

# Emojis Across Humanity

Steven Lazaroff

Communication is always changing, and that change presents newly, emerging methods as a site of tension. In this article, Steven Lazaroff explores the development and use of the emoji to interrogate who uses emojis and why—specifically as it relates to questions of translanguality across gender and age. “Emojis Across Humanity” presents the emoji as a radical literate practice that is capable of making connection in the most surprising spaces.

I sat outside, drinking some tea on my porch, 🤔<sup>1</sup> about the outline of this paper. A neighbor kid drove by on a 🚲<sup>2</sup>, and though I was at some distance, I extended my 🖐️<sup>3</sup> and 🙌<sup>4</sup>. He responded with a 🙌<sup>5</sup>. I could not see his face, but his hand gave me an image in my head of a smiling face attached to that same body of the waving hand.

As I write today, I’m reminded of the other day, a memory came up on Facebook’s On-this-Day feature. My sister had posted in July 2012 that my dad was beginning to text. Then, a year or so later, I remember her texting me “Dad is using emojis now.” As a first-generation Millennial, my sister and I were always engaging in the new use of technology, from home 🖥️<sup>6</sup> to dial-up internet, to the AOL instant messenger (AIM) days—and on. AIM, a product of America Online (AOL), a dial-up internet service, was

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1. Thinking emoji.  
2. Bicyclist emoji.  
3. Right-hand emoji.  
4. Waving emoji.  
5. Waving emoji.  
6. Computer emoji.

**Discourse Community:**

a grouping of people who share a certain language using norms and practices.

the first real-time internet messaging platform that became popular and widely used. AIM formed the basis of many late '90s and early '00s teens' social interactions with their privacy, screen names, and away messages. The *away message* especially looms

large in my own memory as a site of cryptic allusions, what we would now call **vaguebooking**, or **subtweeting**: the ability to communicate with people based on **discourse community**.

Often, we use the generational term *Millennial* to blanket over anyone with birth years from 1981 to 1996, or sometimes only focusing on the latter end, which masks the fact there are Millennial waves. I am a first-wave Millennial which I understood to mean that I “came of age” around the turn of the millennium. This also coincided with the mainstreaming of 🖥️<sup>7</sup> and the internet across the social and educational environments. We not only had crappy 📠<sup>8</sup> to get dysentery on the Oregon Trail, but we had shiny new 📠<sup>9</sup> (the now-defunct brand Compaq rings in my head) and the first hi-speed internet access. This technology heralded a new age and high hopes of possibility for education.



Figure 1: Image of the Yahoo!igans Website.

Now, two decades later, the internet and computers are everywhere in ways we could not imagine then. Sure, I remember my dad trumpeting the idea of Yahoo!igans, but we had no idea we would be carrying around miniature 📠<sup>10</sup>- 📠<sup>11</sup> hybrids. 📠<sup>12</sup> and 📠<sup>13</sup> existed, of course, but separately. Like so much of history, it seems both unimaginable and completely imaginable that things shook out the

way they did. In the late 90s, for instance, it was considered rude to have an on the street 📠<sup>14</sup> call—now it is considered odd or strange to even initiate a voice-to-voice 📠<sup>15</sup> call. Often we can communicate effectively to each other in terms that would not have even been recognizably language in the 90s. I am, of course, referencing the all-powerful emergence of the emoji. Beyond

7. Computer emoji.

8. Computer emoji.

9. Computer emoji.

10. Cellphone emoji.

11. Computer emoji.

12. Cellphone emoji.

13. Computer emoji.

14. Cellphone emoji.

15. Cellphone emoji.

the brevity of the text message, the emoji, in a single image, can communicate a burst of concepts, as well as often bringing a face to a faceless conversation, across and within discourse communities and languages. In this way, emojis are fundamentally **translingual**.

Translingual, Latin, *trans*, “across,” and lingual, “language”) writing is the concept of bringing various languages into the same space and in communication with one another.

A problem in thinking about writing is that so much of what has been presented as writing is only one narrow form of it: the academic paper. We are opening up a world where sending a friend an emoji is a writing composition as valid as the five-paragraph essay. Continuing that work, I’m going to present some research on the different ways emojis represent experiences of laughter, shock, and delight across the example of the alphabetic texts “I’m screaming” and “screaming rn,” the emoji 😂<sup>16</sup>, and the emoji 🦠<sup>17</sup>. What options do we make possible when we make choices about how we communicate our feelings to each other?

Emojis as translingual expressions are everywhere, used by all discourse communities, ages and genders and races and languages, by all people and yet there is still a deep association with emojis as gendered, “female” by some, most recently in a Tweet by a prominent conservative writer, Matt Walsh. Due to this link between emojis and emotion, not only are emojis seen as gendered but as age-specific, too, as though the communication of emotional states is only appropriate for some people. I did some research via my Facebook page to try to complicate this picture, and see how people were feeling about this representation. Far from a niche, narrow state, emojis unite us across language and discourse community differences and push against our idea of what it is to think and to communicate to one another. Beyond (or better: inside) emojis is a **literate activity system**. According to David Russell, activity systems are cooperative interactions aimed at achieving a goal. As a lens, the activity system helps us to analyze the psychological and social processes of achieving that goal. Each system has a goal(s), which is achieved through the work of people and the tools they use). My research centered around the **representation**. The term representation highlights issues related to the way that the people who produce a text conceptualize and plan it (how they think about it, how they talk about it,) as well as all the activities and materials that help to shape how people do this with emojis: how do we think about & plan to deploy emojis? And how do these choices make connections across language—linguaging in different methods of communication and sites of translingualism—to make different kinds of experiences in the world through socialization?

16. Laughing-crying emoji.

17. Skull emoji.

## Brief, Brief, All Too Brief History of Emojis

Emojis emerged out of the emoticon, a text-based attempt to bring emotion out of what can seem distant or cold and as a response to how language was evolving. Emojis and emoticons are **ideograms**, graphic symbols that are outside of any specific language, and in this way are translingual as they move across languages to make communication possible where it was not before. In 2003, the textbook company McGraw-Hill defined the emoticon as, “An acronym for emotion icon, a small icon composed of punctuation characters that indicate how an e-mail message should be interpreted.” The emoticon used characters one could find on any keyboard to produce a cue or a signal of how the sender wants the recipient to feel about how the sender is feeling. Fundamentally, it comes from the fact that communication is happening without faces or voices—without the present body to let us know how we should feel. In this gap of meaning, the emoticon came in to build trust between people, and produce a face where there wasn’t a one. Someone could receive a message of bad news from a friend, and respond with “I’m sorry to hear that” followed by a : ( or a : ). The power of the expression allows for the insertion of either frown or smile acknowledging the bad news. On the one hand, : ( “I am sad to hear that you, my friend, can’t hang out today because you’re not feeling well.” On the other hand, : ), “I am your friend and here for you.” The emoticon joins with the alphabetic text to communicate that friendship in a more meaningful way than the simple letters accomplish and strengthens the relations between people that make them possible, not the borders of the discourse community.

The emoji emerged as a development out of this need for more expression of tone, to render the emoticon even more warmly: in the form of a color image with greater detail. This detail is seen in the faces, the range of emotions from different kinds of frowns and smiles, to the representation of 🐷<sup>18</sup>, 🌱<sup>19</sup>, ✈️<sup>20</sup>, almost all things. But of particular interest are the different deployments of what I will call “crying laughing,” 😂<sup>21</sup>.

### Screaming m, 😱<sup>22</sup>, 💀<sup>23</sup>

One of the major absences the emoji stands in for is laughter. Sometimes we don’t know if we should laugh at something. Sometimes we want to show

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18. Pig emoji.

19. Seedling emoji.

20. Airplane emoji.

21. Laughing-crying emoji.

22. Laughing-crying emoji.

23. Skull emoji.

we are laughing as we are saying something. Sometimes we want to laugh at something we might be uncomfortable to laugh at. There is a range of social conventions that govern these decisions we make about laughter and the emojis that we summon up to help contextualize how we'd like to represent our tones to someone else in the absence of our laughing body.

First, we have common text-based laughing simulations, like “lol,” “haha,” “lmao,” These are helpful and many of us cushion our communications with them in order to let the receiver know we are laughing, but we still have the problem of: where are our faces?! We want to see a face. I find it comforting to read the acronyms, but also we know that we send these acronyms often when we are not laughing, too! How to support the idea that someone is actually laughing? Some exaggerations have stepped in to try to 🗡️<sup>24</sup> that gap: “I’m screaming” or “screaming rn” (rn: right now) do some of that work by turning up the volume on the laughter into a scream. It is an apex-level laughter, but questions of representation emerge: what distinguishes the deployment? What are the different contextualizations that produce each?

“I’m screaming” or “screaming rn” brings a sound right off the bat. To read the word “screaming” is to produce a scream inside our brains, but we also don’t really believe the person is literally screaming wherever they are in the world. The emojis allow us to feel like the person is there laughing with us. The crying laughing emoji is more of a direct translation of the lol, haha, lmao, whereas “I’m screaming” and the dead symbol are escalations of laughter. What are the situations across discourse communities in which one might represent their laughter as the dead symbol? What is the implication?

To see the skull emoji all by itself does not immediately bring to mind laughter. Emojipedia defines the skull as a “whitish-gray, cartoon-styled human skull with large, black eye sockets.

Commonly expresses figurative death, e.g., dying from extreme laughter, frustration, or affection.” Of particular note here is the joining of laughter, frustration, and affection. There are many reasons we laugh or want to indicate to someone else that we are laughing. In fact, the two emotions, frustration and affection, are often never far from each other. But the skull or “dead” emoji escalates laughter from a simple “haha” to an “I am laughing so much this laughter might kill me—or the thing that I’m laughing about will kill me.”

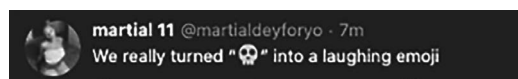


Figure 2: Tweet by martial 11 that reads “We really turned ‘skull emoji’ into a laughing emoji.”

24. Bridge emoji.

In this way, we can see how emojis are imaginative and translingual, going past the limits of distance in a discourse community. No one believes that someone is actually going to die from the laughter, but it is the creation of a fictitious world where we are representing the laughter with the possibility that one could, *that's how funny the thing is*. This inquiry is important because we can see how universal the emoji is through how we navigate different escalations of laughter. On the one hand, from alphabetic *haha, lol, lmao* to crying laughing, and on another hand from these simple laugh expressions into the apex of laughter, the dead symbol.

## Emojis & Gender

There are some, however, who do not conceive emojis as a universal communication method. The writer, Matt Walsh, believes there are some communication methods prescribed for gender, and calls up the image of



Figure 3: Tweet from writer Matt Walsh that reads “Every day I see more grown adult men use emojis. There is no excuse for this. Emojis are for children and women. Do you think your great grandfather would have been caught dead using emojis if the internet existed back then? Have some self-respect for God’s sake.”

our male ancestors in order to evoke some gender shame by using the genre of emoji. And Walsh’s sexism regard emojis isn’t just a niche view. As recently as 2015, the *Washington Post* ominously wrote, “Some Rules for Grown Men Who Dare to Use Emoji.” There is a tension between emojis as emotional communication, and the constructed gender roles of who should communicate emotionally of who gets to use what language, dialect, emoji. However, in response to the Matt Walsh tweet, I posted this rebuttal on Facebook to try to intervene on the construction, and found out some interesting news: all kinds of people use emojis, even, 🧠<sup>25</sup>, veterans of combat.

I’m going to break down the choices of representation and how these rhetorical choices were made to disrupt the ideas we have about the conventions of emojis and gender. I began the sequence with the “hearts all around” to flip the 🖐<sup>26</sup> (aka the 🐦<sup>27</sup>) right off the bat to the idea that I

25. Shock emoji.

26. Middle-finger emoji.

27. Bird head emoji.

as a “man” should not be emotional. I followed with a stream of 🌋<sup>28</sup>, 💣<sup>29</sup>, and 🌶️<sup>30</sup> to reinforce that these are explosive, incendiary ideas that are spicy. The 😄<sup>31</sup> is just plain funny to me, which is often enough for emojis, but also the drooling is self-reflective, indicating I am infatuated with this emoji sequence in progress. I deploy 🤠<sup>32</sup> to bring even more affirmation to the mix, which I read as “let’s go!” or “I’m ready” in the spirit of “saddle up!” The 😈<sup>33</sup> is playful and expands the spunk of the 🤠<sup>34</sup> with the spicy of the 🌶️<sup>35</sup> to turn up the volume of the critique on Walsh. I ended with the 🙌<sup>36</sup> and 🧐<sup>37</sup> because these are two of my favorite emojis, and I wanted to communicate solidarity, we are in this together, and I am smiling cutely while saying all this.

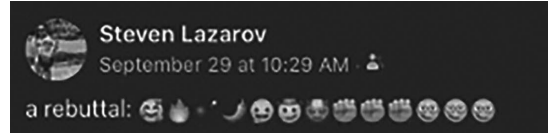


Figure 4: Tweet from Steven Lazaroff that reads: “a rebuttal” followed by a string of emojis.

The responses I received to the rebuttal confirmed and expanded on the convention that emojis are for everyone, and in fact disturb our ideas of who can express emotions and how, expanding the boundaries we typically engage that tells us what language we are speaking and to whom, who is in our discourse community. Two examples stick out to me, both involving friends, and their parents or grandparents.

Here we see an excellent example not only countering the gender and age barrier Walsh tries to present, but also giving us a reason for the representation. On the sending end, the dad is able to communicate his emotional state. This is good for him, in sending that emotion outside his body so it’s not held captive, while also 🌉<sup>38</sup> the gap with his daughter, to where she can have a more precise idea of *exactly* how happy or sad he is, based on the emojis he uses.

Figure 5: Post from Annette Hutto that reads: “I love that my dad, a 65 year old lawyer uses emojis and even updates his bitmoji regularly. I read an article once that emojis allow men to use feelings in a world where they often have feelings suppressed or discouraged. My dad will send whole paragraphs of emojis and I love that I have a better idea how happy to sad he is based on what he uses.”

28. Fire emoji.

29. Bomb emoji.

30. Chili pepper emoji.

31. Drooling emoji.

32. Cowboy emoji.

33. Purple devil emoji.

34. Cowboy emoji.

35. Pepper emoji.

36. Raised fist emoji.

37. Emoji wearing glasses.

38. Bridge emoji.

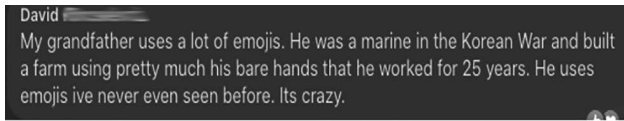


Figure 6: Screenshot of Facebook post that reads “My grandfather uses a lot of emojis. He was a marine in the Korean War and built a farm using pretty much his bare hands that he worked for 25 years. He uses emojis I’ve never even seen before. It’s crazy.”

discourse communities enforcing different genre rules of who and who cannot take part in the genre. Language moves and changes boundaries. Emojis were created because of the new possibilities for communication presented by technological development.

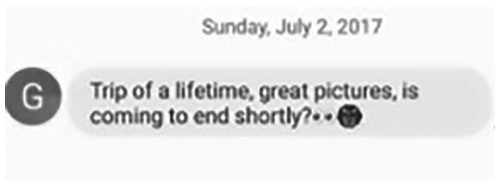


Figure 7: Screenshot of a text that reads “Trip of a lifetime, great pictures, is coming to end shortly?” Followed by two emojis.

grandfather said he chose the 👁️<sup>41</sup> to indicate an openness, an expansion on “the coming to an end shortly,” while the 🖱️<sup>42</sup> was supposed to be playful while also strong.

## Emojis for Humanity

The genre of emoji has tremendous power as a method of translanguaging, and can be deployed in such diverse situations by every type of person within and across language, within and across communities. There is no barrier for gender or age, except those imposed by people. In looking at the different ways emojis behave in the world, we can see that they allow us to be places where we are not, to have our laugh echo in a room we aren’t in, and to speak to people who have different experiences in the world, whether due to culture, gender, or age. Emojis are a radical act, and help us better understand each other—even more to the point, they help us better understand how important emotional communication is. What would motivate a person like Matt Walsh to say that only 🚫<sup>43</sup> and 🚺<sup>44</sup> can use emojis? What does it do

39. Hand emoji.

40. Keyboard emoji.

41. Eyes emoji.

42. Ogre emoji.

43. Crossing sign emoji.

44. Women’s room emoji.

Another great example emerged which explicitly confronted Walsh’s dire image of our ashamed ancestors unable to deal with our emotional communications across constructed, gendered

Here is a grandfather, a veteran of the Korean War, a man whose 🖱️<sup>39</sup> built a farm but also 🗂️<sup>40</sup> text messages involving emotional communication. And not only does he use emojis, but he uses emojis his grandson has never seen before! And what an interesting pairing he made! Upon asking, David’s



to 🚺<sup>45</sup> to take up this kind of communication? What identity privileges is Walsh exhibiting in drawing lines about who can and cannot emoji? How can we view Walsh’s actions as an expression patriarchal power?

We can see in the examples given that emojis do not divide us, but in fact unite us across physical distances, and also make up for the inability of words to accurately communicate what we want words to communicate. The choices we make to represent our experiences reflect care both for ourselves and attending to our own emotional state, but also the desire to communicate that emotional state to another person who cares about us. There is an ongoing surprise of the emoji because we are using them to communicate experiences that don’t fit into language, or if they do fit, they lose much of the intimacy we are hoping to extend. In this extension of intimacy, there is the opportunity for imagination and creativity, not simply in sending, but in receiving. In receiving these communiques, we see often we do not understand, and in not understanding we use our imagination to fill the gap.

The other day a friend came by my house to watch a movie. She brought her 🐶<sup>46</sup>, Addie, who located some vomit my 🐱<sup>47</sup> hid from me in a tucked-away corner. A few days later, we were planning to hang out and she said “come over to my house, I’m scarred by Addie licking the 🐱<sup>48</sup> vomit.” I said “I’ll make it up to you,” and she said “I’m not sure that’s possible, that’ll take a while.” In reply, I simply said 🐛<sup>49</sup>.

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45. Men’s room emoji.

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