

Emojis and the performance of humour in electronic-mediated everyday conversation: a study of a corpus of WhatsApp chats

Abstract

Emojis are little pictographs commonly added to electronic messages on several social media and platforms. Besides being considered as a way to express emotions in electronic-mediated communication (EMC), similarly to ASCII emoticons, emojis are strictly involved in the performance of humour in everyday digital conversation. Drawing on a corpus of casual WhatsApp dyadic chats, this paper analyses the contribution of emojis to humour in conversation. Results show that these pictographs not only help to signal the opening and closing of the play frame, but also to respond to humour, graphically reproducing laughter. For these purposes, the most common emojis employed by WhatsApp users are the popular yellow smiling and laughing faces. Nevertheless, other pictographs are also involved in electronic humour, as less common emojis can be used in playful ways by themselves.

Keywords

Emoticons; Emojis; WhatsApp; Electronic-Mediated Communication; Humour; Laughter.

Title page

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Emojis and the performance of humour in electronic-mediated everyday conversation: a study of a corpus of WhatsApp chats

Author and affiliation:

Agnese Sampietro

University Jaume I, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Department of Languages and European Cultures

Full postal and e-mail address:

Av. Sos Baynat s/n, 12071 Castellón de la Plana (Spain)

e-mail: sampietr@uji.es

Short bio (70 words):

Agnese Sampietro is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University Jaume I (Spain), with expertise in electronic-mediated communication (EMC) and multimodality. She has widely published on the use of emojis, especially focusing on Spanish EMC. Her work draws on different academic traditions around language and communication, such as discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, pragmatics, multimodal discourse analysis and cultural studies to analyse the way language, writing, reading, and communication are changing on the Internet.

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Agnese Sampietro

University Jaume I (Spain)

sampietr@uji.es

1. Introduction

Emojis (from the Japanese *e* and *moji*, meaning “graphic image”) are little pictographs, such as 🤔, which are commonly included in electronic messages on social media, websites, and applications. They were first designed in Japan at the beginning of the 90s (Burge 2019) and since Apple integrated them in their iOS devices in 2009, they have obtained increasing success globally. Emoji are currently standardized by the Unicode Consortium and they are available worldwide in all major operating systems and social networks. According to recent data, around 5 million emojis were sent daily on Facebook Messenger alone in 2017 (Burge 2017), while almost all Instagram posts contain at least an emoji (Siever and Siever 2020). Besides this growing usage, another clue of their success is Oxford Dictionaries’ decision to choose the emoji “face with tears of joy” 😂 as Word of the Year in 2015 (Oxford Dictionaries 2015). Emojis were also the main characters of an animation film picture in 2017 (*The emoji movie*) and one of the original sets of emojis was included in the MoMA design collection in 2018 (Lee 2018). The success of emojis is also justified by their growing number. Version 12.0 of the Unicode Standard (released in 2019) contained 3.017 emojis (Bucholz 2019). Besides facial expressions, either represented as the renowned smiley faces or more naturalistic depictions of human beings, the Unicode standard now also includes a wide variety of objects, natural elements, animals, food, sports, hobbies, daily objects, symbols, and more than 200 flags.

This interest in emoji is also palpable in the academic realm: they have been increasingly objective of academic research in several fields, from computer science to psychology, consumer research and linguistics (see Tang Khe Foon Hew 2019 for a review).

In the field of linguistics (see section 2 for a review of the literature), research on emojis has been largely influenced by previous studies on ASCII emoticons, sequences of punctuation marks representing facial expressions, such as :-). The etymology of the word “emoticon”, a blend between “emotion” and “icon”, suggests that these typographic faces may be used in electronic-mediated communication (henceforth EMC) to express emotions (Dresner and Herring 2010). This idea has largely influenced research in computer science, natural language processing, and psychology (Sampietro 2016a). As ASCII emoticons are being gradually replaced by emojis (Pavalanathan and Eisenstein 2016), research on these pictographs is also shaped by the opinion that they add emotional content to electronic-mediated messages. Linguistic research, on the contrary, drawing on real corpora, has found that emojis perform a wide range of pragmatics functions (see Yus 2019): they signal the illocutionary force of the utterance they are associated to (Herring and Dainas 2017); they can strengthen or mitigate different kinds of speech acts (Sampietro 2019b); contribute to the structuring of the conversation (Sampietro 2016a; König 2019); create rapport (Al Rashdi 2018; Pérez-Sabater 2019; Aull 2019); replace words (Siebenhaar 2018; Sampietro 2019a); and signal humour (König 2019; Sampietro 2016a).

The present paper analyses the use of emojis in a corpus of informal conversations sent through the instant messaging application WhatsApp (see section 3 for a description of the application and the data collection), especially focusing on the use of emojis in relation to humour. As it will be shown in the analysis, emojis have an important role in the performance of humour in EMC: they may be used not only to set and close the “play frame” (Fry 2010) in conversation, but also to show understanding and appreciation of humorous statements written by the interlocutor, to co-construct humour, and to visually display shared laughter. Thus, emojis are involved in every stage of humour performance (Coates 2007; Dynel 2009; Dynel, Brock, and de Jongste 2016; Attardo et al. 2003). In addition, they may be also used in humorous ways by themselves, drawing on their pictorial nature and their friendly design.

The paper is structured as follows. First, the relevant literature on emoticons, emojis, and humour markers in writing is reviewed. Section 3 presents the methods and the procedure and contains a detailed description of the corpus. The following section includes the analysis of the corpus, and before concluding the paper, a discussion of the findings is provided.

2. Theoretical framework

I propose that the following character sequence for joke markers:

:~)

Read it sideways. Actually, it is probably more economical to mark things that are NOT jokes, given current trends. For this, use

:~(

(“Original Bboard Thread in Which :~) Was Proposed,” n.d.)

In September 1982 Scott Fahlman, a computer scientist at Carnegie Mellon, typed what is considered the first emoticon in one of the institution’s private bulletin boards. A joke about what could happen if someone put mercury in a lift was written on the list. Real concerns about contamination with this dangerous substance were raised among the users of the board. Several participants suggested signalling forum messages that were not serious with a variety of symbols; Fahlman proposed the sequence of characters :~), which quickly spread outside this community of scientists to become the first emoticon.¹ So, even if the etymology of the word “emoticon” is a blend between “emotion” and “icon”, the function of the very first emoticon was signalling a humorous statement in EMC.

Linguistic research on the functions of emoticons started in the 90s (see, for example, Wilson 1993). Previously, emoticons were just considered ways to convey emotions in EMC (Rezabeck and Cochenouor 1994), an idea which still exists among researchers (Derks, Bos, and Grumbkow 2007; Walther and D’Addario 2001; Cuadrado Gordillo, Martín-Mora Parra, and Fernández Antelo 2015) and the media (Cruz 2014; Avendaño 2012). Researchers in EMC, drawing on real corpora, found that emoticons also have other functions: they can strengthen or mitigate speech acts (Skovholt, Grønning, and Kankaanranta 2014), which is linked to politeness (Kavanagh 2016); they help to structure conversations (Vela Delfa and Jiménez Gómez 2011; Markman and Oshima 2007); they can signal the illocutionary force of the utterance (Dresner and Herring 2010); and they can be used to signal humour (Yus 2014; Maíz Arévalo 2014), as with Fahlman’s first emoticon, described above.

With the growing success of emojis, researchers have also started to identify their possible use. Emojis perform different pragmatic functions (see Yus 2019), such as strengthening or mitigating speech acts (Herring and Dainas 2017), they have been linked to politeness and rapport (Sampietro 2019b; Aull 2019; Pérez-Sabater 2019; Al Rashdi 2018), have been

considered structural markers of conversation (Gibson, Huang, and Yu 2018; König 2019; Sampietro 2016a), as well as sort of a pictorial language, especially when emojis are used to replace words (Azuma and Ebner 2008; Alshenqeti 2016; Danesi 2016), even if their supposed universality has been put into doubt (Ge and Herring 2018; Sampietro 2016a). Some emojis can be a multimodal way to perform laughter in EMC (König 2019), and, similarly to emoticons, they can also function as humour markers (Sampietro 2016a; Yus 2019; Al Rashdi 2018).

The problem of signalling humour in writing began long before the advent of EMC. The history of punctuation, for example, shows that - from time to time - new punctuation marks are proposed, with the purpose of indicating different non-literal meanings. As reported by Houston (2013), for example, Henry Denham in the 1580s suggested the introduction of a “percontation point,” an inverted question mark (similar to the Arabic question mark), at the end of rhetorical questions, while Alcanter de Brahm in 1899 called the same sign *point d’ironie* (irony point). To mark ironic statements, John Wilkins, in the XVII century, proposed to use a mirrored exclamation mark (Houston 2013). In 1966, Hervé Bazin used the Greek letter ψ with the same meaning, and suggested other innovative punctuation marks for a variety of purposes (Houston 2013). Bazin’s proposal was recovered in 2012, when it was recommended to encode six punctuation characters of the French author in the Universal Character Set (Yevstifeyev and Pentzlin 2012). A sarcasm mark (a swirl with a dot in the middle), named SarcMark, was even patented in 2010 and sold for non-commercial use for 1.99\$ (McCulloch 2019: 134).

It comes as no surprise that the problem of signalling non-literal meanings has also occurred in EMC, as Fahlman’s invention attests. In fact, the detection of humour, and especially of irony and sarcasm, is a significant problem even in the field of Natural Language Processing (NLP) (see, for example, Reyes, Rosso, and Buscaldi 2012; Carvalho et al. 2009; Ortega-Bueno et al. 2018). Explicitly writing `</sarcasm>` after a sarcastic remark, as people did in the early days of the internet, was not a real solution, as it reduces the real reward of catching non-literal meanings (McCulloch 2019). It was necessary to create a little mark, which could prompt the reader to look harder to find a double meaning. The simplified smiling face proposed by Fahlman, which later became a way to indicate, more generally, a positive sentiment, was successful.

In the 80s, another form of digital face was developed in Japan, *kaomoji*, which are considered Japanese-style emoticons (Katsuno and Yano 2007). An example of kaomoji is

^_^, which represents a smiling face (^ are the eyes, and _ the mouth). In contrast to emoticons, kaomoji are not read sideways; drawing on anime and manga conventions, to properly read facial expressions, focus should be placed more heavily upon the eyes than on the shape of the mouth. Kaomoji were used extensively in Asia (Katsuno and Yano 2007).

In the 90s, another new trend in informal digital communication arose in Japan: sending picture messages instead of typing the elaborate kaomoji. Nevertheless, it was not very practical, as people had to upload a whole image file as an attachment. SoftBank, one of the major Japanese mobile phone companies, came up with the solution to this problem. They proposed encoding common pictures - like typed characters - instead of having to send them as image files. Designers at SoftBank created a set of 90 tiny black and white pictures (Burge 2019; McCulloch 2019), while Shigetaka Kurita, an employee of the company DoCoMo, designed the first colourful emojis set in 1999, composed by 176 images (Blagdon 2013).

As already mentioned, the success of emojis is now widespread in digital communication. As emojis are increasingly replacing emoticons (Pavalanathan and Eisenstein 2016), it is possible that, among the functions of ASCII emoticons, emojis are also assuming the role of colourful humour markers in EMC. The issue is, with a growing set of emojis (there are now more than 3.000), which one is best suitable to express humour? It may be argued that the wink and the stick-out-tongue emojis are the most appropriate, as the corresponding emoticons, ;-), and :-p, were used for the same purpose in the pre-emoji era (Evans 2017). Another possibility is resorting to smiling and laughter, as in face-to-face communication (Attardo, Pickering, and Baker 2011; Glenn 2003). For instance, König (2019), studying a corpus of WhatsApp group chats written in German, found that the emojis “face with tears of joy” 😂 and “squinting face with tongue” 😜 were strictly related to some of the functions of laughter in face-to-face conversation. Using conversation analysis, this author observed that emojis contextualise different laughing stances, such as helping to distinguish between “laughing with” (shared laughter) and “laughing at” (teasing) contexts (Glenn 2003). König (2019) also found that other functions of laughter, such as a response to humour or supporting a play frame, are usually carried out by what she calls “laugh particles,” such as the interjection “ha ha ha.”

The present paper aims to explore the contribution of emojis to the performance of humour in interpersonal EMC, drawing on a corpus of WhatsApp chats written in Spanish. One of

the main purposes of this study is to broaden König's (2019) results by considering the use of emojis in all stages of humour performance, from the establishment of what has been called the "play frame" (Fry 2010) or "humorous key" (Kotthoff 2006) to support turns (Hay 2001). Moreover, rather than focusing only on two specific emojis and comparing them to laughing particles, this paper analyses the entire set of emojis appearing in a corpus of WhatsApp chats. The research questions, thus, are as follows:

RQ1: What is the contribution of emojis in the performance of humour on WhatsApp?

RQ2: What emojis are more suitable to signal and support humour?

3. Method

3.1 Corpus

The present paper draws on a corpus of WhatsApp dyadic chats written in peninsular Spanish. WhatsApp is a messaging application, available for smartphones, that allows the sending of messages, voice messages, images, videos, locations or other files, using an Internet connection.ⁱⁱ In contrast to SMS or tweets, WhatsApp messages do not have a strict character limit (users are allowed to send up to 2.000 characters per message), and easy and quick transmission of written messages and other multimodal materials is allowed. At the time of data collection, WhatsApp was one of the most popular messaging applications in Spain (The App date 2014) and still is (Clement 2019). Since its launch in around 2010, WhatsApp has integrated the list of Unicode emojis, which are accessible from the keyboard while typing a message. WhatsApp is considered the application that first popularised emojis in Spain (Calero Vaquera 2014).

The corpus was compiled in 2014-2015 among students, colleagues, and acquaintances of the researcher. As such, the corpus could not be considered representative of the entire Spanish population. Nevertheless, it shows fresh examples of electronic-mediated everyday talk, which is usually difficult to analyse due to privacy reasons (Georgakopoulou 2011). In fact, most of the research in EMC deals with public corpora, e.g. data retrievable from Twitter, forums or other public sites or social networks. Focusing on daily interactions is particularly suitable for this research, since ordinary interactions are one of the best places to find humour: as Coates (2007: 33) indicates: "[humour] is a normal aspect of friendly everyday talk".

Potential participants were asked to send either screenshots of some of their chats (the option preferred by students) or the entire log of dyadic WhatsApp chats to a specific e-mail address. Participants (or their parents in the few cases of underage informants) were asked to sign an informed consent to use their private conversations for research purposes.

The final participants were 120 users, aged 16 to 70, the majority (67%) women. Chats were usually among friends, family members, or colleagues.

All chats were written in peninsular Spanish, even if cases of code-switching with Catalan, English or Italian existed. Conversations entirely written in languages other than Spanish were excluded. Data coming from the screenshots were transcribed in a Word document, eliminating conversations that were clearly incomplete. Chats received by e-mail were copied and pasted into a Microsoft Word document. The excerpts in which the emojis were not clearly displayed were excluded. The remaining messages were grouped into “conversations,” considering the topic and frequency of the exchanges, as well as the timestamp automatically provided by the application. This research is based on a sample of 300 dyadic conversations (3.679 messages) containing at least one emoji, totalling 1.629 emojis.

3.2 Procedure

The analysis of the corpus relied on computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA), a qualitative methodology that applies and adapts concepts from discourse analysis to online corpora (Herring 2004; Herring and Androutsopoulos 2015). As the focus of the present paper is the performance of humour, the analysis was also inspired by research on the pragmatics of humour (Coates 2007; Hay 2001).

This study specifically focuses on excerpts of conversations that contained instances of humorous talk, such as jokes, puns, irony, sarcasm, teasing, etc. (see Dynel 2009). Conversations containing both humour and emojis were then closely analysed. Results of the analysis (see section 4) are ordered depending on the different stages of the performance of humour (Hay 2001): setting the “play frame” (Fry 2010); showing understanding or appreciation of comicity (Glenn 2003); contributing to humour by adding more humour (Coates 2007); and closing the play frame (Dynel *et al.* 2016; Hay 2001). There were also a couple of instances of failed humour that involved the use of emojis, but they were not considered in this analysis.







Although the corpus was systematically coded, this report does not include quantitative data. One of the reasons is that, as mentioned, the corpus cannot be considered representative of the digital population. Moreover, CMDA is a methodology inherently qualitative, so that quantitative data on the co-occurrence of emojis and humour were not truly explanatory of the use and functions of the pictographs. The results presented in the following section rather show trends in the use of emojis in conjunction with each one of the stages of humorous talk considered in the analysis.

4. Results

4.1 Emojis signal humour

As in the case of the first emoticon typed in 1982, emojis can be used to signal humorous messages. The addition of a (usually) yellow face, helps to indicate that a given message should not be interpreted literally. For instance, example (1) is drawn from a conversation between Ricardo and Alicia (fictitious names).ⁱⁱⁱ

(1)

- | | | |
|----|---------|--|
| 19 | Ricardo | <i>Vale, luego te cuento</i>
Ok, I'll tell you later |
| 20 | Alicia | <i>Jeje ok</i>
Hehe ok |
| 21 | Alicia | <i>Hasta dentro de nada!!</i>
See you very soon!! |
| 22 | Ricardo | <i>Pero ya te adelanto que el encuentro ha sido casto, puro y virginal</i>
But I can already tell you that the date has been chaste, pure and virginal |
| 23 | Alicia | <i>Como a mi me gustan!</i>
As I like them! |
| 24 | Alicia |  |
| 25 | Ricardo | <i>Hasta luego, sor Alicia!</i> 
See you later, Sister Alicia!  |
| 26 | Ricardo | <i>Queda con Dios</i> 
May God be with you  |
| 27 | Alicia |  |

In the previous messages, Alicia asks Ricardo how a date he had some days before had gone. Alicia and Ricardo are about to meet, so they would probably talk about this issue in person, but Ricardo in message 22 advances that the date was *casto, puro y virginal* (chaste, pure, and virginal). The emoji “face with tears of joy” introduced by Alicia in message 24 is added to signal that the previous message (*como a mi me gustan*/ as I like them) should not be interpreted literally, but rather as a joke.

As shown by König (2019), the emojis with the tongue sticking out may be also used to signal humour, as we show in message 16 of example (2).

(2)

- | | | |
|----|-------|---|
| 10 | María | <i>[Me ha dicho] Q t ha visto muy delgada</i>
[She said] that you’re very thin |
| 11 | Inés | <i>Muy delgada ??</i>
Very thin?? |
| 12 | Inés | <i>Q va</i>
Not at all |
| 13 | María | <i>Y q casi no has comido</i>
And that you’ve hardly eaten |
| 14 | Inés | <i>Ella q me ve con buenos.ojos</i>
She’s being very kind to me |
| 15 | María | <i>Claro</i>
Sure |
| 16 | María | <i>Comparada co la Filo 🤪</i>
Compared to Filo 🤪 |
| 17 | Inés | 😂😂😂😂 |
| 18 | Inés | <i>Eso será</i>
Exactly |

Inés is María’s sister-in-law. She had lunch by María’s mother, who later told María that Inés seemed *muy delgada* (very thin) to her. As Inés denies the “compliment” as a subjective opinion of María’s mother, María jokingly adds that it is normal that the mother (an older woman) sees Inés as thin, compared to her (also mature) friend Filo. María uses the emoji “sticking out tongue and winking eye” to signal the statement as humorous. It is worth noticing that Inés answers with four laughing emojis (“face with tears of joy”). This,

and to a lesser extent other smiling emojis, is involved in the response to humour, as will be shown in the following section.

Signalling jokes is not exclusive to smiling, laughing, and sticking-out-tongue faces. Other emojis can imply humour, too. For example, an embarrassed face (🙄) is used in the example (3) to mark that the intended meaning of message 4 is exactly the opposite of what is expressed. Enzo helped his and Angela's son with school work.

(3)

- 1 Ángela *K te parece TU TRABAJO??????*
What do you think about YOUR WORK ??????
- 2 Ángela *Dice Juan k si suspenden a su hijo la culpa es tuya. Lo sabes no????*
Juan says that if his son fails it's your fault. You know it, right????
- 3 Ángela <Picture>
- 4 Enzo *Se nota mogollón que lo ha hecho el mano sólo, sin ayuda 🙄*
It's totally obvious that he has done it by hand alone, without any help 🙄

The simple addition of the emoji, together with contextual knowledge, reveals that message 4 should not be interpreted literally, but rather that the meaning of the message is exactly the opposite. This means that even if conventions on the use of specific emojis for particular purposes are developing, users may use other emojis creatively to signal humour.

4.2 Emojis as a response to jokes, humour, irony

Laughter is the chief culturally recognised way to acknowledge humour in talk (Coates 2007: 44). When something humorous is said, usually interactants show amusement and appreciation (Glenn 2003). This is true for WhatsApp users, too. As already shown in the example (2), “face with tears of joy” can be used as a response to humorous statements, reproducing real laughter. A further example is presented below (4). This conversation is again between Maria and Enzo and deals with the results of the school work done by Enzo, discussed in the previous example.

(4)

- 7 Ángela *Por cierto, mi hijo te dedica un CAXITO del 10 k sacó!!! Consuela ver k superamos 4* d primaria.....*
By the way, my son dedicates a bit of the A+ he got to you!!! It's reassuring to see that we pass fourth grade.....

It is worth noticing that laughing emojis used as a response to humour are frequently repeated. In example (2), Inés repeats the emoji “face with tears of joy” three times, while in (4), Enzo repeats it six times. Another emoji used in the corpus with the same purpose is the “grinning face with smiling eyes” emoji, which at the time of data collection looked as follows 😄; since 2017, the corners of the mouth have lifted slightly.

Laughing as a response to humour in Spanish EMC is not only performed by means of emojis, but also by interjections that reproduce laughter, i.e. the interjection “ha ha ha” (*ja ja ja* in Spanish, usually written *jajaja* in EMC). As shown by König (2019), laughing particles and emojis generally appear in support turns – turns that show recognition, understanding, or appreciation of humour (Hay 2001), that also contain humour. As observed by Petitjean and Morel (2017), the interjection is typically placed at the beginning of the turn, as a response to a previous humorous message. In contrast, the laughing emoji is placed at the end of the message, signalling the continuation of the humorous frame (König 2019: 164). For example, in (5) Félix and Nadia are speaking about Félix’s university exchange abroad.

(5)

- 33 Nadia *Ya me contarás la fiesta que hay allí jajaja*
You'll tell me about the party there hahaha
- 34 Félix *Jajajaj mírala qué lista ella 😄*
Hahahah look at how smart she is 😄
- 35 Nadia *Jajajaja*
Hahahaha
- 36 Nadia *Hay que tener cultura de todo 😎 jajaja*
We should have a broad general culture 😎 hahaha
- 37 Félix *Jajajaja*
Hahahaha
- 38 Félix *Vaya que sí*
No doubt

Jokingly, Nadia says that he should tell her how parties are out there. Felix answers in message 34 with both the interjection *jajaja* (at the beginning of the message), and the emoji “grinning face with smiling eyes” (at the end). Concretely, the laughing interjection that opens message 34 is used as a response to the joking piece of advice expressed by Nadia, while the emoji marks the subsequent remark written by Felix immediately after the interjection as humorous (*mírala qué lista ella/ look at how smart she is*).

Laughter in conversation is frequently shared. This is not only a way to show involvement in conversation, but also to mark solidarity (Glenn 2003; Coates 2007). “Face with tears of joy” and, to a lesser extent, other smiling faces are used in the corpus to visually perform shared laughter. Studies in conversation analysis on verbal laughter (see Jefferson, Sacks, and Schegloff 1987) show that when people are implied in shared laughter, they tend to laugh not only at the same time but also in the same way. As WhatsApp messages are a form of quasi-synchronous communication, in which both synchronous and asynchronous communication coexist (Herring 2007), message timestamps are a vague clue to assess if interlocutors laughed at the same time. By contrast, it is clearly possible to observe if users laugh in similar ways. Example (6) shows an example of equal shared laughter. Andrea and Olivia are speaking about buying a present for her friend’s newborn Daniel.

(6)


- 5 Olivia *Y Ana una prenda con su nombre*
And to Anna a garment with his [her son’s] name
- 6 Olivia *Lo juntamos todo*
We put it all together
- 7 Olivia *Y luego repartimos*
And then we split
- 8 Andrea *Ahhhh vimos las de Noah 🙌🙌 están muy chulas*
Ahhhh we saw Noah's 🙌🙌 they're very cool
- 9 Andrea *Ah genial!!*
Ah great!!
- 10 Olivia *Pues eso mismo pero pone Daniel 😂😂*
Well it's the same but it says Daniel 😂😂
- 11 Andrea 😂😂
- 12 Andrea *Pues perfecto!*
Well perfect!

Olivia introduces two “faces with tears of joy” in message 10, and Andrea, correspondingly, answers with two of these emojis as well in the following turn. This parallelism between users is not straightforward, as they dispose of varied semiotic resources to represent laughter on WhatsApp, such as other smiling and laughing emojis or the simple interjection reproducing laughter. This example shows that at the time of the compilation of the corpus the use of “face with tears of joy” was evolving as a conventionalized way to indicate laughter in response to humour on WhatsApp.^{iv} Moreover, it can also be considered the result of stylistic accommodation (Giles, Coupland, and Coupland 1991) or alignment (Georgakopolou 2011) between users.

4.3 *Emojis close the play frame*

The play frame should be opened, acknowledged, and closed (Dynel *et al.* 2016; Hay 2001). Laughing and smiling emojis, as well as laughing interjections, are also used in the corpus to close the play frame. For this purpose, WhatsApp messages are usually constituted only of these laughing emojis or the interjections, as shown in message 3 of example (7).

(7)

- | | | |
|---|----------|--|
| 1 | Fernando | <i>Oé, oé, oé.</i>
Hey, hey, hey. |
| 2 | Fernando | <i>Si tienes un pálpito sobre el número de la lotería de navidad, dímelo por favor</i>
If you've got a hunch about the Christmas lottery number, tell me please |
| 3 | Juan |  |





By means of the four “face with tears of joy” emojis, Juan shows appreciation for the humorous remark written by his interlocutor in message 2, but without engaging further in the conversation. In fact, in most of the cases, when used this way, laughing emojis not only marks the end of the play frame but also close the exchange.

4.4 *Playing with emojis*

Being pictorial in nature, emojis are a colourful addition to electronic-mediated messages. When the data were collected, WhatsApp messages without emojis would appear in plain

text, as it was not possible to customize the font, colour or size of the words typed. One of the reasons for the appeal of emojis, in fact, is their colour (Sampietro 2020). More than 700 emojis were available at the time of the compilation of the corpus. Besides the little yellow faces, the list of emojis also included gestures, people, animals, fauna, flora, objects, symbols, and a wide range of national flags. In the corpus analysed the most frequent emojis were yellow faces (almost all representing positive facial expressions) and to a lesser extent some gestures. Other categories of emojis were not common.

In the corpus, less frequent emojis were often introduced as joking colourful additions to the verbal message. Research on multimodal humour found that the shift from the serious script to the humorous script is usually performed by one of the semiotic modalities, either visual or verbal (Francesconi 2011; Tsakona 2009), or even simultaneously (Tsakona 2009). In this sample of WhatsApp messages, the humorous statement is usually expressed in verbal form, and the emojis, which can or cannot be visually related to the content of the verbal message, are simply a visual addition to what is said.

The last messages of the exchange (1) presented above include such a use. It has already been remarked that the laughing emojis presented in message 24 are used to signal that the preceding message should be interpreted as humorous. In messages 25 and 26 the interlocutor uses two infrequent emojis to continue the play frame. Having jokingly called her interlocutor *sor Alicia* (sister Alicia), Ricardo introduces a baby angel emoji () to the conversation, which visually replicates the religious frame. The following message continues in the same vein, as he uses the uncommon farewell *queda con Dios* (may God be with you) and jokingly adds a “folded hands” emoji () representing praying hands. As shown in the previous section, in message 27 Alicia includes two laughing emojis to signal that she understands the play frame without engaging further in the conversation. A similar humorous use of emojis was displayed in message 36 of example (5), where a user added the “face with sunglasses” emoji speaking about “culture”, but referring to parties’ experiences abroad (*Hay que tener cultura de todo*  jajaja / We should have a broad general culture  jajaja). During the 20th century, sunglasses became a display of style and superior status (Brown 2015). The emoji wearing this accessory in the excerpt (5) is introduced to suggest superiority and modernity; its joking use is confirmed by the interjection *jajaja* placed right after the emoji. This humorous use is understood and acknowledged by the laughing interjection in the following message. Although the verbal

message is usually what conveys humour, this use of the emojis can enhance the amusing effect. The choice to use a less common emoji to decorate a message can thus be considered highly salient, and emojis contribute to conveying a heightened, happy or even humorous, tone to the message.

5. Discussion

Emojis are little colourful pictographs added to electronic messages. The present paper has analysed a corpus of everyday WhatsApp chats retrieved in Spain, focusing on the use of emojis in relation to humour.

Answering RQ1, results show that emojis contribute in different ways to the performance of humour in EMC. One relevant function of emojis is signalling humour, i.e. indicating the opening of a play frame, as in the case of the first ASCII emoticon. This means that emoticons and emojis come as a possible solution to the problem of signalling non-verbal meanings in writing, which has motivated the proposal of different signs and marks throughout history (Houston 2013; McCulloch 2019).

Laughing, and to a lesser extent smiling faces, are also used to visually perform laughter, which is a common response to humorous remarks. Besides emojis, the interjection *jajaja* / *hahaha* (and variants) is commonly used in EMC to indicate laughter (König 2019). Nevertheless, the analysis shows that, when this interjection and the “face with tears of joy” emojis are found in the same message, they are usually separated and perform different functions. As shown in previous conversation-analytical studies of WhatsApp chats (König 2019; Petitjean and Morel 2017), if laughter opens a WhatsApp message, it is usually an answer to previous humorous remarks; if laughter or a laughing emoji are placed at the end of a message, usually they signal that the same message contains humour. This shows that emojis are not only useful to mark non-verbal meanings, but also that they help structure the conversation (König 2019).

Emojis are also used to close the play frame or acknowledge humour (by means of laughter), without engaging further in conversation. Several examples presented in this paper showed that “face with tears of joy” used alone (and often repeated) in the last message of an exchange can be used as a way to close a conversation. This seems to infringe an important interactional rule, that conversations should be “bracketed” between an opening and a closing (Goffman 1971: 79). Nevertheless, greeting and farewell formulas are only one possible way to frame a WhatsApp conversation, and on some occasions, they

may be omitted (Alcántara Pla 2014). This is also true for other forms of EMC, such as emails (Bou-Franch 2011), Facebook private chats (Meredith 2017), SMS (Spagnolli and Gamberini 2007), or short task-oriented WhatsApp conversations (Sampietro 2016b). Rather than considering this phenomenon an infraction to politeness rules (Alcántara Pla 2014), this use suggests that WhatsApp conversations have a different structure comparing to face-to-face encounters or phone calls. For the purpose of this study, it is worth remarking that laughing emojis may be a possible way not only to acknowledge humour and close the play frame, but also to end a conversation in a friendly way.

Finally, emojis may be used in jokingly ways by themselves, especially less frequent emojis, such as objects, animals, and less common gestures or faces. These pictographs are often introduced in a conversation in which the play frame has already been established, and the colourful addition of emojis contributes to maintaining it.

As for RQ2, it comes as no surprise that the emojis more commonly involved in humour are those visually related to laughter. In the case of signalling humour, the most frequent emojis in the corpus are the “face with tears of joy” and different faces with the tongue sticking out, as already observed by König (2019). Regarding the visual reproduction of laughter, the most recurrent emojis used in the corpus are again “face with tears of joy”, as well as “grinning face with smiling eyes”, and to a lesser extent, other smiling faces.

As we notice, “face with tears of joy” is used both to mark humorous statements and as a response to them. This multifunctionality may be one of the reasons why this emoji is the most common on Twitter worldwide (see www.emojitracker.com). There are several emojis representing laughter. Future studies could analyse why this emoji is preferred to signal laughter, if it depends on the design or if it is an instance of accommodation (Giles et al. 1991) to other users’ customs, and also qualitatively analyse the use of other emojis representing laughter. For instance, since 2016 another intense laughter has become available on the Unicode set: the emoji named “rolling on the floor laughing” (see endnote 4). According to Emojipedia (n.d.), this “often conveys hysterical laughter more intense than 🤪 Face With Tears of Joy.” It could be analysed if users actually employ these two emojis differently.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, answering again RQ2, results show that less frequent emojis can be used in humorous ways by themselves, drawing on their bright colour and cartoon-like design. Even if the humorous frame is commonly set verbally, the addition to the

message of a colourful note in the form of an uncommon emoji heightens the enlivened tone.

6. Conclusion

Laughter has several roles in playful talk. Firstly, it signals amusement and appreciation when something humorous is said (Glenn 2003). By laughing, participants in a verbal exchange can also show their involvement in the ongoing conversation (Coates 2007; Glenn 2003). It also marks solidarity, in that collaboratively constructed humour relies on in-group knowledge and familiarity (Coates 2007). Finally, it plays an important role in structuring playful talk, both in signalling speakers' recognition of the establishment of a play frame and in marking its end (Dynel *et al.* 2016; Hay 2001). The present paper has shown that, in WhatsApp conversations, these functions are frequently performed by emojis, which are not only used to represent emotional content, but they also have a wide array of pragmatic functions in EMC.

First, the analysis of a corpus of everyday dyadic WhatsApp chats has shown that emojis are used to set the “play frame” (Fry, 2010), this is to signal the presence of humour or jokes. Used in this way, emojis come as a possible solution to the problem of signalling non-literal meanings in writing, which has motivated the suggestion of different written marks throughout history (Houston, 2013; McCulloch, 2019). In the corpus, the emoji “face with tears of joy” and, to a lesser extent, the faces with the tongue sticking out, were possible ways to indicate humour, in accordance with research done in other languages (König, 2019).

In order for humour to be successful, interactants should not only signal its presence but also show recognition and appreciation (Dynel *et al.*, 2016). The analysis has shown that this function is also performed by emojis and laughing interjections (such as *ja ja ja* in Spanish). Concretely, the emoji “face with tears of joy” was a common response to humour in the corpus. When it represented the action of laughing at humour expressed by the interlocutor, it was usually repeated several times. This may be one of the reasons for the high use of this amused face.

This emoji was also used to perform shared laughter, another important component of successful humour. Sharing laughter helps to create solidarity among interlocutors, as the recognition and appreciation of humour create in-group bonds (Coates 2007). In the corpus,

the “face with tears of joy” was used in similar ways (e.g. repeated the same number of times) by informants to show shared laughter.

The play frame should be not only opened and acknowledged but also ended. Laughing emojis are also used to close the play frame (Hay 2001); when used in this way, they are typically the sole content of the message and are repeated. Sequences of equal laughing emojis, such as the already mentioned “face with tears of joy” can be also used to close short informal conversations. This shows a clear difference between texting and face-to-face or even phone communication, where farewells are an essential part of the structure of a successful interaction (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973). Studies in conversation analysis could examine under what circumstances laughing emojis can replace proper farewell formulas in electronic-mediated conversations.

Finally, the analysis has also shown that emojis, especially less frequent ones, are also used in playful ways by themselves, as a comic-like addition to messages with an enlightened tone.

This paper comes with some limitations. At first, the analysis has only focused on dyadic chats, while group chats have not been considered. Future studies could analyse group conversations, in order to find similarities and differences in the performance of humour with emojis. For instance, anecdotal evidence suggests that closing short humorous conversations with emojis and not with explicit farewell formulas may be more frequent in group chats, compared with dyadic ones. This is a possible avenue for future research on the use of emojis in group chats and on the structure of informal WhatsApp group interactions.

Another limitation concerns the single focus on emojis, as the use of laughing interjections and other onomatopoeic terms have not been thoroughly analysed. In future research, further comparison between the use of written cues for laughing and different types emojis could be performed, complementing König’s (2019) study on the use of two emojis and laugh particles in WhatsApp group conversations.

Finally, in this paper emojis have been mainly considered as a visual addition to humour performed verbally. A further avenue for additional research is framing the use of emojis in multimodal humour research (see Taksona 2009), thus considering how and under what circumstances these pictographs are used to mark the shift from a serious to a joking tone.

All in all, this work systematically approaches the relation between emojis and humour, broadening the literature not only on emojis, but also on everyday electronic-mediated conversations, and multimodality.

7. References

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ⁱ Sequences of punctuation marks (purposely or not) resembling facial expressions existed even before the digital era. For example, in the XIX century the satirical magazine *Puck* displayed “typographical faces,” composed by punctuation marks and symbols (Shep 2010). The sequence :) was also found in an English poem from the XVII century (Stahl 2014) and ;) in the transcription of a discourse by Abraham Lincoln (Evans 2017).

ⁱⁱ At the time of the compilation of the corpus, it was not possible to have phone or video calls through WhatsApp.

ⁱⁱⁱ Examples present excerpts of the WhatsApp chats collected. Messages were transcribed as originally typed by users and a line-by-line English translation is provided. Numbering of messages follows the transcription of the corpus. For example, in excerpt (1) the first message is numbered 19; this means that it is the 19th message of the transcribed conversation. Participants' names and personal details have been modified to ensure informants' privacy.

^{iv} As mentioned, informants show a tendency to use the emoji "face with tears of joy" as a way of reproducing laughter. Nevertheless, with the data at hand it is not possible to know if this habit evolved into a real convention. One of the reasons for this is that currently other laughing emojis are available on the Unicode emoji set. The "grinning face with smiling eyes" mentioned earlier in the paper has changed its design in 2017, and now the corners of mouth have lifted. In 2016, another laughing emoji, called "rolling on the floor laughing," a yellow face tilted on its side, with a big grin, X-shaped eyes, and two tears, was introduced. Other similar emojis are a grinning face with open eyes, different laughing cat faces, different kinds of smiles, and a smiling face with the hand over the mouth. Studies based on more recent corpora could confirm which emoji is nowadays the most used to reproduce laughter on WhatsApp or even if these laughing emojis also reflect different laughing stances.