

The Case of @Emoticoncaselaw – Multimodality, and the Pragmatic Interpretation of Emoji in Pictorial Twitter Narratives

@Emoticoncaselaw is a Twitter account which publishes pictorial narratives of famous legal cases using emoji, as shown in fig. 1 and fig. 2 below:

Fig. 1

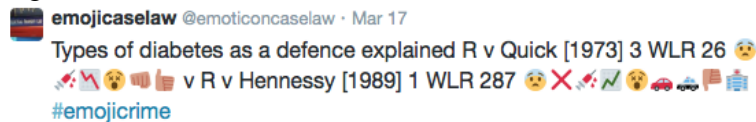


Fig. 2



The effects of these narratives lie in how they are interpreted – the reader must work out how the icons fit with the narrative. Do the icons correspond to concepts that are constituents of the narrative, as we might argue for the fist icon in Fig 1. – the fist can be seen as corresponding to the concept of a punch. Or, do the icons receive an emotional-affective interpretation as we might argue for the ‘ill’ faces in Fig. 1, and the faces portraying various emotions in Fig. 2, a divorce case. Moreover, it seems that repetition of certain emoji can be given an iconic interpretation. The number of calendar icons and bank note icons repeated in Fig. 2, for example, play a role in encouraging the reader to build in a length of time, or an amount of money into conceptual elements of the narrative.

These examples raise a number of questions for non-verbal behaviour and multimodality in online communication. What and how do these icons communicate? What can cognitive pragmatics tell us about the interpretation of such icons? How can non-verbal icons be used to communicate a narrative? Do such icons receive multimodal interpretations i.e. can such icons simultaneously yield a concept *and* emotional-effective content?

This paper adopts a Relevance-Theoretic cognitive pragmatic perspective (Sperber & Wilson, 1995; Blakemore, 2002; Wharton, 2009). Within Relevance Theory (RT) it is acknowledged that communication can involve both inference and coding, and that communication can be verbal and non-verbal. It is also proposed (Blakemore, 1987; Blakemore, 2002) that there are two types of ‘meaning’ – concepts, and procedures, where procedures are instructions for recovering various aspects of an interpretation.

In this paper, I suggest

- (1) Certain emoji – particularly faces – activate emotion-reading procedures.
- (2) Certain emoji yield, but may not encode, concepts in narratives.
- (3) Emoji can be interpreted procedurally or conceptually depending on what the optimally relevant processing strategy is. Moreover, an icon can simultaneously play a role in the recovery of a conceptual and an emotional-affective representation, meaning we can argue for a multimodal account of such cases.

- (4) Repetition of conceptually interpreted emoji can play an iconic role in the computation of measurements (i.e. amounts, times) that are built in to the concepts computed for the interpretation.

As these emoji are not part of language proper, but can communicate narratives that are typically communicated linguistically, a pragmatically informed discussion sheds light on how the same types of meaning can be made ‘beyond language’ using a visual mode. Moreover, this paper expands our understanding of how non-verbal icons are pragmatically interpreted. The analyses proposed in the paper can be applied in the field of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), and are useful to theorists researching how complex representations, and emotional-affective states are communicated in impoverished and restricted online communicative situations.

(Word count excluding title and list of references = 492)

List of References

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