

Emoji and rapport management in Spanish WhatsApp chats

Agnese [Sampietro](#)*

sampietr@uji.es

University Jaume I, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of Languages and European Cultures, Av. Sos Baynat S/n, 12071 Castellón de la Plana, Spain

*Tel.: +34 964 729 846.

Abstract

Emoji are a set of pictographs available on several electronic platforms and applications, which are gradually replacing emoticons (sequences of punctuation marks representing facial expressions). Over the last decade, researchers have proposed that emoticons not only convey emotional content in computer-mediated communication, but they may also perform pragmatic functions, such as signaling the illocutionary force of the utterance (Dresner and Herring, 2010), mitigating threatening formulations (Wilson, 1993), or strengthening expressive speech acts (Skovholt et al., 2014). Despite their growing popularity, little pragmatic research to date specifically addresses emoji. The present paper bridges this gap by exploring the functions of emoji in a corpus of WhatsApp chats written in Spanish. Drawing on Spencer-Oatey's (2000, 2005) rapport management framework, the analysis shows that emoji are used across different domains in the corpus: they not only upgrade or downgrade different speech acts (illocutionary domain), as pointed out by previous research, but they also contribute to achieving a successful interaction by signaling closing sections or by helping to negotiate openings (discourse domain), as well as serving as a way to frame playful interactions (stylistic domain). This study also shows that some practices related to the use of emoji may be influenced by Spanish culture.

Keywords: Emoji; Computer-mediated communication; WhatsApp; Rapport management; Politeness; Spanish

1 Introduction

Emoji are a popular set of digital pictographs used in social media, text messages, e-mails and other applications. In America and Europe, they are considered the inheritors of ASCII emoticons, which are sequences of punctuation marks that imitate facial expressions, such as). While in America and Europe emoticons are read sideways, Asian emoticons, *kaomoji*, are written horizontally: (•_•). In 1999, the Japanese telephone company Docomo launched the first set of emoji, which had enormous success and was imitated by the competitors. In 2009 emoji were standardized internationally by the Unicode consortium and they were integrated into several major operating systems (Blagdon, 2013). Recent studies indicate that emoji are gradually replacing ASCII emoticons (Herring and Dainas, 2017; Pavalanathan and Eisenstein, 2016; Prada et al., 2018). Herring and Dainas (2017) consider that some design features (emoji are small, static, simple but not too minimalistic) may have fostered their success.

In spite of the growing use of emoji, they have been the object of little research in pragmatics up to date (Ge and Herring, 2018; Herring and Dainas, 2017; Pérez-Sabater et al., 2019). By contrast, numerous studies have analyzed the functions of ASCII emoticons in different computer-mediated communication (CMC) settings. The first scholarly studies on emoticons considered that these typographic faces were used either to add emotional content, to substitute for missing non-verbal cues in CMC (Derks et al., 2007; Hancock et al., 2007; Rezabeck and Cochenour, 1995), or to disambiguate messages (Walther and D'Addario, 2001). Subsequent research based on a corpus of naturally-occurring CMC exchanges has pointed out that emoticons may also contribute to politeness in CMC (Dresner and Herring, 2010; Markman and Oshima, 2007; Skovholt et al., 2014; Vandergriff, 2013).

This paper seeks to investigate whether emoji, similarly to emoticons, contribute to relational dynamics in a corpus of WhatsApp chats written in Spanish. Emoji are available globally and are iconic in nature. Consequently, some authors (cf. Alshenqeeti, 2016; Azuma and Ebner, 2008; Danesi, 2016) have argued that emoji could perhaps overcome linguistic barriers virtually, and that they might be used as a “universal visual language” (Azuma and Ebner, 2008: 972). It has been noted, though, that cultural background strongly impacts the use of emoji (cf. Gibson et al., 2018). In addition, politeness is culturally-bound (cf., for example, Bravo, 2008; Spencer-Oatey, 2002; Terkourafi, 2011). This research seeks to understand whether particular strategies and practices related to the use of emoji result from the affordance of a specific CMC mode, or are rather affected by language or culture (Ren, 2018). I start from the premise that these pictographs may reflect cultural preferences about the most appropriate reaction in a given situation (Gibson et al., 2018; Sugiyama, 2015), so I take communication in Spanish between acquaintances as a case study. This paper contributes to three understudied areas in CMC: the still limited body of research on the pragmatic functions of emoji (Herring, 2018), computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) in languages other than English (Danet and Herring, 2003; Ren, 2018), and the study of everyday computer-mediated conversation (Georgakopoulou, 2011; Herring, 2018).

This article is structured as follows: section 2 offers an overview of relevant literature on emoticons and politeness. Section 3 introduces the rapport management framework, which will be used in the analysis. Section 4 discusses the methodology (data, data collection, and procedure) and section 5 reviews the analysis of the corpus. Finally, the discussion and conclusions are presented (section 6).

2 Emoticons and emoji: beyond affect

Despite their etymology (a blend between *emotion* and *icon*), research has shown that smileys are not only used to convey emotional content in CMC settings. In fact, emoticons are used more consciously than non-verbal behavior (Derks et al., 2007; Sampietro, 2016a; Anonymous, 2016a; Yus, 2014). One of the functions that is clearly recognized by researchers is the signaling of irony or jokes (cf., for example, Dresner and Herring, 2010; Yus, 2014), which was the aim of what is considered the first emoticon, typed in 1982 by Scott Fahlman (Stark and Crawford, 2015). One of the most influential studies on the pragmatics of emoticons was published by Dresner and Herring (2010): according to these authors, in addition to indicating emotional and non-emotional contents mapped into facial expressions, emoticons may also signal the illocutionary force of the utterance they accompany. Several researchers have also linked the use of emoticons with politeness strategies: smileys may be used to soften threatening formulations (Calero Vaquera and Luisa, 2014; Wilson, 1993) and as positive politeness markers and rapport building devices (Kavanagh, 2010; Skovholt et al., 2014; Vandergriff, 2013). In daily workplace interactions, Darics (2012) found that emoticons were mainly used to mitigate or to clarify the message, frequently with the purpose of reaching a successful cooperation.

Although research on the functions of emoji is growing, it is still in its infancy. Many authors, like in the case of emoticons, still link emoji somewhat exclusively with the expression of emotions (cf., for example, Jaeger et al., 2018; Marengo et al., 2017; Riordan, 2017), and researchers have only just begun to explore different functions. For instance, Kelly and Watts (2015) recognize that emoji may be used to create conversational connection, playful interaction, and “uniqueness.” Pictographs may be used to specify the tone, engage recipients, and help relationship maintenance (Cramer et al., 2016), as well as to soften or strengthen the message or enhance its irony, fun, and positivity (Prada et al., 2018). Danesi (2016) assigns to these pictographs phatic and emotive functions, such as showing a friendlier tone. Drawing on a corpus of Facebook comments, Herring and Dainas (2017) found that emoji fulfill a wider variety of functions beside emotional reactions, such as modifying the tone, depicting an element mentioned verbally, riffing, embodying an action, or representing a narrative sequence. On the other hand, a recent analysis of emoji sequences on the Chinese platform Sina Weibo (Ge and Herring, 2018) shows that emoji carry out pragmatic and rhetorical functions (e.g., expressing a variety of speech acts, emphasizing the text, and evaluation), which were previously only typical of verbal utterances. An additional Chinese study showed that the emoji *face covering hand* relates to the use of laughter in interaction in this specific cultural context (Gibson et al., 2018). Japanese teens also consider relational concerns in the use of emoji to be key, as they carefully use these pictographs to manage the communication climate and to convey a proper image of themselves (Sugiyama, 2015).

Few studies specifically explore the use of emoji in corpora retrieved from the application WhatsApp. One study carried out in Switzerland (Dürscheid and Siever, 2017) shows that emoji in all Swiss languages are seldom used to replace words or as allographs. In Spanish WhatsApp chats between acquaintances, emoji are used to foster affiliation, intimacy, and friendship, as well as to mitigate possible threats (Pérez-Sabater et al., 2019) and to complete tasks (Al Rashdi, 2018).

As the literature review shows, there is evidence indicating that emoji not only communicate affect, but rather enhance the written text they accompany, similar to ASCII emoticons. Thus, if emoji, like emoticons, are related to politeness dynamics, their use may exhibit cultural variation. To explore this premise, this paper will analyze the use of emoji in a corpus of WhatsApp chats written in Spanish. By adopting a broader conception of politeness, I will discuss how emoji contribute to the management of social relations and to the construction of the conversation in this specific cultural context. Accordingly, this study draws on Spencer-Oatey's (2000, 2002, 2005) rapport management framework, which will be described in the following section.

3 Rapport management

Since the publication of Brown and Levinson's (1987) *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*, research on politeness has become a central topic in linguistic research around the world. Although it is still considered a seminal work, Brown and Levinson's approach has received criticism in recent years. Some of the problems of their model were the excessive pessimism (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1997: 12), the focus on the individual rather than on the relationship or society (Arundale, 2006; Mills, 2003), methodological issues (Eelen, 2001; Mills, 2003), and its supposed universality (cf., for example, Eelen, 2001; Watts, 2003). Regarding the latter issue, in the Spanish-speaking world, showing closeness and friendliness are key factors in interaction (Bravo, 2008). Accordingly, in this socio-cultural context, politeness should not only be seen as a way to repair possible damage to one's or the interlocutor's face, but also as a way to enhance social relations, especially with family or friends (Hernández-Flores, 1999).

A broader perspective on politeness phenomena, which is called “rapport management” (Spencer-Oatey, 2000, 2005, 2011), has been proposed in recent years to describe the way language is used in the management of social relations. Moving beyond the face saving/face threat focus, three influential factors in the success of human interaction emerge from this framework: face sensitivities (the recognition of personal qualities and identity), interactional goals (whether the interaction is transactional or oriented to relation), and behavioral expectations (what people judge as appropriate in a given context, such as the communicative activity, the setting, the type of relationship between

interactants, etc.). Judgments about the most appropriate behavior in a given context derive from two general interactional principles: the “equity principle” and the “association principle” (Spencer-Oatey, 2005: 99–100). The first principle states that people believe they have the right to be treated fairly. The second principle concerns people's perceived right to associate with others, whose components are involvement, empathy, and respect.¹ These expectations are shaped by contextually-based conventions and norms across the following domains (Spencer-Oatey, 2000: 19–20): the illocutionary domain (the performance of speech acts), the discourse domain (content and structure of an interchange), the participation domain (the procedural aspects of an interchange), the stylistic domain (stylistic choices, such as genre-appropriated tone, address forms, etc.), and the non-verbal domain (gestures, eye contact, proxemics, etc.).

The notion of rapport management has been considered one of the best frameworks for the analysis of (im)politeness to date, as it takes into account both the discursive turn of politeness research (Eelen, 2001) and the relational turn of pragmatics (Locher and Watts, 2005). I consider rapport management particularly suitable to analyze emoji, as this framework, by definition, goes beyond the linguistic strategies used by interactants, focusing rather on the construction and maintenance of social relationships in interaction (Spencer-Oatey, 2000: 12). I choose to focus on Spanish interaction, as it has been defined as a “face-enhancing culture” (Carrasco Santana, 1999); the use of politeness in colloquial conversation among Spaniards is usually not motivated by avoiding or mitigating face-threats, but by the desire to improve the relationship between the interactants (Hernández-Flores, 1999). If emoji are related to politeness, this rapport-enhancing tendency should emerge in everyday Spanish CMC. By focusing on a corpus of WhatsApp chats among acquaintances in this face-enhancing culture, this paper analyzes the interactional work done by participants using emoji, moving beyond the links between emoji and emotions, and emoji and speech acts (see Gibson et al., 2018 for similar criticism of preceding emoji research).

4 Methodology

4.1 Data and data collection

The present research is based on a 274,410 words corpus of naturally occurring WhatsApp messages written in Peninsular Spanish. WhatsApp is an interactive multimodal platform that allows users to call and video call, as well as send texts, audio, videos, photos, and other files via messaging using an internet connection. A number of reasons contributed to the selection of this application for the study. At first, the corpus was retrieved in Spain and at the time of data collection WhatsApp was the most common messaging application (Fundación Telefónica, 2015) and emoji were gaining success among WhatsApp users in this country (Calero Vaquera and Luisa, 2014 (Please correct this reference: (Calero Vaquera, 2014))).

In general, WhatsApp is one of the ideal settings to study these pictographs, as the affordances (cf. Hutchby, 2001) of the application are likely to encourage the use of emoji for four reasons: 1) users tend to send short messages, although the word limit is far less strict than in the case of tweets or traditional SMS. This brevity is paired with high immediacy, contextualization and communicative work (Littlemore and Tagg, 2018); 2) similar to many other forms of CMC, WhatsApp is used to text to other people not physically co-present, who need to properly contextualize their messages; 3) WhatsApp is mainly used among the informants of this corpus to text to people who also meet face-to-face or at least know each other in person. The close relationship between users largely shapes the interactions, which tend to present a speech-like tone and a relaxed writing style; and 4) WhatsApp facilitates the introduction of emoji, as a wide range of pictographs is available and the list of emoji is easily accessible from the keyboard.

The corpus was compiled between December 2014 and April 2015.² Possible informants were contacted among author's friends, relatives, colleagues, and students. Participants were 74 women and 41 men; around half of the informants were between 18 and 25 years old and one-fourth were between 26 and 50 years. Exchanges were among dyads of family members, friends, and colleagues (not including the author). In spite of the limitations of a convenience sample (e.g., data may be biased, generalized conclusions may be difficult), one of the most interesting features of the corpus is that it shows instances of everyday private technology-mediated conversation, one of the research areas less explored in CMC studies, despite its significance in everyday life (Georgakopoulou, 2011; Herring, 2018). Informants were asked to send the log of the dyadic WhatsApp chats they were willing to share to the e-mail address of the author, giving their informed consent to participate in the research at the same time. Group chats were excluded, as it was not possible to obtain informed consent from all the users.

The chats were received in plain text format and they were subsequently pasted into a Microsoft Word document. Additional sources of data were informal interviews with participants and chronemic information (time and date of the messages). Other files (such as pictures, audio messages, and videos) were not retrievable with this method, and were thus not considered in the analysis. Group chats, exchanges entirely written in other languages (for example, in Catalan), or incomplete conversations (e.g. screenshots) were excluded.

For the purpose of this study, I consider a “(text) message” each contribution made by one of the users, which appears on the screen, and a “conversation” as an exchange of text messages. The different messages were manually grouped into conversations relying upon chronemic information, the topic of the exchange, and the optional use of greetings and farewells. As the focus of this paper is on the use of emoji and its approach is qualitative, I included in the analysis only conversations containing at least one emoji (correctly displayed).³ Accordingly, 2704 messages, grouped into 229 conversations, were included in the corpus. The selected conversations included a total amount of 1077 emoji, with 107 different emoji. This shows that despite the variety of pictographs available (at the time of data collection the Unicode standard included 972 emoji), users typically rely on a small number of emoji. The most frequent emoji used were *face throwing a kiss* 🥰 (alt-text: Image 1) (198 instances), *face with tears of joy* 😂 (alt-text: Image 2) (141 instances), *smiling face with smiling eyes* 😊 (alt-text: Image 3) (116), and the *thumbs-up sign* 👍

alt-text: Image 4 (56 times).

4.2 Procedure

In order to understand how emoji were used in the corpus, a qualitative analysis of the selected conversations was performed. The methodology combines computer-mediated discourse analysis (Herring, 2004), the study of everyday conversation (Georgakopoulou, 2011; Tannen, 1984), and rapport management (Spencer-Oatey, 2000, 2002, 2005). Moreover, it also takes into account the idiosyncrasy of Spanish politeness (e.g. Bravo, 2008; Briz, 2002; Hernández-Flores, 1999). In the corpus, emoji are used to handle different demands of the interaction, both from an interpersonal and a discursive standpoint. Several contextual factors were observed to be influencing the use of these pictographs and were thus considered in the analysis: 1) the relationship between participants; 2) the (a)synchronicity of the exchange; 3) whether the conversation was relation-oriented (small talk, greetings) or task-oriented (asking for information, planning a meeting); 4) in what section of the conversation emoji were used (openings, closings, or in the main body); and 5) the content of the verbal message that emoji accompany (if there was one).

In the following sections, some recurrent patterns involving emoji observed in the corpus are presented. As the emphasis of this paper are the regularities in the use of emoji, I will especially focus on behavioral conventions and styles across different domains (Spencer-Oatey, 2000: 15-16). The analysis of the use of emoji presented in this paper will focus only on three out of the five relevant domains that play important roles in rapport management: the illocutionary, the discursive, and the stylistic domains. These specific domains were chosen because they were considered more representative of the ways in which emoji were used in the corpus. Around half of the cases were classified as pertaining to the illocutionary domain, one-fourth were considered related to the participation domain, and another fourth to the stylistic domain. As it will be shown in the following sections, domains may overlap. As a consequence, absolute or relative frequencies are not presented: the analysis exposes trends in the use of emoji and not strict categorizations of the corpus.

5 Discussion of results

5.1 Illocutionary domain

Similar to emoticons (cf. Darics, 2012; Skovholt et al., 2014), emoji may be used as upgraders (to increase the force a speech act) or downgraders (to mitigate it) (Spencer-Oatey, 2000: 36). Although previous research on emoticons stressed their use in mitigation (cf. Calero Vaquera and Luisa, 2014; Wilson, 1993 (Please, correct the first reference: (Calero Vaquera, 2014))), the emoji in the corpus were found in association with relational-oriented expressions (as wishes, greetings, or invitations), above all else. For instance, I found 64 expressions of thanks and around half of them (33 cases) were upgraded in some way (emoji, letter repetition, multiple punctuation marks, code-switching, etc.). In example (1),⁴ Laura wishes her cousin Lorena good luck for a job interview and Lorena sends thanks. Both messages include smiling emoji. These emoji work as upgraders, strengthening the already positive impact of the speech acts of wishing and thanking, while fostering the affiliation between the interlocutors.

(1)

1.	17.12.2014	8:07	Laura:	Es hoy la entrevista? Muuuucha suerte!! 😊 alt-text: Image 3
				<i>Is the interview today? Gooood luck!!</i>
2.	17.12.2014	9:22	Lorena:	Gracias cariño 😊 alt-text: Image 3 😊 alt-text: Image 3 😊 alt-text: Image 3
				<i>Thanks honey 😊 alt-text: Image 3 😊 alt-text: Image 3 😊 alt-text: Image 3</i>

Another upgrading use of emoji is the association of pictographs with greetings, as in example (2). In the corpus, there were 11 greeting conversations (birthday, Christmas, New Year, Name Day). Adding a colorful note to these kind of expressions may be a way to foster the involvement and the association between participants. Moreover, all birthday greetings in the corpus formed an adjacency pair with an expression of thanks, which may in turn be upgraded with emoji, as observed above. Studies on different varieties of Spanish have shown that fixed formulas of greetings for particular events (such as birthday or Christmas) are usually paired with thanks, while thanks may not follow other kinds of interactional well-wishing, without being considered rude (Dimitrescu, 2004).

(2)

1. 13.01.15 17:47 Mónica: Muchass felicidades guapaa!!!!



Happyy birthday honeyy!!!!

2. 13.01.15 19:47 Carmen: Muchas gracias!!!!

Thank you very much!!!!

3. 13.01.15 19:47 Carmen: *

alt-text: Image 5 (It would be better to provide a table (like in the other examples), instead of an image. I noticed that this example was formatted differently in the manuscript, so I attach a revised version of the table, in order to format example (2) like the other examples.)

This use of the emoji is of special interest, as birthday greetings are usually paired with other pictograms related to the iconography of birthday (birthday cake) or celebration in Spain (kisses, party poppers, etc.). Moreover, emoji in wishes and compliments are frequently used in a row and/or repeated, showing greater creativity and imagination than words alone (Alshenqeeti, 2016). In spoken discourse there are different ways to upgrade a speech act, such as using an emphatic prosody, recurring to exclamations or tag questions, and introducing different kinds of lexical boosters (Holmes, 1984: 351–354). The previous example shows different ways to upgrade a greeting in CMC in a single message, such as the “rhetoric” use of reiterated punctuation marks (cf. Figueras, 2014), the repetition of letters, and the introduction of a sequence of pictographs (the latter observed also by Al Rashdi, 2018). By means of the repetition of emoji, the user is not only visually boosting the speech act, but also eliciting a marked response from the interlocutor. In the following messages, in fact, the interlocutor answers with thanks, which are in turn also upgraded by emoji and emphatic punctuation. The last message is an example of the use of the asterisk to introduce a self-initiated repair: the asterisk is used not only to repair typographical errors, misspellings or morphological mistakes in CMC (Collister, 2011: 919), but also an inaccurate selection of emoji.

The following complete conversation (3) shows the use of emoji with an apology. Nuria sends the message to her mother, while knowing that she was at the theatre. The emoji *smiling face with cold sweat* in message 3 follows a verbal apology, as *perdón* is a typical illocutionary force indicating device (Blum-Kulka, 1989) for apology in Spanish.

(3)

1.	08.11.2014	20:06	Nuria:	M lo he desinstalado
2.	08.11.2014	20:06	Nuria:	<i>I've uninstalled it</i>
				No mola
				<i>Don't like it</i>
3.	08.11.2014	20:06	Nuria:	Ay perdon q estais en la obra! 😓 alt-text: Image 6
				<i>Oh sorry, u're at the show!</i> 😓 alt-text: Image 6

Apologies are considered inherently face-threatening (Brown and Levinson, 1987) and are usually upgraded (Spencer-Oatey, 2000: 25), so the use of this emoji may be strange in this situation. However, this incident may be considered a minor offence in the context of family relations among Spaniards, which are characterized by deep familiarity, acceptance, and closeness (Hernández-Flores, 1999). In rapport management terms (Spencer-Oatey, 2000: 16), Nuria shows personal consideration for the interlocutor (equity right) by apologizing, while her use of a smiling emoji displays closeness and involvement (association rights), even in this apparently face-threatening situation. The apology in (3) may be considered more “ritualistic” and “supportive” than truly “remedial” (see Ide, 1998). It is noteworthy that, contrary to face-to-face conversation, the apology is not followed by acceptance or exoneration (Leech, 2014: 130): silence terminates the incident.

5.2 Discourse domain

The discourse domain concerns the content and structure of an exchange (Spencer-Oatey, 2000: 21). In this section I will focus on the use of emoji in openings and closings, where they are frequently found (Al Rashdi, 2018; Danesi, 2016; Sampietro, 2016a-[Anonymous, 2016a]). Despite often being an optional section, openings and closings have an important relational role in different CMC settings (Lorenzo-Dus and Bou-Franch, 2013): at the beginning of a conversation the channel should be opened and communication established, while in closings the interaction should be concluded without producing any bad feelings. Emoji may be considered a creative way to ease the management of

interpersonal relationships in these two key elements of a conversation. It may be argued that this use overlaps with the upgrading of greetings and farewells (illocutionary domain) but as [Spencer-Oatey \(2000: 21\)](#) observes, the different domains of rapport management are often interrelated.

I will start with a discussion on the use of emoji in closings, as the most frequent emoji found in the corpus, *face throwing a kiss*, is often used in closings. It is worth observing that in Spain, cheek-kissing (usually man-woman and woman-woman only) is a common way to greet and say goodbye to friends and acquaintances. Comparable to face-to-face and telephone conversations (cf. [Schegloff and Sacks, 1973](#)), closings are an important part of the exchange and on WhatsApp these are frequently signaled ([Sampietro, 2016b](#), [Anonymous, 2016b](#)). In the corpus, the kissing emoji is either associated with a verbal farewell (as in example 4), introduced in closing moves (example 5), or used without any other verbal content to close the conversation (as in the last message of example 5).

(4)

1.	05.01.15	08:27	Carmen:	Mónica! Buenos días!
				<i>Mónica! Good morning!</i>
2.	05.01.15	08:27	Carmen:	A lo largo de la mañana de hoy bajaré al gym
				<i>I'm going to the gym throughout this morning</i>
3.	05.01.15	08:28	Carmen:	Lo digo por si quieres bajar
				<i>I'll tell you in case you want to go as well</i>
4.	05.01.15	08:28	Carmen:	Besos 🍷 alt-text: Image 1
				<i>Kisses 🍷 alt-text: Image 1</i>
5.	05.01.15	08:28	Carmen:	Ya me dices!
				<i>You tell me!</i>
6.	05.01.15	12:21	Mónica:	Me imagino que ya habras bajado no ??
				<i>I guess you've already gone, didn't you??</i>
7.	05.02.15	12:21	Mónica	Esq me he levantado hoy un poco tarde
				<i>The thing is, I woke up a little late today [...]</i>

In message 4, Carmen writes the informal farewell *besos* and she introduces a kissing emoji, visually repeating the verbal goodbye. From an illocutionary perspective, the emoji may be considered a way to boost the farewell. The chronemic information automatically provided by the application makes it possible to notice the asynchronicity of this exchange. Carmen is writing at 8.28 AM and she has probably detected that her interlocutor is not online (in fact, she answers 4 h later). As a consequence, she shapes the conversation as asynchronous: she writes everything she wants to say and then introduces a verbal farewell, explicitly giving the floor to Mónica in message 5. The friendly goodbye (*besos*) and the emoji help Carmen to terminate the chat without causing any bad feelings, thus showing involvement and concern for her interlocutor (association rights). At the same time, she signals the intention to end her turn and gives the floor to Mónica, since a response, either positive or negative, is usually expected after an invitation (equity right). She then adds a further message to explicitly elicit a response from the interlocutor (message 6).

The kissing emoji may be also used as a farewell on its own, without verbal content, as shown in the following excerpt (5), which includes the first and the final messages of a conversation between a middle-aged woman and her sister-in-law. In this case, the chronemic information shows that the conversation is synchronous, as the 18 messages of this conversation were sent in less than 5 min.

(5)

1.	18.03.15	19:09	Marta:	Salis esta noche? <i>Are you hanging out tonight? [...]</i>
14.	18.03.15	19:14	Inés:	Si queréis quedamos para para el finde y cenamos <i>If you want, we can meet next weekend and have dinner together</i>

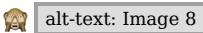










15.	18.03.15	19:14	Marta:	Vale ya lo hablamos el viernes si quereis <i>Okay, we'll talk about it on Friday if you want</i>
16.	18.03.15	19:14	Inés:	Ok
17.	18.03.15	19:14	Inés:	Hablamos 😘 alt-text: Image 1 <i>Let's talk</i> 😘 alt-text: Image 1
18.	18.03.15	19:14	Marta:	👍 alt-text: Image 4 😘 alt-text: Image 1 😘 alt-text: Image 1 Image 1

As in telephone conversations, the closing section is composed by two adjacency pairs: the pre-closing with its acknowledgment and the proper final goodbye, both reciprocated (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973: 90). In this example, the negotiation of the closing sequence starts in message 14 and it includes a reference to future contacts, which is common both in face-to-face and phone conversation; it is also a way of attending to the relationship aspect of communication, and a way to show concern for the association rights of the interlocutor (Pavlidou, 2000). In the following messages, Inés acknowledges and further elaborates upon the invitation to close the current conversation and connect again in the future (messages 16 and 17). The emoji in message 17 helps to transition from the pre-closing to the proper closing without a verbal farewell, perhaps for the sake of brevity and speed. The farewell is pictorial, the kissing emoji. The same functions are carried out by the sequence of emoji included by Marta in the last message: the thumbs-up emoji is used as an acknowledgment, whereas the kisses reciprocate the pictorial farewell and signal the end of the conversation.

As for openings, hypocoristic names,⁵ onomatopoeias, or simple greetings are often used at the beginning of many conversations of this corpus with a phatic function (Sampietro, 2016a; Anonymous, 2016a) or with the purpose of eliciting a response from the interlocutor (Al Rashdi, 2018: 123). Emoji in openings may be used with greetings or may stand alone (without any verbal message). An interesting regularity in the corpus may be observed: openings with standalone emoji usually start an informal social-oriented exchange between participants, as in the following excerpt (6).

(6)

1.	19.02.15	21:23	Domínguez:	😘 alt-text: Image 7 😘 alt-text: Image 3 😘 alt-text: Image 3
2.	19.02.15	22:29	Manuela:	Eyyy 😘 alt-text: Image 7 😘 alt-text: Image 7 <i>Heyyy</i> 😘 alt-text: Image 7 😘 alt-text: Image 7
3.	19.02.15	22:29	Domínguez:	Como esta mi valencianita favorita 😘 alt-text: Image 7 😘 alt-text: Image 7 🙌 alt-text: Image 8 <i>How's my favorite Valencian girl</i> 😘 alt-text: Image 7 😘 alt-text: Image 7 alt-text: Image 7 🙌 alt-text: Image 8
4.	19.02.15	22:30	Manuela:	Bieeen y voss?? 😘 alt-text: Image 3 <i>Fiiiine and you??</i> 😘 alt-text: Image 3
5.	19.02.15	22:30	Domínguez:	Molto bene 🙌 alt-text: Image 9 🙌 alt-text: Image 9 😘 alt-text: Image 3 , ahora mismo fallitas 🙌 alt-text: Image 9 Image 9 🙌 alt-text: Image 9 😘 alt-text: Image 7

				
				<i>Molto bene</i> ⁶    , <i>right now fallas</i> ⁷     
6.	19.02.15	23:14	Manuela:	Jajaja siiiii 
				<i>Hahaha yeessss</i> 
7.	19.02.15	23:14	Manuela:	Yuju yuju <i>Yoo-hoo yoo-hoo</i> [...]

The interactional goals of this exchange are clearly relational. The first two messages include emoji. In addition to pictographs, other features indicate an informal tone and proximity, such as the repetition of letters (messages 2, 4, and 6), the non-normative use of punctuation marks, the playful use of the form of address *vos* (message 4), code-switching (message 5), and onomatopoeias (messages 6 and 7). Emoji have a significant presence in the exchange, as there are pictographs in all but one message. Opening a conversation with standalone emoji, as in this example, signals the beginning of an informal, joyful, and relational exchange. By responding with emoji as well, the interlocutor accepts the negotiation of the sequence of phatic communion (Coupland et al., 1992) and acknowledges the playful tone.

5.3 Stylistic domain

The stylistic domain concerns phenomena as the choice of the tone, syntax and genre-appropriate lexis, the use of terms of address and honorifics, etc (Spencer-Oatey, 2000: 21). Using an emoji might be considered a stylistic choice per se; in the previous section, for instance, I showed that a standalone emoji opening prefaced an informal conversation. The next two excerpts (example 7 and 8) illustrate the different stylistic choices made by a single user (Esteban) in two different situations, when texting to his boss (7) and to a colleague (8).

(7)

1.	03.02.2014	7:46	Esteban:	Hola Ayer empecé con fiebre y dolor corporal y esta mañana sigo igual. Hoy no iré al trabajo. Intentaré coger hora para el médico.
				<i>Hello Yesterday I started with a fever and body aches and today it's the same. I won't be coming in to work today. I'll try to get an appointment with my doctor.</i>
2.	03.02.2014	8:08	Jaime:	Okavisa a RRHH ... no problem <i>Okinform HR ... no problem</i>
3.	03.02.2014	8:24	Esteban:	Me puedes pasar el correo? <i>Could you give me the e-mail?</i>
4.	03.02.2014	8:48	Jaime:	[e-mail]
5.	03.02.2014	8:49	Esteban:	Ok
6.	03.02.2014	8:50	Jaime:	A mejorarse  

				<i>Get better soon</i> 🍌 
7.	03.02.2014	8:50	Esteban:	Gracias Me voy al medico
				<i>Thanks</i> <i>I'm going to the doctor</i>

Esteban sends a WhatsApp message to his boss (Jaime), saying that he is not going to the office because he feels sick. As the employee is ill, he is probably not very willing to use a playful tone, but still it may be noticed that emoji are used only by the boss. Warning the boss about a missing work day may be considered a face-threatening situation. Although Jaime, in this dyad, is the person with more power and less benefit from the situation, he uses an informal and relaxed writing style, visible in the use of the emoji, non-normative punctuation (message 6), and code-switching (message 2). The emoji included by the boss in message 6 is likely to have been used to show informality and display closeness and association, removing the potential face-threat. By contrast, the employee is using a well-mannered writing style, as the only deviation from standard writing is the lack of some punctuation marks, such as the opening question mark in message 3, which is compulsory in standard written Spanish, but rather uncommon in Spanish CMC ([Anonymous, 2016b](#); [Sampietro, 2016b](#)). From the pragmalinguistic point of view, the wording of the request of the e-mail address of the human resource department is of special interest. In fact, Esteban formulates an indirect request (*puedes pasarme*) with mitigating purposes; in Spanish everyday conversation, requests are usually formulated directly without being considered rude, while mitigating a request is usually a strategy to seek listener's acceptance ([Briz, 2002](#)). This mismatch between styles parallels a disparity between interactional goals, as the boss wants to show closeness, understanding, and create an informal relationship with the employees, while Esteban seems to orient the conversation as merely a transactional exchange.

It might be argued that the use of a register similar to standard writing may be a feature of Esteban's personal writing style. Nevertheless, he wrote differently and used emoji when he texted to a colleague some days later, as shown in example (8).

(8)

1.	08.02.15	13:57	Esteban:	Ciao 🐟  🐟  🐟  🐟  En el ordenador viejo tengo windows vista y una actualización importante (service pack 1). ¿La instalo o la evito?
				<i>Ciao</i> 🐟  🐟  🐟  🐟  <i>In the old computer I have windows vista and an important update (service pack 1).</i> <i>Do I install or avoid it?</i>
2.	08.02.15	14:00	Julián:	Ciao!
3.	08.02.15	14:00	Julián:	Es original? <i>Is it original?</i>
4.	08.02.15	14:00	Julián:	Hostia, no entendía lo de los peces 🤔 
				<i>Damn, I didn't understand the whole fish thing</i> 🤔 
5.	08.02.15	14:00	Julián:	No le ira mal 🤔 
				<i>It won't do wrong</i> 🤔 
6.	08.02.15	14:00	Esteban:	Ok 🙌 

				ArTTTTT
				Ok 🐟 alt-text: Image 15 Yarrrr

After the greeting (*ciao* is another case of code-switching that could already signal an informal tone), Esteban includes a sequence of four fish emoji. To interpret the message, it was necessary to directly ask the informant. Actually, when Julián (a very skilled programmer) receives trivial questions about computers, he often repeats: “I don't clean fish” (meaning that he does not like to do the dirty work), a quote from a character of a famous Spanish sitcom. Even Julián finds it difficult to grasp the pictorial allusion, as he explicitly admits in message 4. At the end of the exchange, Esteban uses again the same strategy, by including an emoji representing a fish hung from a bait (message 6). Even the last onomatopoeia *arrrrrr* is a further allusion, as it is a sound repeated by a character of *The Simpsons*, an animated series admired by both interlocutors.

This excerpt is a clear example of the interconnection between transactional and relational goals (Spencer-Oatey, 2005: 106). From the transactional point of view, Esteban is asking for advice about computers. Nevertheless, he also establishes rapport by means of an informal and humorous tone, shaped by references to shared knowledge about each other and popular culture, onomatopoeias, code switching, and emoji. Julián has no other benefits from the conversation than helping his colleague, thus fostering rapport, and probably maintaining his personal reputation as an expert. It should be noted that Esteban does not thank the interlocutor, even if Julián freely gave him advice on the computer update, as requested. In the context of the Spanish culture, this lack of thanks among close people is not considered impolite (Hickey, 2005). In this excerpt, the maintenance of a joking tone, expressed by means of the further allusions to fish and the onomatopoeia, may be considered a way to foster affiliation and *confianza* (deep familiarity and understanding) among interlocutors and strengthen social relations (Bravo, 2008; Hernández-Flores, 1999). By contrast, in the previous excerpt (example 7, message 7), Esteban did explicitly thank the boss, which indicates a greater social distance with the interlocutor in this cultural context (Iglesias Recuero and Silvia, 2007. [The reference should be \(Iglesias Recuero, 2007: 26\).](#)): 26).

Even if such a short excerpt is not sufficient to observe real accommodation between the users, a general tendency for the users to align may be observed. Both participants, for instance, use code-switching (the greeting *ciao* is acknowledged and repeated by Julián) and emoji. This stylistic alignment is indicative not only of a cooperative and social encounter, but also of an intimate and equal relationship, as the users are colleagues. In general, the conversation seems to be oriented toward the maintenance of an already harmonious rapport.

6 Summary and conclusion

Emoji have been mostly presented in previous literature as indicators of emotion. Nevertheless, the analysis of a corpus of naturally-occurring WhatsApp conversations written in Spanish provided evidence that, in this application, emoji play important interrelated roles across the domains that Spencer-Oatey (2000, 2005) identifies as key to the management of rapport among individuals. This research has specifically focused on three of these domains: the illocutionary, the discursive, and stylistic domains. To summarize and discuss the findings, the strategies identified throughout the analysis of the corpus are grouped in the following categories:

Emoji as upgraders or downgraders (illocutionary domain). Emoji contributes to the management of the face sensitivities of participants by contributing to the adequate expression of speech acts in a socially-appropriate way (Spencer-Oatey, 2000: 23–25).

Emoji help to manage the conversation (discourse domain). This category includes the use of emoji to open or close a conversation (with or without a textual content), or to give the floor to the interlocutor. When used in this way, emoji primarily contribute to achieve a successful interaction between the interlocutors. In general, emoji are used both in conventional forms of phatic communion (like greetings and farewells), and also in creative and joking ways. The *face throwing a kiss* emoji is the most frequently used, and it is usually placed in the closing section of a WhatsApp chat to signal the closing of the last topic, to end the conversation or enhance verbal expressions of farewell, and in order to mitigate or avoid a possible sense of rejection (Coupland et al., 1992). The use of emoji in openings (with or without verbal greetings) contributes to establishing contact between participants and to focus on positive relational goals (Pavlidou, 2000:123). A relevant feature of emoji-only openings in the corpus is that they introduce a socially-oriented exchange.

Emoji as a stylistic choice (stylistic domain). In Peninsular Spanish CMC, emoji are used more frequently in informal registers and they are a useful cue to signal the speech genre (for example, emoji in openings initiate an informal conversation), the social relationship (e.g. showing informality), and to negotiate and orient the social purposes of the conversation in general (Coupland et al., 1992). The patterns of emoji use may be different depending on the interlocutor, topic, and technical features as well as concrete circumstances of the exchange.

By focusing on a sample of Spanish everyday CMC, this paper has shown that some strategies related to the use of emoji are strictly related to the specific characteristics of this culture. For example, birthday greetings were heightened by emoji and elicited a marked response (an expression of thanks accompanied by emoji), and apologies among family members could be associated with smiling emoji and not verbally upgraded. Closings were heightened by emoji and a strong desire to keep in contact with the interlocutor emerged in these sections of the exchanges. Conversations between a boss and an employee were instances of the informality of workplace interactions in Spain. In general, the strive for closeness and *confianza* were prominent in the corpus. This analysis suggests that even if some uses of emoji described in the analysis are also observed in other corpora (Al Rashdi, 2018; Danesi, 2016; Pérez-

Sabater et al., 2019 (This in-text reference is incorrect. The correct reference is Pérez-Sabater, 2019), emoji at the moment should not be considered a universal language. Rather, it could be understood as a means to interact in a socially-appropriate way, in a given culture.

There are issues that can be addressed in future research. First, this research only focused on three out of the five domains of rapport management. Participation and non-verbal domains may be the focus of a future paper. Second, a better understanding of emoji use on WhatsApp may be obtained by studying other kinds of conversations (such as group chats or more formal exchanges), by comparing similar corpora in other languages and by analyzing the use of specific emoji in context (cf., for example, Gibson et al., 2018 [Anonymous, 2016] Sampietro, 2016c). Moreover, other multimodal elements (such as stickers, GIFs, and the use of images or videos) may be considered (Herring and Dainas, 2017). A final issue concerns the frequent updates of the application itself, which has changed since the retrieval of this corpus. The set of available emoji is continuously growing and a recent update has enabled an emoji prediction feature, which can profoundly influence the use of emoji in this application. Thus, the results presented in this work should be frequently updated.

Declarations of interest

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2019.02.009>.

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Agnese Sampietro is Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University Jaume I (Spain), with expertise in computer-mediated communication and multimodality. Her work draws on different academic traditions around language and communication, as discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, pragmatics and cultural studies to analyze the way language, writing, reading and communication are changing due to the use of digital devices.

Footnotes

¹Contrary to [Brown and Levinson's \(1987\)](#) model, rapport management is not only concerned with a personal or individual conceptualization of “face”, but also with explicit social interdependent rights. While equity rights have some traits in common with Brown and Levinson's negative face, association rights are not considered as face issues, but rather, they refer to the behavior that is expected in a given situation ([Spencer-Oatey, 2002](#): 540-542).

²WhatsApp was preferred to other multimodal applications whose primary purpose is conversation (such as Telegram) to better focus on emoji. At the time of the compilation of the corpus, WhatsApp users could not introduce other graphical elements, such as stickers (cartoon-like illustrations of a character) or GIFs (small animations or very short videos) to their messages, which, by contrast, were already available on other platforms. Furthermore, the emoji prediction feature (an automatic suggestion of a possible emoji depending on what the user is typing) was not yet available.

³This method impedes the analysis of the actual incidence of emoji in WhatsApp conversations, but at the time of the data collection not all emoji were correctly displayed once pasted into a Word document (similar problems were found by [Petitjean and Morel \(2017\)](#), and the sample of respondents was not probabilistic. For a stylometric analysis of a large corpus of WhatsApp messages among teens in Spain, cf. [Vázquez-Cano et al. \(2015\)](#).

⁴The excerpts of WhatsApp chats are transcribed as they were sent by the users. Spelling, grammar, orthography or syntactic deviations from the standard Spanish written norm were not corrected or signaled with [sic]. The examples were translated into English by the author trying to mirror the most relevant features of the original in Spanish. For privacy purposes, the names of the participants have been changed.

⁵Hypocoristic forms of names (also known as “pet names”) are names used among friends, family, or intimate situations. They usually consist of shortened version of the name (e.g., *Tom* for Thomas, *Willie* for William), but also other names (e.g. *honey*) or new creations may be found ([Crystal, 1999](#): 152).

⁶*Molto bene* means ‘very well’ in Italian. As it is an instance of code-switching in the original in Spanish, the greeting has been left in Italian and not translated into English.

⁷Fallas is a celebration in the city of Valencia (Spain) held every year in March in commemoration of Saint Joseph.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

The following is the Supplementary data to this article:

[Multimedia Component 1](#)

Multimedia component 1

alt-text: Multimedia component 1

Highlights

- Analysis of some of the functions of emoji in WhatsApp chats written in Spanish.
- Emoji upgrade or downgrade different speech acts.
- Emoji help to manage the conversation, e.g. in openings and closings.
- Emoji are also a stylistic choice.

Queries and Answers

Query: References "Collister, 2011; Holmes, 1984" are cited in the text but not provided in the reference list. Please provide them in the reference list or delete these citations from the text.

Answer: Here are the references (I cannot edit the reference list) Collister, Lauren B., 2011. *-repair in Online Discourse. *Journal of Pragmatics*, **43**(3), 918-921

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2010.09.025>.

Holmes, Janet, 1984. Modifying illocutionary force. *Journal of Pragmatics*

8, 3, 345-365 [https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166\(84\)90028-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166(84)90028-6).

Query: Have we correctly interpreted the following funding source(s) you cited in your article: University Jaime I Postdoctoral Fellowship Program?

Answer: Yes, you correctly interpreted the founding sources, but the name of the institution is University Jaume I (you wrote Jaime I). I edited it.

Query: Please confirm that given names and surnames have been identified correctly and are presented in the desired order and please carefully verify the spelling of all authors' names.

Answer: Yes

Query: Your article is registered as a regular item and is being processed for inclusion in a regular issue of the journal. If this is NOT correct and your article belongs to a Special Issue/Collection please contact b.ganeshan@elsevier.com immediately prior to returning your corrections.

Answer: Yes