

Languaging in Multimodal Digital Interaction: An Enactive Exploration of Emoji Metaphors and Meanings

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Abstract

Emojis, small pictographic characters commonly used in electronic messages, have become a global phenomenon. This study utilizes key enactive concepts to demonstrate how emojis reflect the ongoing interplay between technology, language, and culture. A central theme of the analysis is the role of metaphors in justifying the design, use, and interpretation of emojis, illustrating how these symbols originate, evolve, and adapt to the contextual nuances of our environment. The ultimate goal of this study is to enhance our understanding of the evolving meanings of emojis, emphasizing their dynamic nature, and enriching our understanding of their role and interpretation in contemporary human expression and interaction. In this context, emojis emerge as cultural artifacts that are both shaped by and continually shape how we communicate and interact in the digital age.

Keywords: Emojis – Metaphors – Embodiment – Enaction – Digital Culture.

Résumé

Les émojis, petits caractères pictographiques utilisés couramment dans les messages électroniques, sont devenus un phénomène mondial. Cet article utilise des concepts clés de l'énaction pour démontrer comment les émojis reflètent l'interaction continue entre la technologie, le langage et la culture. Un thème central de l'analyse est le rôle des métaphores dans la justification de la conception, de l'utilisation et de l'interprétation des émojis, illustrant comment ces symboles naissent, évoluent et s'adaptent aux nuances contextuelles de notre environnement. Cette étude contribue à mieux comprendre les significations changeantes des émojis, à souligner leur nature dynamique et à enrichir notre compréhension de leur rôle et de leur interprétation dans l'expression et l'interaction humaine contemporaine. Dans ce contexte, les émojis deviennent des artefacts culturels qui sont autant façonnés que qui façonnent continuellement notre manière de communiquer et d'interagir à l'ère numérique.

Mots-clés : Emojis – Métaphores – Corporéité – Énaction – Culture Numérique.

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This research was partially supported by the project “La multimodalidad en la comunicación digital contemporánea: perspectivas pragmáticas, ideológicas y educativas” (Ref. 231462.01/1) awarded to the author by Universitat Jaume I.

1. Introduction

Emojis are little pictographic images used in digital communication, such as 😊, 😄, 🐮, ❤️, among many others. Originally designed in Japan, they have spread worldwide since 2010, when Apple launched the first device that integrated emojis, iOS5 (Danesi 2017), followed by Android in 2013. Emojis are now available on virtually any social media platform and messaging app, as they are standardized by the Unicode Consortium, a non-profit organization in charge of developing, maintaining, and promoting software internationalization standards and data. The number of emojis available is increasing annually; as of 2023, there are 3,782 emojis (Unicode 2023). According to estimates, everyday users share over 10,000 billion emojis (*Emojipedia*, n.d.-b).

In the field of linguistics, the rise of emojis has prompted a renewal of the methodology for analyzing digital discourse. Prior to this, linguists examined digital phenomena by applying concepts from traditional text-based communication to digital language (Herring 2019). However, the growing use of multiple modes of communication in digital contexts (i.e., writing, images, videos, and audio) has led to a significant shift in linguists' approaches to analysis. Multimodality, the switch between one semiotic mode (such as writing) and another (image), is now recognized as a key component of digital interaction (Jewitt et al. 2016). Regardless of the theoretical standpoint, many researchers claim that emojis contribute to the overall meaning of digital messages alongside language, conveying attitudes, social meanings, nuances, or even carrying out specific pragmatic functions (see Bai et al. 2019 for a review). To fully grasp the significance of emojis in contemporary communication and their global reach, the present paper provides an approach to emojis that also considers the interplay between body, mind, and culture, and how these elements mutually influence each other. To the best of our knowledge, previous research has not examined the meaning and interpretation of emojis from an enactive perspective. This study aims to fill this knowledge gap by employing key enactive concepts to demonstrate how emojis design and meaning influence and are influenced by both language and culture.

2. Theoretical frameworks

2.1 A short review of research on emojis

Since emojis began to become widespread in the early 2010s, the first academic studies on emojis were published from 2015-2016 and peaked around 2018. Following a literature review published by Bai et al. in 2019, most research on emojis comes from computer science and communication, marketing, behavioral science, linguistics, psychology, medicine, and education.

In the field of linguistics, several studies have explored the pragmatic functions of emojis, their potential as independent languages, and their roles as non-verbal cues. The functions attributed to pictographs in discourse-analytical research range from subtle contextualization cues (Al Rashdi 2018) to tone modifiers (Danesi 2017; Herring & Dainas 2018), humor markers (Sampietro 2021), and hedges (Sampietro 2019; Pérez-Sabater 2019). The use of emojis has

also been compared with gestures (Gawne and McCulloch 2019) or conversational markers (König 2019).

One common misconception in the literature is that emojis can become a universal language (Azuma & Ebner 2008). Although emojis may be more easily understood than complex languages, interpretive codes vary across languages (Danesi 2019). Moreover, researchers studying corpora of natural conversations have found that the function and interpretation of emojis are heavily dependent on the written text they refer to or are associated with. The author's investigation also revealed that replacing or repeating nouns, verbs, adjectives, or multiword expressions through emojis is less common and is usually employed playfully (Sampietro 2019). In naturally occurring digital interactions, the transfer of meaning among modes is a metonymic process. This should not come as a surprise since metaphors are not only common rhetorical figures but rather unique 'ways of thinking' (Casasanto & Gijssels 2015: 327).

A more nuanced approach to emojis was proposed by Moschini (2016) in her analysis of the origins and global impact of the "Face with Tears of Joy" emoji 😄. Adopting a sociosemiotic and multimodal perspective, Moschini (2016) defined this emoji as a culturally hybrid and multimodal symbol, studying how it conveys complex meanings, crosses language barriers, and changes as it moves through different cultures. Despite these insights, Moschini's (2016) study did not explore how emojis influence language. This paper claims that emojis not only mirror culture, norms and the representation of emotions, but also actively shape linguistic conventions.

To better understand the reciprocal impact of language on emojis and emojis on language, we can draw parallels between emojis and metaphors. A common misconception assumes that metaphors are simply figures of speech used in poetry and literature to embellish language (Gibbs 2011). However, following a major revolution in the study of metaphors, conceptual metaphor theory (CMT), proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), first introduced the idea that metaphors are not just linguistic expressions, but are fundamental to thought and action. Metaphors make language more vivid and expressive and play a significant role in cognition by helping people understand abstract concepts through familiar concrete experiences and sustaining broader patterns of thought. These broad metaphors are usually called "conceptual metaphors". Similarly, emojis are not just used to embellish and decorate digital messages but also convey contextual information and pragmatic nuances otherwise unavailable in written interaction.

Another prevalent misconception surrounding metaphors is that they possess static and universally agreed upon meanings. However, the interpretation of a metaphor can vary depending on the context, knowledge and cultural background of both the speaker and the listener (Gibbs 2011). Similarly, emojis lack a fixed meaning and their usage varies significantly based on the context in which they are employed. Emojis function as symbolic representations that influence language by mirroring and actively contributing to the evolution of language and cultural expressions.

This study aims to enhance our comprehension of emojis as cultural artifacts, reflecting how their meaning emerged, evolved, and is shaped by language and culture. Additionally, the study

examines how emojis influence language on a broader scale. To achieve this aim, I draw on key concepts from the theory of enaction.

2.2 Enaction

Enaction is a theory of cognition that emphasizes the active role of an organism in constructing its own experience through interactions with its environment (Maturana & Varela 1980). According to Varela, Thomson and Rosch (1991), cognition is not a simple representation of the world in the mind; instead, it revolves around the enactment of the world through our actions. In other words, cognition does not represent a predetermined world; instead, it emerges from the ongoing interaction between an organism and its surrounding environment (Bottineau 2010). When we interact with the world, our minds and surroundings are connected; we create meaning and understand one another. This theory highlights the pivotal role of the body, senses, and environment in shaping cognitive processes, as understanding is grounded in our direct embodied interactions with the world.

Enaction has significant implications for linguistics, fundamentally changing conventional perspectives on language and communication. As shown by Bottineau (2010), under an enactive lens, language is not just a set of abstract symbols and rules but is deeply connected to the bodily experiences of its users. Moreover, enaction suggests that language is deeply linked to the cognitive processes of perception, action, and meaning making. Finally, enaction emphasizes the social and cultural contexts of language use (social interactions, norms, and practices) in shaping linguistic meaning and communication dynamics.

The relationship between language and the world is particularly apparent in the lexicon. There is consistent evidence that words mirror specific aspects of the outside world (Morant 2019). Following an enactive perspective, the lexicon itself influences or shapes how we perceive the world (López García-Molins 2017: 37). Enaction suggests that the way we perceive the world is shaped by specific cognitive principles that dictate how we organize external stimuli. In the case of the lexicon, the organization of words into semantic fields influences our understanding of the nature of the objects or concepts to which the words refer to (López García-Molins 2017).

Building on these insights, this study examines the emergence of the meanings of selected emojis to demonstrate that communication via emojis, similar to language, is not arbitrary. Rather, the meaning of an emoji arises through interaction with the environment, influences language, and is molded by language and culture.

The methodological approach used in this study involved examining the selected emojis in isolation and observing their use in everyday interactions to determine how their meaning emerges and evolves. Contrary to Moschini (2016), I did not focus on a single emoji, but analyzed different pictographs in this paper. As a starting point for describing these emojis, I searched for the “label” attributed to them in trusted online references, such as *Emojipedia*, Urban Dictionary, and Tecnoexplora (Ortiz 2014). I also considered press coverage, academic literature on emojis, and survey results as additional sources.

In analyzing the reciprocal impact of language and emojis, I initially revisit the concept of linguistic and conceptual metaphors to explore how language-driven metaphors influence the

creation and understanding of some emojis (Section 3.1). Subsequently, I examine the influence of culture on emojis (Section 3.2) while also exploring the mutual impact emojis have on language in their cultural context.

3. Analysis

3.1 How language influences emojis

According to the enactive paradigm, there is a continuous interchange between the body and mind expressed through language. In other words, the mind influences the physical and personal world of the speaker through language, and at the same time, language mirrors that world (López García-Molins 2017: 25). When applying this concept to emojis, we should first consider how language shapes the meaning of emojis. One of the most common ways of considering this influence involves employing emojis metaphorically to convey abstract thoughts, feelings, or concepts, rather than referring to their literal meaning or label. Many of these figurative uses are derived from existing metaphors or idioms, whereas others are based on conceptual metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). As briefly summarized in Section 2.1, CMT, pioneered by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), argues that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, and that these metaphors are grounded in our physical and social experiences (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999). For example, when considering a person “warm” or “cold”, we employ the conceptual metaphor AFFECTION AS WARMTH; the concrete source domains are perceptual concepts, such as warmth and heat, while the target domain is the psychological realm of affection. This is an example of what has been defined as an ‘embodied metaphor,’ that is, the metaphorical mapping of abstract concepts onto bodily experience, a central tenant of CMT (Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

The connection between emojis and metaphors is not new. Marcel Danesi, in *The Semiotics of Emojis* (2017), for instance, explored the representation of various metaphors using emojis. Moreover, the organization responsible for encoding emojis and other characters and scripts, Unicode, strongly encourages the incorporation of new emojis with potential metaphorical uses (Unicode, n.d.). For example, the proposal to incorporate a raccoon emoji (Guo 2017) mentioned that this animal could have various metaphorical applications, from trickster roles to the tanuki in Japanese culture to common associations with waste.

In this section, I examine the impact of language on emojis by analyzing how linguistic and conceptual metaphors found in language are visually represented in emojis. I begin by discussing linguistic metaphors (Section 3.1.1) and then move on to conceptual metaphors (Section 3.1.2).

3.1.1 Metaphoric use of emojis from metaphors in language

Danesi (2017) shows that some “metaphoric” uses of emojis rely on pre-existing metaphors present in spoken language. One of the examples of emojis metaphors mentioned by Danesi (2017) is the character called zipper-mouth face 🗨️, one of the first emojis added to the initial Unicode dataset (it was introduced in 2015).

According to *Emojipedia* (n.d.-g), this emoji typically portrays a yellow face with open eyes and a closed zipper serving as the mouth. The meaning associated with this emoji frequently conveys the idea of a secret or a pledge to maintain confidentiality, as exemplified by the phrase “My lips are sealed” (*Emojipedia*, n.d.-g). Additionally, it can instruct someone to refrain from speaking or to remain quiet. In a more recent work, Danesi (2020) describes the “zipper” emoji as a visual metaphor for the English idiom “zip it” or “zip your lips”, which means “do not talk”. However, Danesi (2020) did not mention the corresponding hand gesture of zipping the mouth with the thumbs and index fingers pressed together. The invention of the zipper may have inspired the creation of a metaphorical gesture that later evolved into an idiom and was ultimately translated into an emoji with a similar meaning.

Other emojis are used with metaphorical nuances, even if they do not clearly reproduce existing metaphors. The sparkles emoji ✨, for instance, conveys positive sentiments, such as love, happiness, beauty, gratitude, excitement, and newness or cleanliness (*Emojipedia*, n.d.-f). It is a very common emoji found in nearly one in every 100 tweets (Broni 2021), the success of which is probably due to its lack of a clear meaning and adaptability to various situations. For instance, Lazzeretti (2023) found that the sparkle emoji is prevalent in museums’ social media accounts, giving the absence of specific aesthetically evaluative emojis, and is associated with words from different semantic categories, such as beauty, novelty, and significance. Overall, this emoji expresses positive emotions (*Dictionary.com* 2021). Additionally, according to Shkurtaj (2021), the sparkle emoji is used on *Tiktok* to stress a specific word expressing feelings (“ ✨ excited ✨”) or even to emphasize the name of a brand of clothes the person appearing in the video is wearing, such as “ ✨ Zara ✨”).


3.1.2 Metaphoric use of emojis from conceptual metaphors




The metaphorical use of emojis sometimes has a more conceptual rather than iconic nature. One conceptual metaphor that is visually reproduced in emojis is ANGER IS HEAT (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). The enraged face emoji, for instance, is a red-faced pictograph with a frowning mouth, eyes, and eyebrows scrunched downward 😡. In addition to the cartoonish representation of the facial expression of anger, the red color of the emoji alludes to the physiology of this emotion, whose flush results from increased blood supply to the muscles in preparation for action (Kövecses 1986). The surge in power and energy makes people feel angry and hotheaded. In other words, an angry emoji reproduces the physiology of anger (characterized by body heat, internal pressure, and redness in the face) and the conceptual metaphor that equates anger to heat. In a survey conducted in Spain (Sampietro 2020), this pictograph had the most widely agreed-upon meaning among respondents.


Another example of the visual reproduction of conceptual metaphors comes from a study by Gawne and McCulloch (2019). These authors mention the potentially universal metaphor that conceptualizes positive emotions in terms of upward movement (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, p. 16) to justify the use of the emoji 📈. These authors equated this emoji with metaphoric gestures Gawne and McCulloch (2019: 10). By referring to existing theoretical literature on gestures, these authors further associate emojis with a form of embodied communication.



3.2 Against the arbitrariness of language: How culture shapes emojis


Enactive theory posits that word meaning is neither static nor arbitrary, which also holds true for emojis. For example, emojis representing specific culturemes are prone to reinterpretation when they are used outside their original cultural context. Lucía Luque Nadal (2019: 164) defines culturemes as unique cultural ideas that are specifically linked to a certain country or region and possess a considerable degree of semantic and pragmatic complexity. The most obvious instance of the reinterpretation of emojis is the use of pictographs that refer to Japanese culturemes.

The origins and iconography of emojis can be traced back to Japanese popular culture (Calero Vaquera 2014), including anime, manga, and TV shows. For instance, the “anger symbol” emoji , which depicts four red curved lines, is commonly used in Japanese comics to express anger but may not have the same connotation for Western users.

Another example is the “carp streamer” emoji , which represents the flags called *koinobori* that are raised on Children’s Day, celebrated on May 5th (Wikipedia contributors, 2023) or the “pine decoration” emoji, , which features three bamboo canes and traditionally used to decorate a doorway in Japan on New Year’s Day as part of a decoration called *kadomatsu* (*Emojipedia*, n.d.-d). The catalog of emojis offers a diverse selection of Japanese gastronomy, including sushi, which is popular in other countries. However, several images of Japanese food products may not be easily identifiable by someone unfamiliar with Japanese culture. For instance,  represents *oden*, a traditional Japanese winter soup (Wikipedia contributors, 2013).

Certain emojis can have varying interpretations, depending on the user’s cultural background. For example, the emoji , which represents a Japanese post office with the 〒 Japanese postal mark on the front of the building, is sometimes mistakenly interpreted as a building with the Tesla logo by some users (*La Nación*, 2022).

When emojis were still a novelty, media outlets frequently reported on their “misuse” by Westerners (Chack 2015). For example, certain facial expressions and gestures can be interpreted differently outside Japan. For instance, according to one of the earliest Spanish emoji dictionaries, the emoji  (a person bowing deeply) conveys an apologetic stance (Ortiz 2014). However, bowing is a fundamental aspect of Japanese culture and is employed in various contexts beyond greetings and farewells, including expressing gratitude, offering compliments, seeking favors, and apologizing (Ohashi 2010). The same is true for the folded hands emojis , used as a gesture of prayer, thanks, request, and, occasionally, as “high five” (*Emojipedia*, n.d.-c), whose original meaning is “thank you” in Japan (Martínez 2023). According to *Emojipedia* (n.d.-c), initial versions of this emoji by Google, Microsoft, and Samsung depicted characters with hands folded, thus remembering the Christian praying practices, a similar action observed in Japan before meals, the Hindu greeting *namaste* or the Buddhist gesture known as *añjali mudra*.

One instance of the varied use of emojis is the interpretation of  (dizzy symbol) as a shooting star in Spain (Ortiz 2014), while in America, it alludes to the popular TV show *The more you*

know (*Emojipedia*, n.d.-a), whose logo also depicts a star with an aura. However, this symbol is commonly used in Japanese cartoons to indicate confusion after a hit.

Emojis are not only influenced by Japanese culture: American culture also impacts their potential meanings and subtleties, as evidenced by the face-wearing sunglasses emoji 🧐. According to Danesi (2020: 270), the emoji in question serves as a visual metaphor that conveys the connotations of “cool”. However, Danesi’s analysis of its influence is limited, as he notes that “this idea has a long figurative history that need not concern us here”. I will explore this figurative history in greater detail in this context.

“Smiling Face with Sunglasses” was approved as part of Unicode 6.0 in 2010 and added to Emoji 1.0 in 2015 (*Emojipedia*, n.d.-d). Thus, it was part of the first emoji set released by Unicode. According to the corresponding *Emojipedia* entry, this emoji, described as, “a yellow face with a broad, closed smile wearing black sunglasses”, is used “to convey the slang sense of cool”, and “may also express a confident, carefree attitude or that something is excellent”. In this emoji, the connotations of the word “cool” and those of sunglasses merge.

The English word “cool” signifies an object or person within an optimal temperature range, neither hot nor cold. Its entry into English has been influenced by cognates in the Dutch and German languages. The word “cool” later came to denote a person who is rational, calm, and composed, with the temperature metaphor serving as a depiction of temperament. This meaning was fixed in the 19th century. This development can be traced back to established conceptual metaphors that link personality traits to temperature, where positive emotions are associated with warmth and negative emotions are linked to coolness. As Vuolo (2013) narrates, between the 1920 and the 1940, the negroism “cool” became to be used as a positive term of approval. Jazz fixated on the expression “cool cat” as referring to a fashionable person (*Collins English Dictionary* 2023) around the 1940s.

This is when the history of the word “cool” merges with that of sunglasses. At that time in America, when jazz performers added the nuance of trendy to the term “cool” one of the most fashionable accessories was sunglasses. The first sunglasses were manufactured in the 1930s in America and were used to protect American Air Force pilots from sunlight while flying airplanes (Brothier et al. 2012). The commercialization of sunglasses among civilians began in 1937 and gained popularity in the following decade. The term “cool” was first used in an advertising campaign for sunglasses in 1946, which featured American airmen who wore sunglasses during World War II. The country proudly admired these young men. During the following years, the connection between sunglasses and famous individuals, such as celebrities, persisted, particularly after influential people began making public appearances wearing sunglasses, such as John Lennon, James Dean, Bob Marley, Queen, and Michael Jackson, among others. This trend has continued to this day, making people associate sunglasses with fashion and modernity.

As indicated by the *Emojipedia* entry for this pictograph, an emoji depicting someone wearing sunglasses is often not understood in a literal sense (i.e., it does not literally represent someone wearing sunglasses). Rather, it represents the metaphorical connection between sunglasses and being “cool”, which is highlighted in the encyclopedia.

3.3 How emojis shape culture

The preceding sections showed that emojis typically convey meanings and connotations associated with their real-world counterparts, such as idiomatic expressions (e.g., “zip it”) or iconic allusions (sunglasses as “cool”). However, this influence is not exclusive. Emojis can also affect the cultural interpretation of certain symbols and even lead to the development of verbal expressions, as elaborated in this section.

One of the emojis whose use has evolved from a visual reproduction of the corresponding real-life icon is the thumbs-up icon (Gawne & McCulloch 2019; Sampietro 2016). This emoji, widely used in various cultures as a sign of approval, is one of the oldest emojis and was added to the Unicode standard in its 6.0 version released in 2010. This emoji depicts the corresponding hand gesture, showing a clenched fist with the thumb raised. According to Ekman and Friesen (1969), the thumbs-up gesture is classified as an emblem, a gesture with a precise verbal “translation” known and shared by the same social or cultural group and intentionally used. This gesture is well-known throughout America and other parts of Europe. In Western countries, the widely recognized meaning of this gesture is either to signal that everything is going well or to express a desire for good fortune (Axtell 1991). Interestingly, historical evidence suggests that this gesture was also used in ancient Rome (Corbeill 1997, Paolucci 2003), although possibly in the opposite direction.

Recently, thumbs-up has emerged as a hallmark of the widely used social networking site, Facebook. In its early stages, the company wanted to introduce a user interaction system to enable users to express their approval or disapproval of content. Fiegerman (2014) recalls that they explored various alternatives such as stars or plus and minus signs. The decision to adopt the thumbs-up design sparked concerns about the platform’s global appeal. After conducting numerous tests, the “like” button was officially launched in 2009, accompanied by white and blue thumbs-up icons. Despite the periodic makeover of the application, the thumbs-up icon remains strongly associated with Facebook. For instance, a survey conducted in Spain (Sampietro 2020) revealed that many respondents were likely to perceive the thumbs-up emoji not only as a corresponding hand gesture but also as a “like” sign, similar to the Facebook button.

Many social media platforms, such as *Twitter* (now *X*) and *Instagram*, have replaced the “favorite” or “like” button with a heart, another widespread icon today (see Sampietro & Morant 2022). The prevalence of red hearts in contemporary urban and digital languages can be observed in various forms of expression such as clothing and accessories, food packaging, advertisements, artwork, and online platforms. The heart symbol, commonly associated with love, has also been extensively utilized in the iconic I ♥ NY logo created by Milton Glaser in the 1970s to promote New York’s tourism, and has since become an emblem of the city (Wikipedia contributors, 2024). In this logo, the heart serves as a substitute for the word “love”, signifying “I love New York”. Morant and Martín (2014: 148) point out that this usage is prevalent in urban street art in Spain, where the heart takes the place of verbs such as *querer*, *amar*, or *gustar*. Additionally, it can represent the letter O, the dot of the I or exclamation mark, or even the letters V or M (Morant & Martín 2014: 27-28). These substitutions are found not only in the urban landscape but also in the digital domain. Advertising and political campaigns

also use iconic or metalinguistic substitution. For example, the heart icon symbolizes a range of positive emotional expressions including love and admiration. The heart emoji clearly illustrates how our physical body plays a metaphorical role in shaping our experiences, and how the embodiment of actions enhances our comprehension of the world.

The impact of emojis on culture is the most evident in their pervasiveness in daily life. In 2016, Lucas published a book showing numerous examples of fashion, merchandise, and objects incorporating emojis. Many brands have embraced emojis in their marketing strategies to engage younger, technology-savvy audiences (Kadry 2021, Yeting 2022), even beyond the screen (Sampietro 2018). Corporations frequently incorporate emojis into their advertisements and social media content to project images that are more approachable and friendlier. Some authors even consider emojis the new “language” of advertisements (Kadry 2021). This trend remains relevant even years after the widespread adoption of emojis and is even more prominent in Eastern countries such as China (Lu 2018). Stark and Crawford (2015) remarked that certain sticker characters (stickers are larger and more advanced emojis), such as Cony the Rabbit and Brown the Bear, have emerged as pop culture icons in Japan.

Social and political movements also employ emojis to express their messages and emotions. For instance, the “raised fist” emoji 🦊 is commonly used to demonstrate solidarity and support for various causes (Alfano et al. 2023). The light blue 💙 and green heart 🍀 emojis were associated with pro- and anti-abortion movements in Argentina, respectively (Cantamutto & Vela Delfa 2020). In Spain, the violet emoji 💜 was initially linked to International Women’s Day but was later adopted by the now-extinct left-wing party, Podemos (Sampietro, Calvo & Campos 2020). Emojis, in other words, can rapidly become symbols of movement and influence public perception.

Emojis have been incorporated into various forms of entertainment, such as films and music. For instance, the animated movie “The Emoji Movie” depicted the world of emojis, while musicians use emojis in their albums’ artwork and promotional materials, thereby contributing to their cultural significance. Furthermore, emojis have gained considerable relevance in legal cases, presenting challenges for lawyers and judges in interpreting their intended meanings. In his review of emojis in court proceedings, Danesi (2021) identified that emojis have been employed as evidence to demonstrate criminal intent or indicate a defendant’s awareness of guilt. The author even proposed establishing a new field of study called “emoji forensics” to address these emerging issues.

4. Conclusion

This study introduced an enactive perspective on emojis, a noteworthy cultural phenomenon in contemporary society. Enaction posits that language is not a static concept, but rather a dynamic manifestation of our experiences and highlights the reciprocal impact between language and social interactions.

As we have seen, emojis are not fixed in meaning. Instead, their interpretation is a fluid process that varies across different cultural and contextual landscapes, influencing and being influenced by the environment in which they are used. The bodily metaphorization of experiences has been

shown to be palpable in the design and use of emojis. Many emojis arise from interactions with the environment and reproduce metaphors in language and potentially universal conceptual metaphors. Moreover, I showed that metaphors are a common way to justify the design, use, and inclusion of new emojis, since the Unicode Consortium, the governing body responsible for standardizing emoji characters, places significant emphasis on metaphoric potential when assessing proposals for new emoji designs (Unicode, n.d.). This acknowledgment underscores the importance of visual metaphors in creating emojis, and their ongoing evolution and cultural relevance. The analysis also shows that the influence of emojis goes well beyond the screen: activists, politicians, and advertisers have leveraged the symbolic power of emojis to appropriate some of these pictographs for their causes. Legal entities have also dealt with emojis, which have been used as potential evidence or indicators in legal and criminal investigations (Danesi 2021).

This study showed that emojis manifest the dynamic nature of language and communication, serving as sources, means, and goals for continuous interaction with the environment. Both language (e.g., metaphors) and culture (e.g., iconography of comics, Japanese culturemes) play significant roles in the design of emojis. The analysis also showed that embodied actions such as gestures and conceptual metaphors influence the design and use of emojis. Additionally, the relationship between emojis and language is not unidirectional: emojis influence culture and extend beyond the screen to produce cultural products. Thus, emojis have become a potent cultural phenomenon that shapes how people communicate, express emotions, and engage with society.

The rise of emojis is much more than a passing trend; they are testaments to the creative potential of human communication, reshaping the way we connect, empathize, and understand each other in the digital age. As this linguistic phenomenon continues to evolve, studying emojis remains important for exploring the intersection of technology, language, and culture.

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