

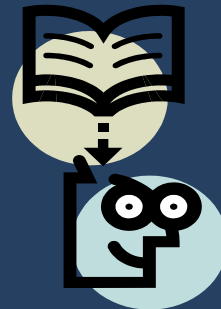
In 2015, the Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year is



“Face with Tears of Joy”

Usage Pattern and Pragmatic Interpretation of Emoji: A Gender Perspective

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1. Introduction

■ The growth in the use of emojis

- The forms and usage of language evolve according to the needs of its users and the platforms they can access for communication (Crystal, 2006)
- 2015, the Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year – “Face with Tears of Joy” (😄)

■ Language is becoming terse and “polluted”?

- Never any clear evidence supporting these assertions (Crystal, 2008)
- An expansion of the expressive options available in a language (Crystal, 2011)

■ Various studies on:

- Clear meanings and rich pragmatic functions of emoji
- “Language barrier” between men and women since 1990s (Cameron, 2007)

■ The relationship between the use of emoji – a special form of language – and gender?



2. Origin and definition

■ Origin

- An English adaptation of Japanese 絵文字 [emodži]
- *e* of *emoji*: picture
- *moji* of *emoji*: letter, character
- *emoji*: picture-word (Alshenqeeti, 2016)
- 1990s, mobile Internet platform, Japan, first introduced by Shigetaka Kurita to provide contextual cues and emotional context (Skiba, 2016)

■ Definition

- A small digital image or icon used to express an idea or emotion in electronic communication (Oxford Dictionaries)
- The word itself can be used as both singular and plural in English (emoji-emojis)



3. Usage pattern

■ Similarities

- **Preference:** men and women have an overlap of 9 emojis in 10 most-preferred emojis (Chen et al. 2018)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Men										
Women										

- **Context:** text messaging > social media posts > email
- **Interlocutors:** friends > partners > family > colleagues
> (rarely or never) teachers, professors, tutors, supervisors or bosses
- (Danesi, 2017; Jones, 2020)



3. Usage pattern

■ Differences

- **Frequency:** women are more likely to use emojis than men (Chen et al. 2018; Herring, 2020)
 - Interesting: men use heart-related emojis more frequently than women
 -  Psychological literature: men are less willing to express love in real life (e.g., Vandergriff, 2013)
 - Men reserve to express love in real situations; they tend to express love through emojis in online textual communication (Chen et al. 2018)
- Emoji in **men-only** and **women-only** chat groups:
 - Women employ emojis profusely to express solidarity, support, positive feelings, and gratitude and maintain their close friendships
 - Men do not; they use emojis more to express sarcasm and teasing
 - (Herring, 2018; Pérez-Sabater, 2019; Wolf, 2000)



4. Interpretation of pragmatic functions

Pragmatic functions of emoji

Pragmatic function	Definition	Example
Action	Emoji is used to virtually perform an action	Haha, you missed 🤔
Reaction	Emoji is used to express an emotion in response to a previously posted message	[In response to a photo of an attractive celebrity]: 😍
Mention	Citing an emoji, e.g., to illustrate something in the immediate or a previous message	Sending kisses 😘
Tone modification	Emoji directly modifies the accompanying text, indicating the intended attitude or stance of the message sender	I just realized I have a calculus exam tomorrow 😬
Softening	Emoji directly modifies the accompanying text, making the message less forceful or more polite	Please help me! 😊

■ (Adapted from Herring, 2020)



4. Interpretation of pragmatic functions

■ Similarities

- There is no evidence that emoji pragmatics is gendered.
 - In interpretation, there are no significant differences in how men and women interpret emoji pragmatic functions.
 - In interaction, the same kinds of emoji are used by men and women for identical interactional reasons.

■ Differences

- Men report to find the interpretation of emoji confusing and annoying more frequently than women.

■ (Herring, 2020; Yanty et al. 2019)



5. Possible explanations

■ For similarities

- Men and women have similar cognitive representations of emojis.

■ For differences

- **Sentiment:** women are more sentimental and more expressive than men; men and women convey their sentiments through different ways (Chen et al. 2018)
- **Stereotype:** “emojis are cute and feminine”, thus inappropriate for men to use (Herring, 2018; Sugiyama, 2015); women could often use emoji on social media as part of their performance of gender identity whereas men should not (Herring, 2020)



6. Summary

- Emojis cannot completely replace traditional language forms but they expand and annotate the meaning.
- Men and women have similar preference, context of use, interlocutors and similar pragmatic interpretation for emojis.
- Women are more likely to use emojis than men; men are more likely to find interpretation of emoji confusing and annoying than women.
- Similar mental representations of emoji semantics and pragmatics; different ways to convey sentiments; different stereotypes or social “expectations”.

Rationale

■ 1. Description

- The forms and usage of language evolve according to the needs of its users and the platforms they can access for communication (Crystal, 2006). In recent decades, the rise of online communicative platforms brings the growth in the use of emojis, which is important for language and communication development.
- Emoji has become an attractive new subject for linguistic research in the past few years. Various studies have been done to investigate the use and functions of emojis (e.g., Danesi, 2017; Riordan, 2017; Sampietro, 2019), adding evidence that emojis present clear meanings and rich pragmatic functions. On the other hand, gender difference in language use has been an important topic in understanding human cognition and interaction. As stated by Cameron (2007), there has been a surge of interest in the so-called “language barrier” between men and women since the early 1990s.

Rationale

■ 2. Feelings

- When it comes to emoji, previous work has compared its use across platforms (e.g., Miller, 2016), across ages and across cultures (e.g., Nishimura, 2015) and found considerable differences in these aspects. However, study of emojis from the gender perspective is still rare.
- Similarly, in this module, we discussed the topic of “language use and gender”, which inspired me to think about the relationship between the use of emoji – a special form of language – and gender. I am a lover and heavy user of emojis who rely on them to convey emotions and many other communicative aims. Hence, to extend the topic of “language and gender”, I want to see how men and women use and interpret emojis.

■ 3. Evaluation

- Overall, exploring this topic is an enjoyable experience. But given that it is a relatively novel field, relevant researches, especially from the linguistic perspective, are not that abundant. I tried hard to collect the relevant ones, make a synthesis of them and offer my own understanding. One of the weaknesses may be that the connection with practical language teaching is limited.

Rationale

■ 4. Analysis

- Emoji is an important form of non-verbal language and performs essential semantic and pragmatic functions on online communicative platforms. Traditional non-verbal language is “silent” language including gestures, facial expressions, eye contact and so on (Levine and Adelman, 1993). The Internet is a remarkable expansion of the expressive options available in a language (Crystal, 2011, p. 7). In online texting, Emojis play the role in representing the non-verbal communication. They offer new layers of interaction in a visual rather than orthographic format, eliminating restrictions that words place on creative expression. In this sense, emojis do not devolve traditional language but rather help to enhance literacy and express emotion. Interwoven into our daily communications, emoji is regarded as a ubiquitous language that connects users speaking different languages (Chen et al. 2018).

■ 5. Conclusion

- Doing research for the presentation makes me realize that emojis cannot completely replace traditional language forms but they expand and annotate the meaning. Men and women have both similarities and differences in using emojis, probably due to similar cognitive representations of emojis, different ways to convey sentiments and different exposure to stereotypes or social “expectations”.

■ 6. Action plan

- Further research may focus on emojis in public discourse, or the interaction among different variables such as age, gender, culture in emoji use.

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