

6.1. 'Rest in Peach'. The relevance of emojis in the gender maneuvering of language

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A b s t r a c t

Looking for ways in which new generations may still be able to negotiate gender dynamics today, this paper's aim is to investigate the use of emojis in texting as a Barthesian "second-order semiological system", in order to disclose their potential as a gender maneuvering tool. Presenting emoji-texting as a metalanguage has a series of implications, most notably revealing its predisposition for the continuous negotiation of meaning behind each of its single expressions (emojis). In order to unravel this claim, the present paper employs a step-by-step approach, progressively situating texting within the realm of culture as signification. Once this is accomplished, the concept of *gender maneuvering* will be added to the picture, so as to offer an interpretation of such a newly acquired potential. In the same ways as (post)feminists of present times are re-appropriating pariah-words (bitch, slut, bad-ass), new emerging languages such as that of emojis offer a paramount opportunity to the maneuvering of language as a means to fight against its gendered nature.

Keywords: *Emojis, gender maneuvering, language, signification.*

GENDER,
 DIFFERENCES,
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1. Introduction

Among the numerous negative characteristics attributed to the youngest generations, texting undoubtedly owns a prominent position. The most urging preoccupation concerns whether the new language, emerging (and relentlessly evolving) from communication exchanges via text messages, has any sort of negative effect on youth, most notably whether it translates into impoverished literacy attainment during education (Plester, Wood & Bell, 2008). What is certain is that the language employed in conversations staged within *computer mediated discourses*, commonly referred to as “texting language” (TL), has rules of its own. These rules are mediated between the need to write shorter texts and that to semantic unambiguity: namely, content still needs to be understandable (Choudhury *et al.*, 2007). In this regard, technological developments are straightforwardly intertwined with linguistic developments, so much that the question arises whether they are gradually modifying language or if what emerges is, instead, a language of its own (Gorney, 2012), as naming it “texting language” may suggest. Such complexity sparks interest towards this postmodern way of communication and offers an awe-inspiring starting point for analyses grounded in the most different perspectives, perhaps even questioning whether its effects are exclusively negative (Vosloo, 2009).

The aim of this paper is precisely that of investigating TL from an original standpoint, partly distancing itself from traditional literature centred on texting's negative influence on language, to focus, on the other hand, on its revolutionary potential. This objective will be pursued by situating texting and, in particular, the use of emojis in its practice within the realm of culture as signification. Doing so will allow to unravel the potential of emojis as a means towards the maneuvering of language, in particular acting against its intrinsic gendered nature (Mills, 2008). What will follow is a brief and concentrated introduction to some of the fundamental concepts of linguistics, a necessary step towards the further development of this paper. Both Saussure's “first-order semiological system” and Barthes's “second-order semiological system” will be discussed and applied to the realm of texting, in order to illustrate the first hypothesis of this paper: texting language owns a revolutionary potential, something that “ordinary language” does not possess. Subsequently, going one step further in what is possibly an ambitious endeavour, texting through emojis will be combined with Mimi Schippers' (2002) theory of “gender maneuvering” and exemplified with an everyday-life case study in an attempt to disclose how the use of emojis may serve the purpose of challenging gendered language.

2. Texting as signification

2.1. De Saussure, Hall and the universe of (youth's) texting

The founder of linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure, provided a fundamental distinction when he contrasted language, the (social) structure, and speech, the individual act (De Saussure, 1964). Only the former can be an object of analysis, since the essential meaning of the latter is lost as soon as it is performed. Language, instead, is a socially organized system of *signs*. Every

linguistic sign stands to represent a whole, in turn constituted by a *signified* – the meaning (more precisely, the concept) – and a *signifier* – the form, or sound-image, employed when referring to the concept (De Saussure, 1964). Young generations in particular form sexting's *community of speakers*, similar to what Zerubavel would call “optic communities” (1997); the continuous redefinition, modification and adaptation of such a language in present times also plays a significant role in the negotiation of youth's own identity (Ringrose & Harvey, 2015). It is possible, for now, to think about texting as a first-order semiological system, the one portrayed by de Saussure, where a brand-new list of *signifiers* (the form, or sound/image) finds a satisfactory relationship with as many *signifies* (the concepts):

- TDTM – Talk Dirty to Me
- NSA – No Strings Attached
- GNOC – Get Naked On Camera
- POS – Parents Over Shoulder
- FWB – Friends With Benefits

As any kind of language that is not instantly consumed, encoding/decoding processes are at work between the moment of execution and that of reception. As Stuart Hall (1980) would have pointed out, the correct reception of sexting messages lays in the relation of identity between the active and passive sides of the exchange. While among teenagers the symmetry stands and they are able to successfully decode abbreviated text messages, the degree of asymmetry between them and their parents' codes often results in *distortions* (Hall, 1980), the so-called “aberrant codes”. The relative knowledge of recipients (influenced by age in particular) confines the language of texting to a specific category – once again, texting's *community of speakers*. Members of this community own the means to properly comprehend text messages; however, as Hall points out, their decoding can still develop in several different forms:

a) **Dominant code**

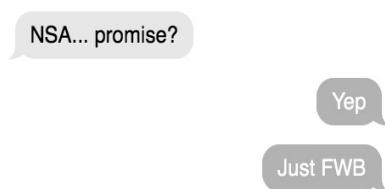


Figure 6.1.1

Members of the same community of speakers correctly decode the message according to the *dominant-hegemonic position*. Sender and receiver both use the same codes in their communicative exchange.

b) *Negotiated code*

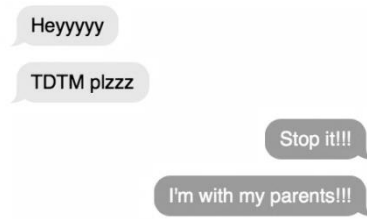


Figure 6.1.2

In this case, the decoding process takes place in a medium between “adaptive” and “oppositional” elements. The receiver understands the code (Talk Dirty to Me), and could then choose to respond in the same way (for example, “POS” – Parents over Shoulder); however, she replies with her own *ground rules*.

c) *Oppositional code*

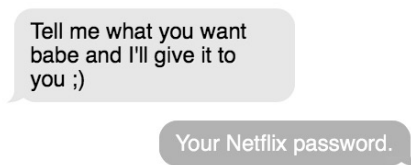


Figure 6.1.3

In this final instance the receiver – while, once again, perfectly comprehending the sender’s code – responds contrarily to it, using an “alternative framework of reference” (Hall, 1980, p. 138). Parents are left out of the community, and they would often need a guide to understand their children’s rhetoric (Katzman, 2010). They would then employ yet another code: the “aberrant code”, belonging to all individuals who do not share the same language (Eco, 1972).

2.2. From first- to second-order semiological system: Barthes meets emojis

In order to go one step further with the present semiotic analysis of texting, Roland Barthes must be included in the discourse. When discussing “myth as a type of speech”, the author introduces a *second-order semiological system*, one that goes beyond the signifier + signified = sign Saussurean equation (Barthes, 1957). In the mythical dimension, indeed, a shift in the relation of signifier and signified occurs when the linguistic sign (concept + sound/image) of the first (classical) system actually becomes just a signifier in a second system, that of *metalanguage* – namely, myth itself. What has been just described is a process of “appropriation”, whereby a sign is emptied of its literal meaning and is subsequently employed as mere form in the expression of something else. It is here believed that the realm of texting provides for a metalanguage, as well: a second-order semiological system. The necessary shift in the relationship between signified and signifier occurs, in particular, whenever emojis are employed in communication. It is exactly through emojis that a clearer description of Barthes’ theory will be carried out. A paradigmatic

case is that of the aubergine: far from being a symbol for farmers' markets and veganism, this vegetable lately underwent a deformation.

Traditionally (or, originally), its sign used to be:

Aubergine (the concept – signified) + (the 🍆 visual form (image) – signifier)

However, when emojis started substituting for actual words in texting practices, the above-mentioned sign “aubergine” was emptied of its original content and became just pure form-signifier to a second semiological system, that of the texting language. Nowadays, whenever the aubergine emoji is employed in texting, notwithstanding its literal meaning being clearly visible, the reader would still grasp something different. Such a distortion of the form is allowed by the linguistical meaning that already hides behind it: the already-established connotation of aubergine-as-a-concept served the erotic *intention* of representing, and expressing, a phallic image. As a matter of fact, mythical language is characterized by intention, rather than form. The combination of the first-system sign (or second-system signifier) with its new signified generates a second system and a new sign, which Barthes calls *signification*.

Further support to this hypothesis comes from recent news reports. The “peach emoji” case rapidly took over the Internet when, not long ago, Apple released a beta version of iOS 10.2, which introduced a new-look version of the beloved peach emoji. The new image was more closely resembling the actual fruit; no problem would have emerged if the first-order semiological system – the one where “peach” would actually mean a peach – was at work. However, that was not the case, as the peach emoji was in truth the most appreciated sexting symbol, in the guise of *derrière*. A madness of tweets and Facebook posts went viral, so much that the original peach emoji was finally re-established in the next iOS upgrade. This event shows how emoji-texting is a metalanguage, similar to Barthes' second semiotic system, rather than a first-system language in the Saussurean conception.

3. Emojis and gender maneuvering: the case of 'period emojis'

Now that the qualification of emoji-texting as a second-order semiological system (or metalanguage) has been clarified and illustrated through the aubergine and the peach emoji case, in order to address the final claim of this paper (and its essential goal, as well) the concept of “gender maneuvering” must be introduced. The term was initially coined by Mimi Schippers (2002) to indicate micro-level, local phenomena whereby patriarchal gender dynamics are challenged by communities of women performing alternative kinds of femininities, often owning up to what are traditionally considered negative gender stereotypes on women. The author employed this term to refer to processes of gender re-negotiation taking place in the alternative, hard rock subculture (Schippers, 2002). Nonetheless, gender maneuvering is not at all confined to music subcultures: Nancy Finley employed the same term to describe similar dynamics enacted by a group of Roller Derby skaters; she described gender maneuvering as:

A collective effort to negotiate actively the meaning and rules of gender to redefine the hegemonic relationship between masculinity and femininity in the normative structure of a specific context. These

strategies change familiar meanings of gender, violate rules of interaction, and shift positions so that the links between gender relations are damaged and transformed within that context. When effective, they challenge localized gender relations and produce 'alternative' gender relations (Finley, 2010, p. 362).

More specifically, instances of gender maneuvering include women challenging hegemonic masculinity by owning up to pariah femininities, negative stereotypes associated with women rejecting traditionally “feminine” behaviours to embody more “masculine” connotations, such as bossiness or sexual openness, leading to the widely used appellatives of “bitch” or “slut”. By re-appropriating of such pariahs, women are able to turn previously insulting stereotypes into empowering, alternative gender identities.

Bringing emojis back into the picture, having already demonstrated how they can serve as tools in the re-negotiation and modification of language – as a metalanguage, they can be emptied of their original meaning, and be assigned a new one – the present paper argues and supports the employment of emojis as instruments for the gender maneuvering of language. In order to clarify how such process could be carried out, what follows is a paradigmatic example derived from contemporary communication exchanges, specifically among young women and girls: period emojis. As a matter of fact, among the infinite emojis one can choose from when texting from both phones and computers – including some ridiculously (almost oddly) specific ones – no emoji has been designed to represent a rather fundamental part of the female existence, menstruations. Women can emoji-text about getting a haircut, their nails done, or even a head massage, but that taboo-thing they experience every month is conspicuously absent from their set of emojis. This is clearly not surprising, as societies confine menstruations to the realm of “pollution”, tacitly supporting their identification with both dirt and danger (Laws, 1991) and welcoming them as yet another emblem of universal male dominance (Buckley & Gottlieb, 1988).

Such an absence has not remained unnoticed: a plea for “period emojis” has been circulating on the Internet, to the point where their eventual introduction in near-future updates has been repeatedly hypothesized. Nonetheless, women around the world have already found their way around this issue. Employing a strategy that closely mirrors what has previously described as (gender) maneuvering, they re-appropriated a number of already-existing emojis, and began using them as signs expressing something different: period, in its various shades. Considering emojis as a second-order semiological system allows comprehending this maneuvering, enlightening the reasons enabling it: emojis are emptied of their original meaning, and become pure form to a whole different sign, one that stands for “period”. Some examples include: the calendar plus the angry face emojis, the flamenco dancer, the erupting volcano, the red alarm clock and the red “no entry” sign; but there truly are endless combinations, each one signifying a different emotional or physical state derived from the universe of menstruations.

4. Conclusion

Analysing (emoji) texting under semiotics' and linguistics' theoretical lenses allows for a better understanding of the rise of neologisms – as well as new languages altogether – in the digital era, as well as specific audiences' ways of encoding and decoding them. The mutability/immutability paradox (de Saussure, 1964), supportive of both the impossibility by communities to actively and purposely perform change in language themselves, and, on the other side, the ever-lasting potential for modification – stemming from both the arbitrariness of the sign and the erosion of time – pose stimulating interrogatives on the next evolution the realm of texting would undergo. The purpose of this analysis was primarily that of introducing the idea of a (gender) maneuvering of language (emoji-texting in particular), by progressively illustrating TL (texting language) using traditional theories of linguistics. Such traditional theories, nonetheless, allow for an innovative reading of TL, one that supports its positive potential for change. The example of “period emojis” is just one instance reflecting how such a maneuvering process is already taking place among young women's community of speakers; however, the present paper is intended as a starting point, rather than a finish line: it is hoped that the idea of a (gender) maneuvering of language will be further explored by the academic community, paying particular attention to all discriminated, underprivileged communities – the only ones that maneuvering can truly empower to affect change.

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