

SHOULD EMOJIS BE TAUGHT AS A NEW LANGUAGE? MULTIMODAL PRACTICES FOR 21st CENTURY LEARNERS

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‘Language is as old as consciousness, language is practical consciousness that exists also for other men, and for that reason alone it really exists for me personally as well; language, like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men.’

(MARX & ENGELS, The German
Philosophy, 1845-6, p. 53)

Introduction

Created by interface designer Shigetaka Kurita in late 1990s Japan, *emoji* is a junction of the Japanese words for “picture” and “character”. The history of emojis can be traced back written symbols of ancient Sumerian and Egyptian civilizations who adapted pictographs and ideograms as representations of concepts, developing them into logographic writing systems. (DANIELS, 1996)

Although it started out as an exclusive system for Japanese phones, it only truly became a worldwide trend in the mid 2000s, when it was included to Apple’s iPhone and, two years later, to Android systems as a keyboard called Unicode.

Year by year the Unicode keyboard keeps being updated with new emojis – its latest addition being a set of five different skin tones and hair colours for each of them (). We also very recently had new profession-related emojis, with both men and women portraying engineers, teachers, doctors and several other jobs.

With this, emoji has been gaining even more space not only in online chatrooms, but in several other fields, such as helping autistic children recognize emotions through an app on Google Glass¹, empowering children to communicate abuse to adults via Abused Emojis², being part of education as emotion charts and games and even as part of marketing campaigns – Domino’s even released an emoji ordering system where, after stating which was your favorite pizza, all you had to do was send a 🍕 and it would be delivered at your door (MERIGO, 2015).

It is safe to say that these pictograms changed the form people communicate and have lately sparked a lot of controversy, especially after the Oxford English Dictionary chose the “Tears of Joy” 😂 emoji as their word of the year in 2015. It is now being regarded as having the potential to kill language once and for all, but so did William Shakespeare back in the Elizabethan age – sorry bro, but emojis are coming for you 😊.

If these cute smiley faces, dancing girls, farm animals and country flags are a hazard to our society by putting our dearly beloved language at stake, then I must get further into it and ask myself: do they carry enough meaning to substitute entire sentences? And, if so, what is their role in modern education?

1. A social phenomenon

Just a few paragraphs back I was poking some fun at William Shakespeare’s status as a language-murderer due to the fact that he transformed and created new categories for several words during the Elizabethan age and was judged by that matter nonetheless. His contribution to English language is now seen as one of the grandest in literary history, leaving us with words like *premeditated*, *emphasis* and *courtship*, to name a few.

Language is alive and its beating heart rests on its users, who in turn form a linguistic community responsible for creating its variations. To observe the phenomenon of language, the producer of the sound and the receiver must be inserted in the social atmosphere (HALLIDAY, 1974; BAKHTIN, 1992; LEITE, 2003). Usually, new words tend to be utterances before they are written, but emoji – if they

¹ <https://reut.rs/2GtH3RH> accessed on 20/04/2019

² <http://bit.ly/2UvCFXo> accessed on 20/04/2019

can be considered words – represent a loophole in this view of language, as they are purely social.

According to the president of Oxford Dictionaries, Caspar Grathwohl:

Traditional alphabet scripts have been struggling to meet the rapid-fire, visually focused demands of 21st Century communication. It's not surprising that a pictographic script like emoji has stepped in to fill those gaps—it's flexible, immediate, and infuses tone beautifully.³

This discourse is representative of Oxford Dictionaries' choice of the 😄 emoji as word of the year and reveals to us a new line of thought in the academia regarding the cute icons. Images have been part of effective communication for thousands of years, since cavemen started painting to depict their routine and daily lives. Society has evolved and, with that, the technology that is verbal communication has too.

Our modern age, though, requires a post-verbal approach to language, as we are now reliant on computers to carry on mostly written messages – sometimes to people halfway across the world – without being able to convey any tone to them. When Grathwohl claims emoji “infuses tone beautifully” what he means is exactly that a message as simple as “I love you.” can become sarcastic 😏, sexy 😏 or just plain cute 😍 all depending on which emoji you choose to go along with it.

What's important to point out about emoji and their meaning when we are analyzing discourse is that each of the icons have their own names, as matters of accessibility came into play later on and it was decided that, for computer and mobile phone screen readers to become able to translate emoji for the blind, they must each have their nomenclatures defined.

The names are decided based on the simplest description that can be done of each symbol. Take this “💣”, for example; the name for this emoji is “exploding head” and, though its commonplace usage might not be for a situation where a literal

³ Waldman, Katy (November 16, 2015). *"This Year's Word of the Year Isn't Even a Word 😄😄😄"*. Lexicon Valley. *Slate*. Accessed on 22/04/2019.

head is exploding, that's how the software will deal with the image. The intricacies of language are not involved in that decision, and this is why emoji reach a deeper level, which will be briefly discussed next.

2. Emojis can be metaphorical

Let's take the "exploding head" emoji, for instance. While the screen reader might put it out like that, its creation was never meant for a literal use, but for a metaphorical one instead. The term "mindblown" is a much better fit if we are considering its use in discourse, and if we had corpora to sustain emoji usage through text messages, I bet we would see "💥" fit this context a lot more often than any other.

Another good example of metaphorical use of emoji is the infamous "eggplant" or "🍆", which in this case was indeed created for its literal use say, for depicting a recipe or a meal and is instead used to resemble the phallic form. Following this concept, we also have the "🍑" emoji which has been used to signify "butt" a lot more often ever since reality TV star Kim Kardashian adopted it to allude to her just as famous behind.

There's even an emoji etiquette to be followed, as some of the images are more appropriate for an informal conversation with a family member, like "😘", whereas the "😗", which is a kiss with no heart, might be better used with acquaintances so as not to cross any lines.

These evidences imply that these pictures have more to them than meets the eye, going deeper into discourse than we might assume. The context defines the usage, and the patterns make each of them more or less commonplace in virtual environments, relying on the enunciation to be fully understood by a certain group of people.

Com efeito, a enunciação é o produto da interação de dois indivíduos socialmente organizados [...] A situação social mais imediata e o meio social mais amplo determinam completamente e, por assim dizer, a partir do seu próprio interior, a estrutura da enunciação. (BAKHTIN, 2012, p.116 -117)

Since they can be used as metaphors, the enunciation present in emoji depends on a mutual comprehension between “speaker” and “listener”, much like it would if two speakers of different languages tried to communicate in their mother tongue. There are even African-American related⁴ emojis, so the social has an extremely strong pull on possible linguistic value attributed to the pictograms and its varieties.

They can not only infuse tone in a conversation, but also truly help out other people communicate in a better, more dynamic way. It is being used for good, and not just by obnoxious teenagers who would probably read this and say “as if! 🤔”⁵. Jokes apart, I really do believe that emojis are not language killers, but language builders. With that in mind, I strongly believe that they can play a really important role in education as part of a multiliterate approach to language learning.

3. What can we learn from emoji?

With new technological advances, society finds itself perceiving the world differently, and their influence in our culture, customs and in the manner we consume content becomes part of what is now called Cyberculture (LEVY, 1997). Cyberculture reflects *l’Universel sans totalité*⁶, a brand new concept when put against orality or even written records, due to the fact that in Cyberculture, we are offered a wide array of information which is interconnected, yet plural.

The interconnection between computers - and lately, mobile phones - in which users are constantly dealing with heterogeneity and excess information has been bulldozing whatever tries to come for it, and that is why education has a very important place in that discussion. This is owed to the fact that currently, digital technologies are part of the school environment just as much as books and a whiteboard.

Emoji, although not being regarded as a sophisticated technology, still fits within the definition of the term *digital technologies*, as those are regarded as

⁴ AfroMoji is an app available on app stores worldwide.

Link: <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/afromoji-black-emoji-stickers/id1385348738>

⁵ This is a reference to the movie “Clueless”, released in July 19, 1995. It is a modern twist on Jane Austen’s novel “Emma” and was directed by Amy Heckerling.

⁶ Universality without totality

anything that is part of the contemporary process of production, consumption and transformation of information. Apart from that, emojis also allow people to engage with new media and helps them to consume digital content on social networks, as well as fit within new expectations of what online socialization should look like nowadays. These interactions lead to blurred lines between traditional and modern, production and consumption and most importantly, authorship and readership (VAN DIJK, 2011).

Teaching languages was never an easy task, but during this post-modern era, where social changes are blazing new trails in the realm of education, new methodologies arise and it can be overwhelming to teachers to take all of this in. One of those is the shift from *literacy* as a singular object of study to *literacies* and *multiliteracies*.

When learning a second language, such as English, literacy is a key element. According to Luke and Freebody (1997, p. 9)

Literacy has been perceived as central component of citizenship in the West since the first German campaigns of Reformation, when Luther and colleagues forged the link between universal textual practices, spiritual enlightenment, and membership in the emergent nation-state.

Although literacy is an important reason for the success of ESL teachers, it is undeniable that the shift to multiliteracies has a clear motive, which is the fact that it suits our learners best at this time. There's a clear change from the exclusive use of written forms to the mix between written and visual aids inside the classroom. Gunther Kress states:

The former constellation of *medium of book and mode of writing* is giving way, and in many domains has already given way, to the new constellation of *medium of screen and mode of image*. (KRESS, 2003 p. 9, italics in original).

Seeing that technology and human beings share an almost symbiotic relationship, it's important for educators to adapt themselves – though not entirely – to this new realm of social interactions. Using emoji in the classroom can be an

empowering tool to mix written and visual languages. This new constellation needs to be implemented in a healthy way, and in the context of teaching English as a second language (ESL), emoji might serve as a *lingua franca*⁷.

If we take the idea of multiliteracies to heart, it's vital to understand that all images - even seemingly neutral ones such as the emojis - are filled with ideology (CALLOW, 2005). The emoji “🙏”, known as “hands pressed together”, is used by Christian communities as a symbol of prayer, but for other communities of speakers it can be used as a high-five.

This is an important aspect when using this tool in the classroom, as it is a key element to point out to students the importance of using emojis combined with sentences - and therefore outlining the multimodalities - in order to avoid misunderstandings.

Still within the “🙏” example, if a student uses this emoji on its own in his religious studies Whatsapp group, it will be ambiguous for his peers whether he is meaning “let's pray” and/or “bless you”, or “high-five” and/or “heck yeah!”. The lack of context here is a good example of why it's important for students to also have some literacy in emojis, as they're probably more well-known than the second language they're learning, but offer tons of good examples on the importance of context, patterns of usage and frames in any language, as they're an effective yet flawed method of communication.

Conclusion

In light of the myriad of arguments explored in this chapter, it is possible to acknowledge that technologies, as an ever growing aspect of our society, cannot be frowned upon as something strictly bad and menacing, but also perceived for its importance, in this case as we speak of advances in communication.

It is therefore likely that in the future emojis and their recognition as language builders will be reason for further studies on their link with education. It definitely has

⁷ Oxford Dictionaries: “A language that is adopted as a common language between speakers whose native languages are different.”

the potential to become a key aspect of multiliteracies, as imagetic devices are already part of a multimodal approach to education and these, in particular, are filled with meaning and receive new nuances often, being indeed a clear way of having students understand the phenomenon of language and the ways through which it is being changed everyday.

Their status as educational devices might not be recognized yet, but when we come to think of it, they help bridge the gap between speakers of different languages and serve a good purpose even to the teenagers everyone seems to judge so much over using them in every single chat. What they might be doing is creating an effective communication skill which will be bettered by this tool they have at hand, as their discourse is now becoming more infused with feeling and tone, something which e-mails and ICQ weren't able to do before.

As we live in this Cyberculture, let's try to not be threatened by them and, instead, be welcome to them. What's the point of using "like" in almost every sentence? Zero to none, and yet, it's something that happens all the time. We, as a community of speakers need to be more mindful of our own behavior as "changers" of words, as we're constantly attributing new meanings to old signs. Let's *emote* a bit more and see how it goes.

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