

EMOJI LINGUISTICS

TYLER SCHNOEBELEN: *Ides aglæcwif yrmþe gemunde, se þe wæteregeþan wunian scoldeld, cea e streamas, siþðan Cain wearð to ecgbanan angan breþer, fæderenmæge.*

NARRATION: That was a passage from *Beowulf* in Old English, which is not something you would expect to hear at an emoji conference, but it was from a talk by the linguist Tyler Schnoebelen at Emojicon, the first ever conference dedicated to emoji. It took place in San Francisco in November 2016. Tyler's point in speaking in Old English was that language isn't static.

TYLER SCHNOEBELEN: We know that language changes, right? This is just a thing that happens. It is inevitable, and in fact, desirable.

NARRATION: I just want to take a moment to make something clear about linguistics. Linguistics isn't like your grade school grammar, which told you how you should be using language—it's not about "don't split infinitives" or "don't end sentences with prepositions." Rather, linguists are interested in how people actually use language, including how people's use of language has changed over time. In recent years, a source of language innovation has come from emoji. In his talk, Tyler discussed the interplay between emoji, language, and technology.

TYLER SCHNOEBELEN: So emoji help us alert us to the technology of language and particularly the technology of writing. Writing has only been invented five times in the whole world—probably. And most people just see writing of their neighbors and like, "That is a great idea! Let's do that!" Things like technology also affect how things develop, right? So if you look at early typewriters, they don't have exclamation points. The exclamation point is a pretty old character, but you didn't have that—because why? Well, you didn't have to have them until the 70s because people who were typing on typewriters weren't like, "Mr. Johnson EXCLAMATION. I am furious EXCLAMATION," right? That's just not a thing you did when you were using a typewriter in the 50s.

NARRATION: And as we've moved on from typewriters to computers, we have a lot more characters at our disposal than before. Technological advances in mobile devices have also changed the appearance of emojis greatly. So a little bit of history: emojis were first developed in Japan. The word *emoji* comes from the Japanese *e* (meaning "picture") and *moji* (meaning "character"). Arguably, the first emoji was the heart symbol, which was introduced in 1995 on a pager by NTT Docomo, a Japanese mobile service provider. The story then goes that in an updated version of the pager, Docomo got rid of the heart, perhaps in an attempt to appeal more to the professional business-oriented people. Subsequently, the young folks that actually used the pagers stop using Docomo's and Docomo learned its lesson: teenagers heart the heart symbol. As technology moved on from pagers to cell phones, Docomo was able to release a set of 176 emojis in the late 1990s, which were small 12-by-12 pixel characters. As technology improved, emojis have evolved to be the colorful collection of symbols we now know today. And just as emojis have changed, so has language. As Tyler explained in his talk, users of language frequently utilize the resources around them to create specific meanings.

TYLER SCHNOEBELEN: So you can, of course, take the old language changes and do stuff with them, right? Like, "Zounds!" Now I can use that in my comic illustrations and sound old fashioned, sound all sorts of things because people are really good at adapting the resources they have

available from the past and from the present. So obviously the sort of main example of adaption and emoji is, of course, the eggplant, which goes not just for the eggplant, the euphemism of penises, but extends into, like, people literally say “eggplant Friday,” right? It becomes a cultural thing.

NARRATION: “Eggplant Friday,” in case you didn’t know, was a popular hashtag on Instagram where people, typically wearing sweatpants, took photos suggestive of the “eggplant.” I got the chance to interview Tyler and ask him a bit more about the linguistics of emoji, specifically the patterns in which people use them.

TYLER SCHNOEBELEN: So the number one thing that is the most important is just how infrequent it is for people to use multiple emoji in a row. Mostly people are doing, you know, one or two, and then when they are doing repeats, mostly they’re just doing the same one over and over and over, or they’re doing variations, right? So all the heart colors, right. So those are technically different emoji but it’s still kind of the same thing—it’s not really a grammar.

So once you wade through all of those, which are the vast majority, and you get to two and three sequences, you see that people, one, respect the order of the emoji, so they have directionality, right? So if you do, like, the puff of air and then the car, that doesn’t make sense for a fast car because the cars point left. So you want to do car, then puff of air, unless you’re having the car, you know, drive into the fog or something. People respect, sort of, temporality. So, you sequence it in the order that you mean it to happen, just as you do in, kind of, conjunctions in most languages. If you say “this and that” you also mean that this came before that, even though, logically, you know, that’s not how “and” works in the logical thing, it’s how it works pragmatically.

NARRATION: To give a concrete example, let’s say for lunch, you had sushi, and then for dessert, you ate ice cream. If you were to describe that in emojis, you’re probably more likely to use the sushi emoji and then the ice cream emoji, rather than the other way around.

TYLER SCHNOEBELEN: I think the one that’s maybe more exciting is that people lead with stance first, right? So you’ll be much more likely to have your facial emoji before the other emoji.

NARRATION: That is, if you’re happy because you got a present, you’re more likely to use one of the happy smiley emojis followed by a wrapped gift emoji rather than the other order. But although we may talk about there being a grammar of emoji, emojis in and of themselves don’t constitute a language. Here’s the Internet linguist Gretchen McCulloch, who also gave a talk at Emojicon.

GRETCHEN McCULLOCH: The first thing that I want to talk about is this question of “what’s a language?” And we’ll get to in a sec, “do emoji qualify?” What a lot of people don’t realize is that when people talk about language, we tend to be very imprecise, and there’s actually two different meanings that people have when they say language. Sometimes people mean any way of communicating. You can say the language of dance, and you know, the language of art—the skull symbolizes the memento mori and things like this. And we also have language as a very specific thing, which is an abstract combinatorial system of meaning and what happens is sometimes we conflate any means of communicating with means of communicating that are complex enough to do all of this abstract stuff.

So when it comes to emoji, can we use emoji to communicate? Of course, we can use emoji to communicate. But can we use them to communicate abstract meaning? Kinda—there's a couple of—you know, there's a couple emoji, someone had to tell you what the eggplant meant. Can you combine emoji to mean certain things? Well, kinda maybe. But if I say, you know, happy face, dog, does that mean I like dogs? Does that mean the dog is happy? Does that mean it's a good dog? Does it mean I'm happy and also there is a dog? It's harder to tell the relationship between those.

NARRATION: But just because emojis aren't a language doesn't mean we can't care deeply about them. Back in September 2016, the journalist Zoe Mendelson wrote an online article for Slate titled, "The Emoji Era Is Over. Thanks, Apple."

In her article, she complained about the iOS 10 update, which brought about the redesigns for many of the emojis on iPhones. These redesigns made the emojis look more realistic, perhaps less cartoon-like. Zoe cares deeply about emojis—so much so that one of the article's comments stated, "I wish I cared about anything as much as the author cares about emojis." At Emojicon, Zoe gave a talk.

ZOE MENDELSON: This is about—this is a presentation about why I'm never going to update my phone ever again because Apple's designers, I would argue, fundamentally misunderstood what makes emoji awesome and what makes them super useful.

NARRATION: So what is it that makes them so useful? For Zoe, it's that emojis have an important pragmatic function.

ZOE MENDELSON: There's a part of linguistics called pragmatics and it's about how language performs actions. Some of the actions that language performs are like, greet, establish intimacy, acknowledge something, request something, promise something. There's a ton of things we do that are, apart from the meaning of the word, the intention of your utterance, the intention of what you're doing. And a lot of them are subconscious. They're very subtle.

NARRATION: Keeping this idea of pragmatics in mind, we can see that emojis don't just illustrate texts but layer them with pragmatic meaning.

ZOE MENDELSON: I think that this is like, the answer to the question "why did emoji get incredibly popular? Like, why did emoji blow up like crazy?" And people have expressed like, well, it adds feelings—it adds, you know, feelings and tone to what otherwise can be, like, flat text, but I think on top of that, they are very good at the kind of subtle, vague, pragmatic communication that we're used to having in person-to-person real life communication.

NARRATION: For example, in her article, Zoe talked about the Grinning Face With Smiling Eyes emoji. With the update, it shows a simple happy grinning emoji. But prior to the iOS 10 update, the emoji showed a smiley with happy eyes, but the mouth wasn't your typical smiling face; rather, it was a grimace-like expression that bares its teeth. Zoe calls it an "indistinguishable grin-grimace" that expresses a "slightly-guilty-slightly-pleased-slightly-embarrassed-but-still-excited expression." A complex and vague expression indeed.

ZOE MENDELSON: This sort of vaguery is a feature; it's not a bug. Vagueness is built into the way we communicate because every situation, every social interaction is full of these factors we don't know, and so we need to have the ability to hide our intentions and reactions just as much as we show them, and I think the weirdness of emoji and the subjective, strange vagueness of them is what gave them the flexibility to do that.

NARRATION: Another example of emoji vagueness comes from the Person Bowing emoji. The older version of the emoji showed a person's hands laid flat below their face, alert eyes, and blue marks above the head, as if to suggest shock or worry in a cartoon-like fashion. According to the emoji reference site Emojipedia, "Many variations of this emoji are misinterpreted as a person doing push-ups, lying down to have a massage, or doing a cute "head resting on hands" gesture." However, for Zoe, it represented something else.

ZOE MENDELSON: And then this little guy—I think before he was kind of like, generalized angst—like the little lines coming off of his head—like uhng—like, you know, and now he looks very clearly apologetic.

NARRATION: And perhaps this is the emoji that best represents the loss of communicatory potential that came with the iOS 10 update, an update that doesn't even allow us to express our angst about the changing emojiscape, an update that just leaves us feeling sorry for everything that can no longer be said in emoji.