on top of the icon of a cigarette, communicating the idea of 'no smoking'. But pictograms can also play the role of ideograms. To represent the idea of creativity, it is common to use the pictogram of a lamp. However, the lamp itself represents an object (the light bulb). But its use as an ideogram will depend on the context. On top of understanding the visual cues and being able to recognise it, understanding if the sign is being used as a pictogram or an ideogram is similar to recognising figures of speech, sarcasm, and irony when speaking a foreign language. This subtle combination is already inherent to the emoji universe. Some emojis, as shown in Figure 20.2, are exclusively used as pictograms, such as the omnipresent 'thumbs up' and the 'smiley face' in most contexts. But others require more fluence to be correctly used and to prevent misunderstandings, such as the 'aubergine' – first released in 2010. The vegetable quickly became a symbol for penis.

The Origins of Computer-Mediated Signs

Since the early computer-mediated exchanges, there have been attempts to recreate the

Figure 20.2 Emojis can have different levels of interpretation

non-verbal communication aspects. Initially, this happened through the introduction of cues such as onomatopoeic signs or the use of non-standard orthography – specially the repetition of letters – to contextualise the communication process in written text (Darics, 2013). Examples of it are expressions such as 'hmmm', 'yesssssssss', or 'zzzzzzz'. Even the Morse alphabet includes conventions to express emotions dating back to the 19th century, with the number 73 initially expressing 'love and kisses' and later, 'with respect' (Tomic et al., 2013). It can be seen as an attempt to translate the orality – and thus to reclaim some of its non-verbal aspects – within written communication. While this has historically occurred in literature, computer-mediated communication dislocated it from the domain of professional writers to popularise its use within mundane conversations. However, instead of simply breaking formal rules, this liquid language has its own organisational structure and it is "highly performative in essence" (Soffer, 2012, p. 1092), adding a layer of visual drama to the written conversations.

Despite being able to reduce the gap between oral and digital written text, the transgressions of the formal language did not manage to reclaim the facial and gestural layers of the non-verbal communications. This only happened on a larger scale when mobile phones became smart and incorporated multimedia resources. Thus, the next communicational transformation observed was, at the same time, an evolution and a return to the most primitive format of written communication: pictograms. In these new digital contexts, they received the name of emoji. While the word 'emoji' represents a "picture character": 絵 (e ≅ picture) 文 (mo ≅ writing) 字 (ji ≅ character), it can also represent other elements and actions, connected to cultural backgrounds. So, there are more layers of meaning associated with a 'smiley face' and 'thumbs up' than one would initially assume.

The use of pictograms and ideograms became more present in the popular culture

with the release of the first smartphones in 2007. However, their history started centuries earlier. In 2017, archaeologists excavating a region on the borders of Turkey and Syria found a 3,700-years-old Hittite jug decorated with a 'smiley face' (Daley, 2017). The happy face also appeared in more detailed designs and in different shapes along history before acquiring its distinctive minimalist and yellow appearance. And no, it was not Forrest Gump who inspired the image, despite the claims of the movie. In one scene, the runner cleans his face covered in mud leaving it with a perfect smiley imprint.

Away from fiction, it was in 1963 that the American graphic artist Harvey Ross Ball created the 'smiley face' as a commission for an insurance company. The image was used in posters, buttons, and signs to boost the morale of the workers during a series of mergers and acquisitions (Stamp, 2013). The results of the campaign are unclear but as the image was never trademarked, it was further appropriated by many others until it became one of the most recognisable faces of modern culture, as shown in Figure 20.3.

In the digital universe, the smiley emoji has some different ancestors, the emoticons. As mentioned before, there were many attempts to humanise CMC, but 19 September 1982 is considered by many as the emoticon official birthday. It happened when Scott Fahlman from Carnegie Mellon University sent a text message to his peers, as shown in Figure 20.4.

However, there are suggestions of emoticons being used in CMC as early as 1979 (Herring and Dainas, 2017). Furthermore, a humoristic publication in the American magazine *Puck* from March 1881, entitled Typographical art, brings different combinations of characters displayed in three lines to create what resembles facial impressions of joy, melancholy, indifference, and astonishment. The publication, shown in Figure 20.5, is frequently referred to as the earliest ancestors of emoticons (Behrens, 2019).

The name 'emoticon' is a combination of the words 'emotion' and 'icons'. The broad concept encapsulates the initial explanation provided by Fahlman and refers to a "string of keyboard characters that, when viewed sideways (or in some other orientation), can be seen to suggest a face expressing a particular emotion" (Danesi, 2014, p. 110). Overall, the research around emoticons indicate that they are "multifunctional, having at least four uses in CMC that potentially overlap: expression of emotion, nonverbal signalling, tone management or indication of illocutionary, and as punctuation or structural markers" (Herring and Dainas, 2017, p. 2185). In this case, illocutionary refers to the illustration of something that has been done, and structural markers to the hierarchy within a conversation.

Figure 20.3   Harvey Ball 'Smiley Face', created in 1963

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"I propose that the following
character sequence for joke
markers:
:-)
Read it sideways. Actually,
it is probably more economical
to mark things that are NOT
jokes, given current trends.
For this, use
:-( "
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Figure 20.4   Text message from Scott Fahlman

TYPOGRAPHICAL ART.

We wish it to be distinctly understood that the letter-press department of this paper is not going to be trampled on by any tyranical crowd of artists in existence. We mean to let the public see that we can lay out, in our own typographical line, all the cartoonists that ever walked. For fear of startling the public we will give only a small specimen of the artistic achievements within our grasp, by way of a first instalment. The following are from Studies in Passions and Emotions. No copyright.
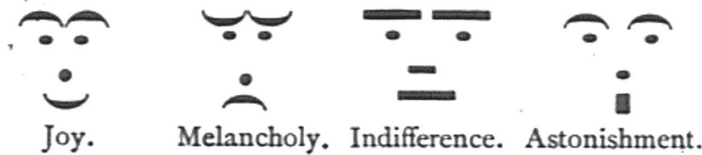
Joy.　　Melancholy.　Indifference.　Astonishment.

Figure 20.5　Emoticons with text, published by *Puck* magazine (30 March 1881)
Image reference: *https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Emoticons_Puck_1881_with_Text.png*

These ASCII-based (American Standard Code for Information Interchange) supporting resources became popular and were widely used at the time when social media and chat platforms did not support pictograms (Pavalanathan and Eisenstein, 2016). Other than happy or sad, they could represent a broader range of ideas and actions. For example, @}>– is a rose; :'(is the representation for crying; %) will be drunk or confused; and <3 will be a heart. Despite the sideways reading being very popular in Western cultures, it is not the only way to represent emotions or actions in text. A different set of emoticons became popular in Asian countries (kaomojis), but they must be read horizontally. The most famous example being the shrug ¯_(ツ)_/¯ expression, but there are also cats >^..^<, pigs (´(00)`), surprised faces (o_O), apologies m(_ _)m, and joy (⌒ʊ⌒). A comprehensive study analysing more than a billion Tweets confirmed that "English-speaking countries used the horizontal style overwhelmingly. Koreans most actively used the vertical style 74% of the time, while Japanese people used horizontal and vertical styles to a similar extent" (Park et al., 2013, p. 470).

Nowadays, the terms emoticons and emojis are used interchangeably. Both formats have the same paralinguistic role but emojis are more frequent than emoticons (Konrad et al., 2020). They became synonyms when text applications started to automatically generate emojis based on text-based emoticons. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other popular media also convert text into emojis. In fact, "Facebook has increasingly incorporated graphical means of communication such as emoticons, emoji, stickers, GIFs, images, and videos" (Herring and Dainas, 2017, p. 2185). Altogether, these digital imageries are referred to as graphicons.

There are many reasons behind the fast spread of this new pictographic language, making it almost an ubiquitous language (Lu et al., 2016, p. 770): they are compact, it reduces the time to input information; and "the rich semantics they convey expresses ideas and emotions more vividly". Moreover, visual elements are decoded 60,000 times faster by the human brain than written texts

(Jibril and Abdullah, 2013) and 70% of people believe that emotions can be better expressed through images than words (ZoomInfo, 2020). The popularity is such that in 2015, the Emoji 'Face with tears of joy' was elected the word of the year by the Oxford University Press. This specific emoji alone made up 20% of all emojis used in the UK during that year (Oxford University Press, n.d.). There is an 'World Emoji Day' which was created in 2014 and is celebrated every year on 17 July. It is an unofficial holiday, mostly celebrated online.

In an attempt to organise the fast growing range of emojis, the Unicode Consortium included unique hexadecimal for emojis in 2010 (Bich-Carrière, 2019). In this case, hexadecimals are shortcuts for the binary value of the character. In 2013, Emojipedia, a web site that, among other features, offers a repository for emoji characters in the Unicode Standard, bringing details and showing how each emoji is depicted in different platforms (Emojipedia, n.d.) was launched.

Together with emojis and other graphicons, another category of pictographic representation is gaining relevance in the recent years: stickers. They are being described as "more aesthetically appealing, familiar, clear, and meaningful" (Rodrigues et al., 2018, p. 401). They can be defined as "oversized cartoon-like and character-driven emoticons" (Wang, 2016, p. 458) and encompass facial emotion as well as body language in some pictograms, enhancing the socioemotional experience of the user. If an emoji's main function is to modify and complement the messages (Danesi, 2017), stickers work as self-contained units (Konrad et al., 2020). Social platforms, apps and operational systems offer the opportunity to create personalised stickers, based on the user's customised avatars. This very personal representation of oneself can elevate the levels of intimacy in the CMC. They have been considered to be "more fun, cute, humorous, specific, and expressive of personality" (Konrad et al., 2020, p. 229).

PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF EMOJIS

Intimacy is indeed a key factor in an effective communication process and it is largely connected with non-verbal elements. When face-to-face interaction is removed, most of the desired rapport is also lost. In face-to-face communication, people share empathy and create relationships through a phenomenon called Emotional Contagion, in which similar emotions and their corresponding behaviours are directly triggered from one person to the other. The idea is that emojis (and graphicons in general) can induce the same contagion on a text-based conversation. It means that when reading a sentence that has been enriched with emojis, it activates verbal and non-verbal areas of the brain (Yuasa et al., 2011). Despite the stimuli not being at the same level, it is still a reaction similar to the one triggered by face-to-face non-verbal inducement. In other words, a 'smiley face' partially emulates the effect a smile will have in the brain.

This correlation between emojis and real expression must happen in both ways, on the side of the individual emitting the message and for the recipient. There are connections between the pictorial cue – by adding a non-verbal layer to the text message – and the personality of the writer. In a certain extension, it is possible to assess different personalities, languages and literacy level based on the way one uses emojis (Marengo et al., 2017). The use of emojis varies according to a pre-existent intimacy between the parts. If there is a low level of intimacy, the tendency of the sender is to use more emojis to convey their personality and to prevent plain text messages being misperceived. In SMSs, for example, in which the degree of privacy is very high, researchers found out that only about 4% of the analysed messages contained emojis (Tossell et al., 2012). Another study demonstrated that "when Internet users come across texts without emoticons, they find it difficult to perceive the precise emotion and

the attitude expressed" (Jibril and Abdullah, 2013, p. 203). In addition, emojis also help to create the idea that the interlocutor is more approachable. They tend to appear more in emotional exchanges – even if just a meet and greet situation – than in task-oriented conversations (Xu et al., 2007).

Gender also plays a role in the use of emojis and women are more likely to use pictographic cues than men (Rodrigues et al., 2018). Yet despite females sending more messages with emojis, males use a broader range (Tossell et al., 2012). In mixed-gender groups, the use of emojis can vary, as males could be led to emulate a more emotional approach, including expressions of solidarity, support, assertion of positive feelings, and gratitude (Wolf, 2000). According to Fullwood et al. (2013) women are more likely to be emotional in their use of CMC and, as a consequence, they rely more on emojis to complement the non-verbal aspects of conversations. It is possible that this behaviour could change from one platform to another, based on the context of the conversation.

In professional situations, messages with emoji are perceived as less negative than the ones with exclusively plain text. However, in work-related emails, emojis tend to be perceived as non-professional (Gacey and Richard, 2013). Nonetheless, there are signs of quick changes, as a study showed that 61% of people already use emojis in professional communications (Griffith, 2019). Emojis and graphicons in general, together with onomatopoeic language, non-standard English with abbreviations, and surrogate face-to-face cues such as emoticons, have received their fair share of criticism. They have been accused of corrupting language. In fact, "they actually demonstrate a creative repurposing of symbols and marks" (Collister, 2015). CMC has thus contributed to a vast range of new vocabulary and expressions, and social media increased the speed at which languages have evolved (Kleinman, 2010). For example, niche online communities will have their own set of colloquialisms that, for an outsider, can sound almost like a new dialect.

Similar to any other conversation, when a common code is required to make the communication effective, it happens with emojis. A similar understanding of what the emojis are representing is needed to enable them to fulfil their role of softening the information exchange by adding non-verbal cues, improving the intimacy and rapport. Research has shown that the interpretation of emojis varies more in relation to the language of a country than to its geographical position. Concurrently, the same study revealed that "contexts and sentiments that were frequently associated with a given emoticon varied from one culture to another" (Park et al., 2013, p. 474). Therefore, users from one culture might have difficulty in interpreting the repertoire of pictograms used by individuals from another culture. Although in a multicultural scenario, this occurs with face-to-face communication, the facial representation of basic emotions – happy, surprise, fear, disgust, anger, and sad – is not necessarily the same across cultures (Park et al., 2013). Thus, challenges with reading non-verbal cues are not exclusive to intercultural relations nor to the correct decoding of emojis.

Emojis have indeed an important role in improving rapport on CMC. They can be considered "quasi non-verbal cues" as they "allow receivers to correctly understand the level and direction of emotion, attitude, and attention expression" (Lo, 2008, p. 597). However, even inside culturally homogeneous groups, there is still "a lot of variability in the understanding of the emotional intent of emoji" (Tigwell and Flatla, 2016, p. 864). For instance, when asked to rate the same emoji in the same platform as positive, neutral or negative for a study, participants disagreed 25% of the time (Miller et al., 2016). In addition, ambiguity persists in both cases, if the emojis are analysed in context (together with written messages) or as isolated pictograms (Miller et al., 2017).

Diversity

Accordingly, cultural differences affect the way emojis are perceived. Consequently, some emojis can represent objects or even encapsulate ideas that are alien to different groups. One example is the pinched fingers, shown in Figure 20.6, which is common in Italian culture and normally used to express impatience. Using such an emoji for communication would just be understood by those with knowledge of this aspect of the Italian culture.

Religious artefacts, holidays paraphernalia, traditional clothing or even food are represented by specific emojis, but most of them are still very Westernised, despite the same gallery being used across the globe. The problem is that "the presence or absence of emoji both hints at and contributes to cultural visibility and erasure" (Shade, 2015). There were some attempts to make emojis more inclusive, offering five different skin shades to the original yellow tone. In addition, a proposal submitted in 2018 has been finally approved and greater diversity started appearing on devices from 2021 (Marx et al., 2018). For the new relationship emojis, five skin tones other than the traditional yellow are available in multiple combinations, including same-sex couples. Families can be displayed as a diverse range of members and genders. Another improvement was the inclusion of non-binary pictograms.

Figure 20.6   Italian "pinched fingers", a symbol that requires previous knowledge to be understood

Diversity of emojis still needs further work as BIPOC individuals are portrayed with traditional Eurocentric features. Body shapes are yet to be included, as all full-bodied pictograms are skinny. A positive improvement was the representation of some visible disabilities, with wheelchairs, walking canes, hearing aids and prosthetic limbs (Wheeler, 2019).

Emojis in Communication

When 'Face with tears of joy' was declared the word of the year, the Oxford University Press stated that "emojis are no longer the preserve of texting teens – instead, they have been embraced as a nuanced form of expression, and one which can cross language barriers" (Oxford University Press, n.d.). In fact, eight in ten adults use emoji regularly and 40% of Brits send messages that have no text content, but a simple emoji (Evans, 2017). Furthermore, 95% of internet users sent an emoji at least once, resulting in 10 billion emojis sent every day (Agnew, 2018). This demonstrates how the language is being adopted at an unprecedented speed. Younger users, between 18 and 25 years old, are early adopters and almost three out of four suggest it is easier for them to express emotions using emojis than words (Faull, 2015). Emojis are now present in one in five tweets; on Facebook, there are 5 billion emojis sent daily and since 2015 half of the comments on Instagram include an emoji (Emojipedia, n.d.).

The adoption of this new language is leaving older generations lost in translation as 54% of those aged over 40 admit to confusion over the use of emojis. Altogether, including skin tone variations, there are more than 3,500 emojis in the Unicode Standard (Chawathe, 2021) and new emojis are being introduced by every major operational system's update on computers and mobile devices.

Generational differences can also be perceived with the use of emojis and similar pictograms having different meanings and intentions. Even the 'smiley face' can have

different interpretations. If for millennials it is a very straightforward smile, for some Gen Z it can connotate awkwardness or discomfort (Abdullahi, 2021), representing a half-hearted smile. The translations are far from being straightforward, considering that only 7% of people use the peach emoji as a fruit, yet it is largely used to represent a butt or even acquiring other connotations (Emojipedia, n.d.). Additionally, the perception of usage differs from the initial intention of usage (Wall et al., 2016).

These variations are not only related to the way cultural and generational distinct groups decode and understand emojis. The popularity of emojis also oscillates and emojis are more or less trendy. The 'smiley face' was for many years the most popular emoji (Agnew, 2018). In a study analysing over a billion of tweets, it was the leader in usage, being present in 46 million messages (Park et al., 2013). In fact, the ten most popular ones at the time – :) :D :(;) :P :-) ;-) :/ ^^ :p – represented about 43% of all emoticon used on tweets. An online tool that measures emoji usage in real time confirmed that the same emoji remains the most popular in 2021 (EmojiStats, n.d.). The 'red heart' is in second position, followed by 'Face blowing a Kiss', 'Smiling Face with Heart-Eyes', and 'Rolling on the Floor Laughing'.

Based on the popularity criteria, it is possible to say that, in general, emojis bring an optimistic connotation to the messages. On Twitter, 75% of the emojis used are positive (Agnew, 2018) and the top ten emojis used on the platform are quite stable (Emojipedia, n.d.). However, there is a direct connection between the use of positive emojis and the World Development Indicators across the globe (Ljubešić and Fišer, 2016). Better living conditions imply the use of more positive pictograms and this connection suggests a reason behind the decline of the use of the 'smiley face' during 2020, while the 'pleading face' experienced a surge in popularity (Emojipedia, n.d.).

Restrictions on the freedom of movement connected to the Covid-19 pandemic impacted negatively the use of travel-related emojis, with the category of Travel and Places decreasing in popularity. Two emojis that gained status were the microbe emoji (a green spiky and round creature), with 800% of growth and the face wearing a mask was 87% more popular (Moffitt, 2021). Another change observed in some platforms during 2021 was the adjustment of the syringe emoji. Instead of including a different emoji, which is a process that can take years, some platforms redesigned the existing one, replacing the blood to a more neutral representation to be used as a vaccination emoji (Broni, 2021).

Different uses of Emojis

The popularity of emojis is not restricted to chats, social platforms and written communication between individuals. There have been creative attempts to use the popular pictograms in different functions beyond the interpersonal communication, with different degrees of success.

> **Emojis as password** – The IT British firm Intelligent Environments (ieDigital) in 2015 launched the world's first emoji-only passcode for their bank services, relying exclusively in pictures instead of words and numbers. The method allowed the user to create an emoji-story to remember their pictorial password (ieDigital, 2015).
>
> **Emojis as URL** – The URL (Uniform Resource Locator) is the address of a web page, and it has been used since the creation of the world wide web. Due to the complexity of different types of alphabets worldwide, the URLs accept a myriad of character types. Some countries, such as West Samoa (.ws), accepts emojis as characters for their URL, which had been explored for companies to promote their products.

For example, in 2015, Coca-Cola created a series of emoji URLs to promote their brand. The campaign was centred on 'smiley emojis' as an "icon that means happiness in every corner in the planet", according to their promotional video (Coca-Cola Puerto Rico, 2015). The URLs used a series of different smiley emojis, following the scheme of using *www.[smiley emoji].ws*. Reactions to the

campaign can be checked through the #Emoticoke on Twitter ("#Emoticoke - Twitter Search," n.d.).

Also in 2015, Norwegian Air followed Coca-Cola, and created an emoji URL to promote their flight from Copenhagen to Las Vegas, (Figure 20.7) using *www.[airplane][money with wings][slot machine].ws*. Although these URLs are no longer available for public use, it is still possible to purchase emoji domains for campaigns.

Emojis in PR campaigns – A police force in a county in southwest England (Dorset), created an innovative campaign against people using their smartphones while driving, reminding the dangers of being distracted behind the wheel. The advertisement ran in 2017, showing the consequences and perils of this act (Dorset Police, 2017), as shown in Figure 20.8.

Chevrolet, a car manufacturer, pushed the idea of using emojis as an independent language to its extreme. The public relations

Figure 20.7   URL example of the Norwegian Air flight to Las Vegas

Figure 20.8   A press release campaign using emojis to illustrate a story, by the Dorset Police

Source: www.dorset.police.uk/news-information/article/2287

team created an entire press release for their Cruze model using only emojis. The only part that used text, was the contact addresses, including their URL, Social Media platforms and the hashtag #ChevyGoesEmoji. Even though the original piece could be hard to understand on its own, it created momentum and worked as a teaser for the press release. Through the hashtag it was possible to find the translation for the emoji-based message ("#ChevyGoesEmoji," 2015).

Another example is Pepsi which joined the emoji trend to promote its brand. They created their own set of emojis, to be installed through a specific keyboard app for smartphones, offering 600 new emojis inspired on their logo. The campaign "Say it with Pepsi" also launched a collection of t-shirts and sunglasses with the proprietary emojis. The bottles and cans distributed globally for more than 100 markets had emojis on the labels, inviting consumers to choose the product according to their feelings at the moment (Newswire, 2016).

The WWF, a mature non-governmental organisation, found a creative way to use emojis to their cause. They turned tweets to donations with an #EndangeredEmoji social campaign, in May 2015. The campaign introduced an emoji alphabet, based on a standardised set of emojis, representing the endangered species to engage users into fundraising (WWF, 2015).

> **Emoji in pop culture** – In 2017, emojis became Hollywood celebrities with their own movie. The story brings to life all emojis that live in a constant dispute for popularity inside a smartphone. The drama revolves around the 'Meh' emoji – similar to an 'Unamused Face' – who wants to express more than one fixed emotion (IMDb, n.d.).

HERE TO STAY

From movies and series, to sunglasses and clothing, emojis have crossed the boundaries of virtuality, being physically present in popular culture, and are here to stay ☺. They have the power to soften language, to portray personality traits, and to increase intimacy in CMC. Emojis stimulate our brains to be perceived as facial expressions, adding emotion and creating rapport in what could otherwise be a cold exchange of plain text. They have an important role in bringing nonverbal cues to text interactions and can be mentally processed faster than written words.

Emojis are playful, fun, and can be used in creative ways. They can have their meaning dislocated from the original purpose to create metaphors, irony and add sarcasm and humour to digital interactions. Emojis can, to a certain extent, enable communication between interlocutors that do not speak the same language but they can also be interpreted with a contrary meaning in different cultural contexts. Emojis are the fastest adopted communication format in the world with new pictograms and variations being added to keyboard libraries at a fast pace.

However, what separates emojis from any other language is that, in fact, they cannot exist without the technology. They also do not belong to a culture or a geographical location. "Although in theory emoji are public-domain entities, the whole system is regulated by a small consortium of representatives from the major tech companies" (Seargeant, 2019, p. 170). Different from a language that evolves freely from social and cultural interactions, emojis are heavily regulated. New emojis are officially suggested and undergo a complex bureaucratic process, are evaluated and carefully designed before being available through the updates of the operational systems.

Beyond the hype, emojis do not configure a true language and are far from being universal. They are "at most a linguistic tool that is being used to complement our language" (Broni cited in Rawlings, 2018). However, despite the corporate constraints, they are a central part of CMC and popular, especially among the Gen Z. It means emoji adoption has increased and become normalised in formal interactions as pictograms belong to the

generational repertoire in the same way specific jargon characterised earlier generations. Speaking emoji is now a necessary skill, even if they do not constitute an international language (yet).

However, "it is possible that emoticons are evolving from a universal way of expressing faces in text to culturally-bounded emotional dialects, much as many natural languages have evolved from a common desire to communicate into culturally-mediated forms of expression and interaction" (Park et al., 2013, p. 474). In this case, the evolutionary process of this language and its future path is highly controlled by technology moguls. Yet there is no regulation preventing creative use, interpretations, and transgressions. This is why no one predicted that peaches and aubergines would have lost their innocence so fast.

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