



Do you know what I mean > :(

A linguistic study of the understanding of emoticons and emojis in text messages

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Title: Do you know what I mean > :( - A linguistic study of the understanding of the emoticons and emojis in text messages

## **Abstract**

This study investigates the understanding of emoticons and emojis used in text messages. The aim of this study is to determine whether there is a universal understanding of emoticons and emojis, which is important considering the number of people using them every day when sending text messages. Many studies have been made of communication via text messages and the usage of emoticons and emojis, but no study has focused on the interpretation of the symbols and the importance of the context.

For the purposes of this study, a questionnaire was completed in an upper secondary school (Swedish gymnasium) in Stockholm, during normal school hours in November 2014, by 90 16-19 year old students. The result was then analysed through a 'Relevance Theory' perspective, and in the light of the works of, amongst others, Saussure, Peirce and Thomas.

The result revealed that, for the interpreter of a text message, it is important that a textual context is established, in order for the interpreter to be able to understand what the emoticons or emojis used in text messages mean. The result also showed that the emoticons and emojis do not have a meaning in themselves and that they can have different meanings depending on the situation, and the mood or the person for whom the message is intended.

Keywords: 'interpreter', 'implicature', 'text message', 'emoticon', 'emoji', 'symbols', 'Relevance Theory', 'sign', 'inference',



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## **I. Introduction**

Communication today is just as important as it was 200 or 2000 years ago. The difference is how we do it. Today we have access to so many different channels through which we can express happiness, disappointment, opinions, news, status, thoughts, encouragement or knowledge, to mention just a few. It is not only possible to use different media for this communication, such as blogs, mail, Internet, and phones, again just to mention a few- it is also very fast. We type, we press ‘send’ and instantly, the message shows up on someone else’s screen. Responses to such messages often need to be instantaneous. In the short time available, there is really not enough time to be sure that the message is understood or that the response has been thought through. To make it more complicated, we can also show our mood, our emotions or our attitude, such as sarcasm or anger, through emoticons or emojis (Emoticons and emojis are defined in chapter 1.3.1 and 3.1.3).

Much has been written about emoticons and how they are used. Many articles, papers and books have focused on gender, how the emoticons are used or the frequency at which they appear, including conventions of emoticon use, placement, and impact of smileys on perception processes, rhetorical importance or semantic orientation or the mood of the recipients when interpreting the message. This requires us to consider whether these signifiers are widely understood and, if so, how ubiquitous and uniform that understanding is. The general consensus is that emoticons are used as a non-verbal emphazier of emotions without answering the question as to whether these emoticons are universally understood. This essay aims to focus on the extent to which there is a ‘universal understanding’ between users, as in senders and receivers, through a communication via smartphones. Smartphones are used for text messaging, tweeting, blogging and sending mails, all of which are examples of media through which emoticons and emojis are being used<sup>1</sup>. This study aims to find an answer to the question of whether messages are regularly misinterpreted or if we actually understand each other when communicating through messages.

### **I.1 Background**

My son was looking over my shoulder when I was writing a text message to a parent of one of his friends. We had both decided what I was going to write when he suddenly said to me-

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<sup>1</sup> ‘PC Mag- Encyclopedia’ [www.pcmag.com](http://www.pcmag.com) [website]  
<http://www.pcmag.com/encyclopedia/term/51537/smartphone>, accessed 3 December 2014.

“You cannot really use that emoji”. I asked him why and it transpired that we actually interpreted the same emoji differently in a context we both understood and both had agreed upon. If there is a discrepancy between two people that are living together and know each other as well as a mother and son possibly can, two persons that have agreed on one message but have different references of what emoji to use, how does it then look outside our home? As I am working with students diagnosed with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder), I daily encounter situations which emphasise the importance of understanding each other and what to do to improve or be aware of the differences in understanding. This essay is intended to answer one of many questions about understanding each other.

## **1.2 Purpose**

The purpose of this essay is to establish whether symbols used daily in text messages, by thousands of people all over the world, are understood in the context of the message or by themselves- as in a universal understanding of symbols.

## **1.3 Research Question and Definitions**

- To what extent are the symbols interpreted in the same way by everyone?
- How are they understood and interpreted through the context in which they are written. Alternatively, do they have a universal and individually understood message in themselves?

### **1.3.1 Theoretical Definitions**

In this essay, the following concepts will be used according to the following definitions: - a **smartphone** is a phone with an advanced computing capability, one of its features being the possibility of web browsing, using Internet and apps. Peirce defines an **icon** as being part of a triadic typology that includes indices and symbols. This study will use Peirce’s definition in which an **icon**<sup>2</sup> represents a sign that shares qualities with its object through either resemblance or imitation, such as a word or graphic symbol, and whose form suggests its

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<sup>2</sup> Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy [website] <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/peirce-semiotics/>, accessed 14 December 2014.

meaning, this is the definition that will be used. **Texting** is another word for typing a text message that is intended to be sent as a **SMS**<sup>3</sup>, which is an acronym for ‘Short Message Service’ and is a system that enables mobile phone users to send and receive text messages. **Emoticons** are “A representation of a facial expression such as a smile or frown formed by various combinations of keyboard characters and used in electronic communications to convey the writer’s feelings or intended tone”<sup>4</sup>. An emoticon is “A small digital image or icon used to express an idea or emotion in electronic communication”<sup>5</sup>. Emoticons can also be illustrated, in which case they are called **emojis**. An **emoji** is part of a certain set of icons designed by Shigetaka Kurita in 1995<sup>6</sup> which are possible to download to mobile phone (see Appendices 2, 3 and 4 for examples of how they look or chapter 4.1.3 for further explanation). **CMC**- is an acronym for ‘Computer Mediated Communication’, **IM**- for ‘Instant Messaging’ and **ITC**- for ‘Informal Text Communication’<sup>7</sup>.

In this essay, emoticons and emojis will be used with a parallel and similar definition. The reasons for this are partly because emoticons belong to a broader category of the same signification system and, through a smaller investigation amongst students targeted for this essay, it turns out that the term ‘emoji’ is what the students use as a categorization for the symbols they put into their text messages; hence, it would be problematic to separate the two definitions within the frames for the purpose of this essay.

### **1.3.2 Operational Definitions**

The following operational definitions will be made. **Students** in this essay refer to upper secondary school pupils as those within an age range of between 15-19 years of age. When talking about **young people**, it will be in reference to the group of students mentioned above. **Symbols** and **signs** will be used with definitions according to Peirce, where a **sign** is a “triple connection of sign, thing signified, and cognition produced in the mind”<sup>8</sup>. A **symbol**, according to Peirce, denotes its object by virtue of the fact that it will be interpreted as doing so<sup>9</sup>. See further explanations in chapter 3.1.

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<sup>3</sup> Oxford Dictionaries [website] <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/> , accessed 3 December 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Oxford Dictionaries [website] <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/> , accessed 3 December 2014.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.digitaltrends.com/mobile/emoji-fun-facts/>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> W Nöth, 1995 p42

<sup>9</sup> Ibid pp.42



## 2. Theoretical background

Communication is based on encoding and decoding and, since Aristotle, all semiotic theories have been based on ‘the code model’. Sperber and Wilson propose that there is something missing here and suggest the notion of inference, as the code model does not cover the gap between semantic representation of sentences and thoughts actually communicated by utterance<sup>10</sup>. Relevance theory is an approach developed by Sperber and Wilson. It is an attempt to explain the processes involved in recovering meaning through implicature. Relevance theory is based upon the assumption that human cognitive processes are oriented towards achieving the highest cognitive effect with the least effort. In order to be able to do this, the inferencing process must be initiated. Inference can be defined as conclusions automatically drawn based upon context and pre-knowledge, or as ‘implicature’- which is something that is not implicitly expressed, but rather is understood by the context. Sperber and Wilson state; “Fundamental to our account on inferential communication is the fact that to communicate is to secure someone’s attention, and hence to imply that the information communicated is relevant. We call this idea that communicated information comes with a guarantee of relevance, ‘the Principle of Relevance’”<sup>11</sup>. This is what establishes the intention behind an utterance that is about to be interpreted. Relevance theory, according to Sperber and Wilson, is thus an advance on previous models of implicature based not only on the Aristotle’s code model, but also on Grice’s approaches to conventional and conversational implicature. Grice’s theory explained and predicted implicatures in, for example, conversation by attempting to describe how they arose and were understood through his maxims<sup>12</sup>.

## 3. Understanding language

Semiotics is in its broadest definition ‘the study of signs’. The intention below is to provide an overview of the relevant aspects of semiotics, semantics and pragmatics in order to provide a theoretical basis for the subsequent study.

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> D Sperber & D Wilson, ‘Relevance Theory’, *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* [online journal], Volume 10, Issue 04, December 1987, pp. 697-710 <http://dx.doi.org.ezp.sub.su.se/10.1017/S0140525X00055345> ,Published online: 4 February 2010, accessed 3 December, 2014. pp.697

<sup>12</sup> Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy [website] <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/implicature/>, accessed 14 December 2014

### 3.1 Semiotics

‘Semiotics’ is derived from the Greek word, *sēmeiōtikos*, which means ‘observant of signs’<sup>13</sup>. Saussure suggested semiotics as a “science that studies the life of signs within society”<sup>14</sup> and today there are many definitions of the ‘science of signs’ where, according to Nöth, some even refuse to define it as science<sup>15</sup>.

The modern study of signs and sign systems started with Peirce at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Peirce, in contrast to Saussure, came from a philosophical branch and his work suggested a more epistemological universality, in which he believed “/.../that cognition, thought and even man, are semiotic in their essence. Similar to a sign, a thought refers to other thoughts and to objects of the world so that “all which is reflected upon has [a] past””<sup>16</sup>. Peirce’s definition of sign is a “triple connection of sign, thing signified, cognition produced in the mind”<sup>17</sup> and the interpretant is the term for the meaning of a sign. He also classified the triadic sign relation, ‘the Peircean sign’, which includes a sign, an object and an interpretant. This is explained, in its simplest form, by Merrell “as something that relates to something else for someone in some respect or capacity”<sup>18</sup>. This is, in other words, a description of a sign that is mentally interpreted by creating another sign in the mind that functions as the interpretant of the first sign. The basic classes in Peirce’s classification of signs are icons, indices and symbols and, as these are the most relevant for this essay, they will be further explained. These definitions are part of a trichotomy that creates a tree structure of ten sign classes<sup>19</sup>;

- An icon denotes its object by virtue of shared resemblance or similarity. An example of an icon is a “sign that interrelates with its semiotic object by virtue of some resemblance or similarity with it, such as a map”<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> <http://global.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/534099/semiotics>

<sup>14</sup> W Nöth, *Handbook of Semiotics*, Indiana University Press, USA, 1995. p.3

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. pp.39

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p.42

<sup>18</sup> F Merrell ‘Charles Sanders Peirce’s concept of the sign’ in P. Copley ed., *Semiotics and Linguistics*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005, pp.vii-326,

<http://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/theory/Merrell-Peirce-on-sign-Routledge.pdf> ,accessed 3 December, 2014

<sup>19</sup> K. Boklund-Lagopoulou, M. Gottdiener, & Ph.A. Lagopoulos, ‘Overview’ in M. Gottdiener, K. Boklund-Lagopoulou, & Ph. A. Lagopoulos, ed., *Semiotics*, pp.3-43.Sage Publications Ltd, London, 2014. P.14

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

- An index denotes its object by virtue of actual, physical, imagined or causal connection. An example of index is a sign that also interrelates with its semiotic object, but through a causal connection and to use the example of Merrell- “a weathervane obediently moves around to point (indicate index) the direction of the wind due to the action of the wind on the object (smoke was for the Ranger an index of fire)”<sup>21</sup>.
- A symbol, according to Peirce, denotes its object by virtue of the fact that it will be interpreted to do so or as Merrell said; “a linguistic sign whose interrelation with its semiotic object is conventional”<sup>22</sup>. Conventional in this context means that there is no necessary natural connection between the represented and the semiotic object and this is similar to Saussure’s concept of arbitrariness<sup>23</sup>. It is also a particular type of sign where the symbol is the sign in consequence of habit<sup>24</sup>. An example of a symbol according to Peirce is more complicated as it needs a conventional semiotic object to interrelate with. A conventional object in this context means that there are no natural links to with which to relate the objects as there are with indices, and no similarities as there are with icons, but rather they are arbitrary and depend upon context and pre-knowledge.

Saussure, who was a contemporary of Peirce, also believed in a structural model of the language. However, instead of Peirce’s triadic model, Saussure had a dyadic system of signs- the sign and its constituents the signifier and the signified<sup>25</sup>. Saussure developed the concept of *langue* (language) as a social dynamic system composed of signs, grammar, rules and codes where the sign is the basic unit and *parole* (speaking) - the executive linguistic act: the utterance. Saussure opined that *langue* and *parole* were closely interrelated and expressed through mutual presupposition between the signified and the signifier<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> F. Merrell, 2005.p.31.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>H.Bussman, *Routledge Dictionary of Language & Linguistics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, ed. G. Trauth & K. Kazzazi, Routledge, Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2006, [http://book.e-reading-lib.org/bookreader.php/142124/Routledge Dictionary of Language and Linguistics.pdf](http://book.e-reading-lib.org/bookreader.php/142124/Routledge_Dictionary_of_Language_and_Linguistics.pdf) , accessed 3 December, 2014. p.83

<sup>24</sup> P Cobley, *Routledge Companion to Semiotics and Linguistics*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005 p.272

<sup>25</sup> W. Nöth, p.59

<sup>26</sup> K Boklund-Lagopoulou et al 2014, p.7

Barthes, another structuralist, focused many of his studies on connotative semiotics that he developed based on theories of Danish linguist Hjelmslev which were, in turn, developments of Saussure's 'Course in General Linguistics'. Barthes analysed advertising and, by using the image in the ad, found a 'second-level symbolic message' that was controlling the denotative signs in order to become signifiers. According to Barthes, connotation occurs when the relation between the signifier and the signified is not clear enough. The signs of an image that cannot be connotators are 'rhetoric'<sup>27</sup>. Barthes was, however, convinced that Saussure's model focused on denotation, the literal meaning or the encoded signifier, at the expense of connotation. Barthes used the concept of connotative semiotics to uncover concealed messages in texts, something he defined as myths<sup>28</sup>.

Wheelwright explains 'myth' as something that "may be defined as a story or a complex of story elements taken as expressing, and therefore as implicitly symbolizing, certain deep-lying aspects of human and trans-human existence"<sup>29</sup>. This can be interpreted as either a metaphorical narrative or an existential question. Lévi-Strauss developed a structural method in order to analyse myth. He considered myths to be a type of speech or message similar to the structure of a language. A 'mytheme' is the fundamental unit of all different versions of myths; 'mythemes' are thus the result of breaking down all the myths and analysing the relationship between functions and subject<sup>30</sup>. Lévi-Strauss used a two-dimensional notational system on which he organized the mythemes on one syntagmatic axis, that follows a narrative sequence of mythical events based on the context of the mythemes, and the other is a paradigmatic axis which represents semantic equivalence of the textual components. Lévi-Strauss came to the conclusion, by using this categorisation, that every myth has a core of four mythemes related by opposition or similarity<sup>31</sup>. Barthes considered myths to be a "second order semiotic system built on the principle of connotation"<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p.29

<sup>28</sup> W Nöth 1995.p.311

<sup>29</sup> P. Wheelwright, *Myth*, in Preminger, Alex ed., *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Princeton University Press, 1974, pp538-541, cited in W Nöth, *Handbook of Semiotics*, Indiana University Press, USA, 1995, p.374.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p.375

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p.376

### 3.1.1 Semantics

The word ‘semantic’ comes from the Ancient Greek, *sēmantikós*, meaning ‘significant’<sup>33</sup>. The discipline of linguistic semantics studies the meaning of words and how they can be combined to make the meaning of a sentence or phrase, in other words, the meaning in language. Meaning can thus be difficult to establish, as it depends on the circumstances in which it appears, like context for example; this is also the reason to why it is hard to generalize ‘meaning’ in studies. Palmer therefore argues the need for a distinction between what would be the “usual meaning of a word or a sentence and the meaning it has in certain specific circumstances”<sup>34</sup> (also see below re pragmatics).

The ‘signifier’ and the ‘signified’ were terms established by Saussure when describing language as an information system in which the meaning, the ‘signifier’ is the ‘form’ which the sign takes and the ‘signified’ is the ‘concept’ it represents<sup>35</sup>. Palmer argues that it could be a problem to institute the nature and relationship between the ‘signifier’ and the ‘signified’ and he therefore suggests the use of other definitions such as ‘denotation’ and ‘reference’ instead, where the former describes the class of persons, things- everything the word denotes, and the latter the actual persons, things, or in other words everything the word refers to<sup>36</sup>. This is useful when studying words and the meaning of words, and also when studying sentences. However, it is not without problems, as the ‘concept of minds’ also has to be considered. Ogden & Richards<sup>37</sup> describe this relationship as a triangle (see figure 1) in which the ‘reference’ or ‘thought’ is the strongest link between the ‘symbol’ and the ‘referent’. It is, in other words, the experience of importance that forms the relationship between linguistic and non-linguistic elements when interpreting words, regardless of whether one is a sender or a receiver of a message<sup>38</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> <http://global.britannica.com/search?query=semantic>

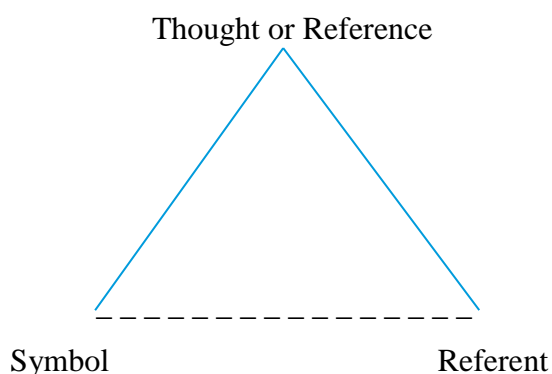
<sup>34</sup> F.R.Palmer, *Semantics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Cambridge University Press, Avon, 1981, p.8.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. pp.5

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p.18

<sup>37</sup> C.K. Ogden & I.A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning*, 10<sup>th</sup> ed., London, 1949, cited in F.R. Palmer, *Semantics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Cambridge University Press, Avon, 1981, p.24

<sup>38</sup> F.R. Palmer, p.29



(Figure 1)

Another important aspect is that all words have different ‘values of meaning’: one word could have several meanings, such as the word ‘present’, while other words could mean nothing or just have, as Sweet<sup>39</sup> explains them, a ‘grammatical’ meaning like the words *it, the, of*. Sweet describes these types of categories as ‘full’ words and ‘form’ words. The ‘full words’ have according to Sweet, the same type of meaning that can be found in dictionaries whilst the ‘form’ words have only a grammatical meaning and can be found in a dictionary<sup>40</sup>.

### 3.1.2 Pragmatics

The word ‘pragmatics’ originally comes from the Greek word *pragmatikos*, via the Latin word *pragmaticus* and can broadly be translated as ‘fit for action’<sup>41</sup>. ‘People do not always say what they mean’ might be an odd explanation of pragmatics, but it is what is said in the context that matters rather than in the actual words and this includes assigning sense to the words. Thomas describes pragmatics as something that “is not about meaning; it is about **making meaning**, about meaning potential and about showing how people negotiate meaning in interaction”<sup>42</sup>. It is intuitive to try to make sense of what is heard or read, but this does not automatically mean that the intended message will be understood, especially if it is not in the receiver’s native language. Even if it is possible to make sense of the words used in an utterance, there is no guarantee of understanding as a reference might be needed, such as a previous situation to which the speaker might refer. This essay will focus on pragmatics in

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<sup>39</sup> F.R. Palmer, pp.32

<sup>40</sup> Ibid

<sup>41</sup> Oxford Dictionaries [website] <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/>, accessed 3 December 2014.

<sup>42</sup> J. Thomas, *Meaning in Interaction- an Introduction to Pragmatics*, Longman Group Limited, London, 1995. p.183

relation to meaning in interaction, even if there are many other interesting aspects of pragmatics to consider, especially philosophical, but these lie outside the scope of this essay. This also means that meaning in interaction will be considered as a dynamic process between speaker and receiver/reader in which the context is also of importance.

Going from an abstract meaning of pragmatics to a concrete meaning of the same could be described as what, hypothetically, the speaker might mean in relation to what s/he actually means. The relationship between the abstract and the concrete meaning of pragmatics could be described as being the same as the relationship between what the speaker means in theory and what he/she actually says. Speaker-meaning consists of two components, known as ‘utterance meaning’ and ‘force’, the former being defined as ‘a sentence-context pairing’, which is the first component of speaker meaning<sup>43</sup>, and the latter as the speaker’s communicative intention<sup>44</sup>. These two components can enable the speaker’s meaning to be understood in part, with or without each other. This means, according to Thomas, that it is possible to understand utterance meaning but not force, force but not utterance meaning or understanding them both together or neither of them. An example of this, taken from Thomas, is when someone understands force but not utterance; “*The speaker is referring to the Swiss city of Geneva:* ”It’s a city where “The Bank along the river” has a different meaning than usual”<sup>45</sup>. In this example, it is not possible to understand the speaker’s intention unless simultaneously entertaining the two meanings of the word ‘bank’.

Austin was a philosopher, active during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century; he was also an eminent linguist and developed many concepts and theories regarding language structure and use, some of which were in collaboration with a group of other philosophers. The works of Austin were based on observations of ordinary people’s communication and the efficiency and relatively simplicity that came with this way of communicating<sup>46</sup>. It also led to the ‘performative hypothesis’ - Austin was of the view that most utterances have no truth conditions. This means that he considered most utterances to be actions rather than statements, a conclusion he came to through an analysis of ‘performative verbs’. An example of a performative verb can be ‘I quit’, as this, when uttered, also leads to action. A ‘performative verb’ is something that is neither true nor false, but is understood as an action. These performatives can be divided into metalinguistic- (self-referential), ritual-

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<sup>43</sup> J. Thomas, p.16

<sup>44</sup>Ibid. p.18

<sup>45</sup> J. Thomas, pp.17

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. p.29

collaborative-, felicity- or group-performatives<sup>47</sup>. According to Thomas, there is no satisfactory explanation today of how these can be used, but she finds the conclusion of how utterances perform actions important<sup>48</sup>.

Austin used the term 'speech act' to refer to an utterance which, in today's terminology, is the same as an illocutionary act. He claimed that all utterances can be said to have three dimensions, namely the illocutionary act, which is the force behind the words, locution is the actual word used in their syntax (which according to Austin is the simple encoding/ decoding of the utterance) and finally, perlocution, which is the effect of the illocution on the hearer/ receiver/ reader<sup>49</sup>.

### 3.1.3 Emoticons and Emojis

According to Encyclopaedia of New Media, "Emoticons (a contraction of the words "emotional icons") are glyphs used in computer-mediated communications and are meant to represent facial expressions"<sup>50</sup>. It is possible to type emoticons by using various combinations of the characters of the keyboard on a computer or a phone. It is also possible to download them as an application, from which the user can choose different iconic illustrations in order to be able to express emotional state or moods in a message. Emoticons can be, and often are, used to express emotion, emphasize a message or to express humor when communicating with friends. They are also more often used in a positive rather than a negative context<sup>51</sup>.

According to a study by Derks, Bos and von Grumbkow, emoticons are used in a comparable way to facial behavior in a face-to-face interaction<sup>52</sup>. The study also refers to results showing that emoticons have an impact on the interpretation of messages, this being achieved through emphasis and the possibility to express sarcasm<sup>53</sup>. Steinmetz writes about the way in which humans always communicated with images, referring to Egyptian hieroglyphs and Paleolithic cave drawings. She continues by saying that emojis have become

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p.32

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. p.49

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> <http://knowledge.sagepub.com/view/newmedia/n92.xml> search word emoticon

<sup>51</sup> D Derks, A.E.R Bos, & J von Grumbkow. 'Emoticons in Computer-Mediated Communication: Social Motives and Social Context, *Cyber Psychology & Behavior* [online journal] Volume: 11 Issue 1: February 14, 2008, p.99-102 <http://online.liebertpub.com/doi/abs/10.1089/cpb.2007.9926> 2008, p.99, accessed 3 December 2014.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> D Derks, A.E.R Bos & J von Grumbkow, 'Emoticons and Online Message Interpretation', *Social Science Computer Review* [online journal], Sage Publications., 5 August, 2008 vol. 26 no. 3, pp. 379-388, <http://ssc.sagepub.com/content/26/3/379.full.pdf> , accessed 3December 3, 2014.



“such a critical part of our hyperconnected exchanges that they are emerging a dialect all of their own”<sup>54</sup>.

Aragon *et al.*, through a study made on a scientific collaboration in a bilingual cross-cultural environment where chats were the primary method of coordinating scientific tasks for many hours a day<sup>55</sup>, testify that emoticons seem to function in the same way as facial cues and tone of voice do in face-to face communication

In contrast to emoticons, that are made up mainly of facial expressions in order to express emotion in messages, emojis are often pictographs-images of things such as facial expressions, holiday symbols, activities or animals, to mention but a few<sup>56</sup>. Emojis originally come from a certain set of icons designed by Shigetaka Kurita in 1995<sup>57</sup> and are downloadable to mobile phones. Nowadays, emojis do not have to ‘look the same’ (as they did when Shigetaka Kurita designed them) in order to be called an “emoji”. There are many different types of emojis and it is possible to download them to/for many different smartphones or computer operating systems

Appendices 2 and 3 contain examples of emojis that are downloadable to iPhones and Android phones respectively. Appendix 4 contains a list of the most commonly used emoticons.

#### 4. Data and Methodology

On ‘googling’ the phrase ‘understanding emojis’ or ‘understanding emoticons’, many of articles and essays can be found focusing on, for example, a computer mediated environment or communication. When searching academic library networks using the same search criteria, many articles are also available, one example of which is *The Communicative Functions of Emoticons in Workplace E-Mails* by Skovholt, Grønning and Kankaanranta. One

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<sup>54</sup> K. Steinmetz, ‘Not just a Smiley Face’, *Time* [online journal] Volume.184, Issue 4, pp.52-53, [http://ux4tp7xg6h.search.serialssolutions.com/?ctx\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&ctx\\_enc=info%3Aofi%2Fenc%3AUTF-8&rft\\_id=info:sid/summon.serialssolutions.com&rft\\_val\\_fmt=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:journal&rft.genre=article&rft.atitle=Not+Just+a+Smiley+Face&rft.jtitle=Time&rft.au=Katy+Steinmetz&rft.date=2014-07-28&rft.pub=Time+Incorporated&rft.issn=0040-781X&rft.eissn=2169-1665&rft.volume=184&rft.issue=4&rft.spage=52&rft.externalDocID=3425638611&paramdict=en-US](http://ux4tp7xg6h.search.serialssolutions.com/?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2004&ctx_enc=info%3Aofi%2Fenc%3AUTF-8&rft_id=info:sid/summon.serialssolutions.com&rft_val_fmt=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:journal&rft.genre=article&rft.atitle=Not+Just+a+Smiley+Face&rft.jtitle=Time&rft.au=Katy+Steinmetz&rft.date=2014-07-28&rft.pub=Time+Incorporated&rft.issn=0040-781X&rft.eissn=2169-1665&rft.volume=184&rft.issue=4&rft.spage=52&rft.externalDocID=3425638611&paramdict=en-US), pp.52, accessed 3 December, 2014.

<sup>55</sup> C.R.Aragon, N.C. Chen, J.F. Kroll & L.B. Feldman, ‘Emoticon and Text Production in First and Second Languages in Informal Text Communication’, *Computer Science* [online journal] Volume 8393, 2014, pp.223-228, [http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007%2F978-3-319-05579-4\\_27#page-1](http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007%2F978-3-319-05579-4_27#page-1) p.224, accessed 3 December, 2014.

<sup>56</sup> ‘FAQ- Emoji & Dingbats’, *Unicode.org* [website], [http://www.unicode.org/faq/emoji\\_dingbats.html](http://www.unicode.org/faq/emoji_dingbats.html), accessed 4 December, 2014.

<sup>57</sup> W. Pelegrin, ‘More than just a smiley face: 5 things you should know about emojis’, *DigitalTrends.com* [website], <http://www.digitaltrends.com/mobile/emoji-fun-facts/>, accessed 4 December, 2014.

can also find branch articles, such as *Apple Eyes More Diverse Emoji* by Mlot. Searches made simply with the word ‘emoji’ or ‘emoticon’ gives similar results. A description of the method and design will be introduced below, followed by an account as to how the participants were selected and, finally, an explanation of the way in which the study was executed.

The material will be analysed by putting the responses into a spreadsheet through which it will be possible to gain an overview and thus conduct a further analysis. When analyzing the results of this essay, it is from a perspective of ‘Relevance Theory’ and, by comparing the results with traditional theories within semiotics, as introduced above, conclusions will be drawn.

#### **4.1 Method and design**

This study is a macro-linguistic, in which a certain amount of data has been used in order to draw a broad conclusion in regard to the degree in which there is a universal understanding of emoticons<sup>58</sup>. Questionnaires will be used as a main source and this will, therefore, be a quantitative study. This method, of using questionnaires, has proven to be very useful for studies in which a diverse but representative range of people are needed to answer a number of questions<sup>59</sup>.

Dörnyei argues that a questionnaire is a highly structured ‘instrument’ through which specific options for answers and information are used and, because of this, it is suitable for statistical analysis<sup>60</sup>. In this questionnaire, there will be behavioural<sup>61</sup>, multi-choice<sup>62</sup> and open-ended questions that, according to Dörnyei, fulfill the requirement for this kind of study. Multi-choice questions will reveal personal information about the respondents and open-ended questions will leave room for illustrative quotes, clarification and interpretation that would not be otherwise possible.

The questionnaire (see appendix 1) is constructed to answer a variety of questions regarding how and why emoticons and emojis are used in messages and how they are interpreted in different contexts.

In order to refine the questions used in the questionnaire, a pilot study has been performed. The pilot study was performed with four students and four middle-aged persons

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<sup>58</sup> E. Dresner & S.C Herring *Functions of the Non-Verbal in CMC: Emoticons and Illocutionary Force*, Indiana University [website], 2010 <http://ella.slis.indiana.edu/~herring/emoticons.pdf> p.93, accessed 3 December, 2014.

<sup>59</sup> Z Dörnyei, *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2007 p. 115

<sup>60</sup> Ibid p.104

<sup>61</sup> ibid p.102

<sup>62</sup>ibid p.106

(45-65 years of age), answering the questionnaire and afterwards asked what they found unclear. Adjustments were made in accordance with their responses.

## 4.2 Respondents

The questionnaire was answered by 90 students, between the ages of 15 and 19, all of whom attend an inner city upper secondary school (called 'a gymnasium' in Swedish), which has total of 1,200 students. The school has eight national programs, which are preparatory for higher education, and two vocational programs<sup>63</sup>. The targeted group of students was chosen based upon access and probability of awareness and usage of symbols when communicating. All the students are from Stockholm, which could be regarded as a problem of representativity, but unfortunately it is not possible to do this differently, given the time available for this essay. In order to secure ethnic diversity, a group of students from the same school, who arrived in Sweden in the last two years, have also answered the questionnaires. It has also not been possible to secure a perfect gender balance in the answer ratio, as some students could not, for various reasons, participate. There were 47% female answers and 53% male answers. In Stockholm, there are 51% women and 49% men and, in 2010, there was an average of 21% of non-ethnic Swedish citizens<sup>64</sup>. In this essay, there are at least 18% confirmed non-ethnic Swedish citizens, who together with the gender cells, make the figures representative

The decision to use just this age group is based on the fact that these participants were available and willing to take part in the survey. When conducting a study on students under the age of 18, parental agreement is recommended. However, due to the time constraints, this was not possible for the purposes of this study. Nonetheless, much consideration has been given to ensure candour and anonymity of the participants. The study has been made according to CODEX' rules and guidelines for research in the humanities and social sciences, as established by The Swedish Research Council. These principles are based on four main prerequisites: the researcher has to inform the participants about the study; the participants may choose at any time to withdraw their participation; the participants need to agree to take part; and, finally, that the study will not be used for any purpose other than what has been agreed. The study is also conducted in confidence - no names or places will be used,

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<sup>63</sup> Skolverket, <http://www.skolverket.se/om-skolverket/andra-sprak-och-lattlast/in-english/the-swedish-education-system/upper-secondary-school/about>, accessed 5 December, 2014.

<sup>64</sup> Statistics Sweden, *Population Statistics/ Befolkningsstatistik*, [http://www.scb.se/sv/\\_Hitta-statistik/Etikettfilter/?tag=254](http://www.scb.se/sv/_Hitta-statistik/Etikettfilter/?tag=254) accessed, accessed 2 December, 2014.

in order to maintain the anonymity of the participants. As this study has followed these guidelines<sup>65</sup>, the headmaster of the school in which the participants are pupils, allowed the study to take place.

### **4.3 Execution of the study**

The students were informed about the purpose of the study. The questionnaires were handed out during lessons and the students were asked to stay as long as was needed to answer all the questions. The participants were also informed about the CODEX' rules and guidelines for research in the humanities and social sciences, as established by The Swedish Research Council. Thus, they were aware that their answers would be treated anonymously and that their headmaster had pre-approved the study. The study went as planned, with all questionnaires completed.

## **5. Results and Discussion**

The analysis of the answers in the questionnaires was entered into a spreadsheet and then analysed by dividing the respondents into different groups, according to gender and ethnicity. The reason for this was to increase the possibilities of identifying differences and/or similarities between gender and ethnicity, as in different cultural attitudes in the interpretation of emoticons and emojis. If there is a difference in the results of more than +/-5%, this has been highlighted. The results from the questionnaires are then analysed and recalculated into percentages. The purpose of recalculating the result is to make it more reader-friendly and to be able to understand the different responses within the questions. Using percentages to measure the differences also makes it possible to analyse variations between the groups, as the groups contained different numbers of participants. According to Dörnyei, it is preferable to combine the result with a theoretical discussion, as it “allows for an ongoing commentary and theoretical framing”<sup>66</sup>. The ‘Result and Discussion’ chapter will also be thematically divided below, in order to create a better overview.

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<sup>65</sup> Vetenskapsrådet *Forskningsetiska Principer* [website] <http://www.codex.vr.se/texts/HSFR.pdf> , accessed 14 December, 2014.

<sup>66</sup> Z. Dörnyei, 2007, p.284

## 5.1 Reasons and Qualifications for using emoticons/ emojis

In order to understand what the analysis of the results refers to, it is important to consider some underlying information about the respondents: **66 %** of the participants have an iPhone (different models) and have also the downloaded versions of emojis (see appendix 3), **19 %** have a Samsung (different models) and **11 %** a smartphone of a different brand. The iPhone owners all use downloaded emojis and, to a certain extent, emoticons, whilst the others, Android users, use emoticons and occasionally emojis (see appendix 4). **35 %** knew the difference between emojis and emoticons, but most of the participants preferred to refer to them as emojis.

The reasons for using emoticons/emojis are, in **70 %** of the cases, to make the text easier to understand. **24 %** of the boys, compared to **16 %** of the girls, stated that it is because it is quicker than using the actual word. According to these figures, emoticons/emojis are used as a deliberately, and in order to improve the understanding of a text and not as a quicker way of typing. According to Gunther Kress, the focus of sociolinguistics has moved from, for example, the exploration of dialects, social codes and issues and code switching, to become less abstract and with an increased tendency to integrate the linguistic with the social. Kress continues by stating that this move is for the purpose of representation and ‘making of meaning’ at all levels and all aspects<sup>67</sup>. The social codes can, therefore, and in this context, be explained as a need for making ‘meaning’ and making oneself understood rather than a social trend, as only **7 %** of the participants used emoticons/ emojis for the reason; ‘Because everyone else does’, as one of the students answered.

What we are trying to make more easily understood is as follows; **69 %** of the participants use emojis to express emotions and **20 %** because they ‘are fun’. Only **2 %** use them because they find it hard to use words. Kress states that the “verbal language is being displaced as a communicational mode by image, in many sites of communication: whether in schoolbooks, in the electronic media, and in the information and communication technologies in general”<sup>68</sup>. In this context, this means that young people are trying to express their emotions and trying to make themselves understood by using emoticons/ emojis. An emoticon/ emoji is used simply as an extension of the text or to emphasize the sentiment behind the text.

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<sup>67</sup> G. Kress, ‘Sociolinguistics and Social Semiotics’, in P. Cobley ed., *Semiotics and Linguistics*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005, pp.vii-326, <http://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/theory/Merrell-Peirce-on-sign-Routledge.pdf>, p.67, accessed 4 December, 2014.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

Kress states that the text informs the recipient and that the image provides more detail of the text, for example context<sup>69</sup>. In this context, emoticons/ emojis can be seen as the images to which Kress refers and his explanation thus clarifies why there is a need for a combination of text and image. This is important to keep in mind when discussing how many text messages are actually sent and received with or without emoticons/ emojis that are used to convey emotions or to make the message easier to understand. **50 %** of the participants answered that they send about **75 %** of their messages with emoticons/ emojis and **5 %** answered that they did not put them in at all. In other words, the vast majority use enhancers in the form of emoticons/ emojis in their messages and only **2 %** use emojis in all their messages. The number of received messages with emojis was about the same as number of sent messages. These results show that there are more messages sent and received with emoticons/ emojis than without.

## **5.2 Interpretation and meaning of emoticons/ emojis in context**

**70 %** of the students answered that they interpret the emoticon/ emojis differently, depending on who wrote the message. Theories of implicature attempt to explain the recovery of actual and intended meaning; foremost among these is Relevance Theory, which proposes that implicature is recovered through a process by which the greatest degree of understanding is achieved through the least effort.<sup>70</sup> The understanding is therefore of importance. By using Peirce's basic classifications for signs, icons, indices and symbols with implicature, it is possible to analyse the relations of a text message with text and emoticons/ emojis and the interpreter. Many of the respondents also answered the open question, asking why they interpret the same emoticon/ emoji differently depending on who send the message, with answers such as; "A message with an inside joke" and "If you are using inappropriate humour, you use different emojis than you otherwise do" or "Depending on if it is a close friend or not". This is where implicature comes into the analysis. The sender or receiver of a message relies on the context, in combination with the requisite pre-knowledge, in order to understand or make the message understood. In this case, the context is dependent on either an emoticon as a symbol or a feeling as an emoji. It is thus easy to understand the usage of different emoticons/ emojis, depending on by whom, when and how a message should be understood.

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<sup>69</sup> G. Kress, 2005, pp.68.

<sup>70</sup> D Sperber & D Wilson, 1987, pp.607

**71 %** of the answers indicate that the participants can interpret the seriousness of a message depending on the emoticon/ emoji included, whereas **17 %** say they cannot. Many of the answers refer to angry emoticons/ emojis (see appendix 1-3). There are many different versions of angry faces - everything from red faces, wrinkled brows, devils horn, etc. Therefore, when the sender decides to put one of these in their message, it is also a decision based on what s/he thinks represents anger, how s/he wants to be interpreted and, finally, how s/he thinks the receiver will interpret the level of anger, sarcasm or irony. This is also the reason **27 %** of the students ask a friend to either help them choose which emoticon/ emoji to add, or ask for help to interpret a message they have received. Connotation is what happens when the relation between the signifier and the signified is unclear, in other words when the cultural or emotional association of a word is not understood in its context. Denotation is the literal meaning of a signifier; in this case, it is the angry faces with different expressions and the signified is the 'level' of anger that is interpreted. Barthes argued that Saussure's model of the signifier and the signified aimed towards denotation at the expense of connotation<sup>71</sup>; in this case, Barthes' interpretation must be the more correct one as connotation actually takes place and should be given significance. The students either use the connotation deliberately, as a way of being vague, or they are confident that they are being being clear, as the signifier and the signified in their message makes sense to them. When they hesitate, some of them ask a friend.

There is also an adaption, depending on who receives the intended message. When responding to the question of whether emoticons/ emojis express different meanings depending on receiver of the message, **87 %** said that they do. **19%** send the same type of emoticons/ emojis to their friends as to their parents, while **73 %** do not. Palmer suggests the use of 'denotation' and 'reference', as opposed to 'signifier' and 'signified', by explaining denotation as everything that the words denotes, and reference as everything the word refers to. If using this perspective when interpreting the answer above, the result would be different than if using Barthes' perspective. If there is a connotation and the students are aware of this possibility, they would send different emoticons/ emojis to their friends from those they send to their parents. If using Palmer's perspective, where the reference replaces the signified, the angry emoticons/ emojis could refer to anything that is angry. This is why Ogden & Richards, who argued that 'the concept of mind'<sup>72</sup>, needs to be considered when using Palmer's terms.

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<sup>71</sup> D. Chandler *Semiotics for beginners* [website] <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/dutch/sem06.html> , accessed 28 December, 2014.

<sup>72</sup> C.K. Ogden & I.A. Richards, 1981, p.24

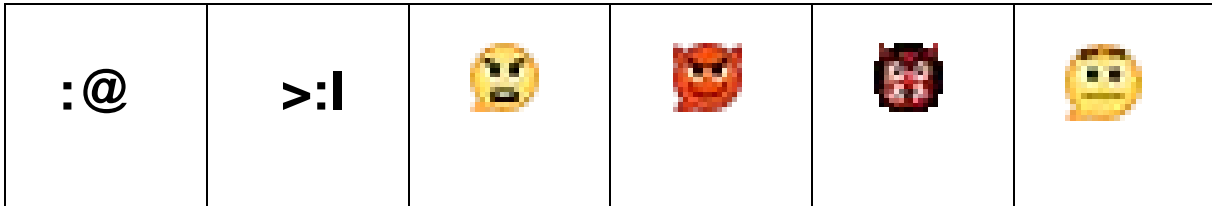
The authors say that the experience, which they call ‘thought’ or ‘reference’, is what forms the relationship between the symbol and the referent. In the context of this study, the different experiences that the sender has with the intended receiver of the message are of the essence, as it is on this that the sender bases her choice of emoticon/ emoji. A different emoticon/emoji would be chosen for a parent than for a friend, as a general rule, based on different joint experiences and expected pre-knowledge of the context in which this is put. As **44 %** of the students judge, or sometimes judge, a person depending on the emoticon/ emoji, it is important to get it right.

**5.3 Actual interpretation and (non-) contextual understanding**

The analysis of the respondents’ answers to what emoticon/ emoji they would use, or how they would interpret the sentence, including the emoticon / emoji revealed results that were extremely different.

In an open question about which mood the participants believed the sender was in when writing, there were many differences in the answers. ‘I miss you 😊’ was interpreted by **19 %** as a sarcastic sentence, **16 %** interpreted it as a friendly message in one way or another, whilst **26 %** interpreted the sentence as honest and sincere. The rest of the answers consisted of completely different interpretations of the mood of the sender as: happy, “stalkery”, joke, jerk, sometimes and so on.

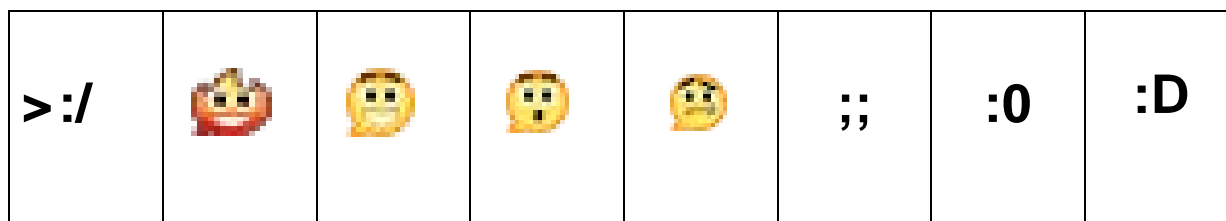
In answer to the questions in which the respondents were asked to finish a sentence with an emoticon/ emoji that would represent the given mood of the sender, the answers were even more varied. “If you are angry (in an angry mood) and send a text with the following statement; “You are late\_\_\_\_\_” (they were asked to fill in the emoticon/emoji on the line) a majority of **44 %** used an angry or disappointed emoticon/ emoji of some kind, e.g. in figure 2.



(Figure 2- emojis source- gmail)

The rest of the answers contained completely different emoticons/ emojis used, such as in, for example, Figure 3.





(Figure 3- emojis source- gmail)

The students were asked to indicate a mood and for that mood allocate what they believed to be the most appropriate emoticon. Their answers varied greatly. Thomas says that people intuitively try to make sense of what they read, but also that this does not automatically mean that they will understand the intended message<sup>73</sup>. By looking at the next question and answers, it is possible to scrutinize this further. The respondents were given a statement and an emoji that they were asked to interpret; if they could not answer, they were allowed to put a cross on the line. Examples of two statements had answers as follows ('≈' means the answers were of the same kind and '=' means the answers were identical) ;

**'I'm fine ❤️'**

17 % ≈ fine/ ok/ feel fine/ I'm fine

4 % = caring

7 % ≈ good/ feel good/ I am good

3 % ≈ grateful that you care/ that you care/ happy you care

1% = love

6 % = happy

3 % ≈ alright/ the person is ok

10 % ≈ as they meant it/ honest/ sincere

**'I'm fine 🍒'**

3 % = happy

21 % ≈ sick / bad/ not fine

4 % ≈ sick but take medicine/ drugs/ tablets

3 % ≈ drug problems/ drug addict/ addict

1 % = suicidal

3 % ≈ sarcastic/ ironic/ sarcasm

<sup>73</sup> J. Thomas, 1995, pp.183.

1 % = psycho

1 % = getting better

3 % ≈ fine but take medicine/ good but take drugs

The answers above are sometimes very different to each other, even if they often make sense in the context and very often mean almost the same thing. Thomas talks about meaning potential and says that, even if it is possible to make sense of an utterance, there is no guarantee that the interpreter of the message will understand the reference that was intended. In this case, the interpreters did not know any context at all: they were simply guessing. It was not an ongoing conversation in which they could interpret much from the context. According to Thomas, people in a conversation assign contextual sense intuitively and part of this is assigning meaning to the words. She goes on to explain the importance of assigning reference in context<sup>74</sup>. In the examples above from the students' answers, it was possible to ascertain that they could understand the word and the context of the words, but not the reference that was made. Two of the questions were phrased in exactly the same way ('I'm fine'), but different emoticons/ emojis were used. The students did not know the reference and hence could not do anything but guess. The conclusion to this is that it is of the essence to be able to assign contextual reference to the emoji in order to understand the context of the words in a text message.

We have seen that a message is in need of a reference to be correctly understood; we can also state that there is a difference as to which reference one is using depending on the receiver and hence the context that is established between sender and receiver. We can note that emoticons/ emojis are used to make the text easier to understand. Furthermore, it is evident that there is an awareness of how important the emoticon/ emoji that is put into the message is. On the question of how many emoticons/ emojis a message should include, the majority of the students, **81 %**, answered up to **4** emojis per message. In Britain, it is predicted that **300** billion IM's (Instant Messaging) and **125** billion SMS's (Short Message Service) were sent in 2014<sup>75</sup> and then there are about **6,000** tweets per second, which equates to **500** billion tweets per day around the world<sup>76</sup>. Considering the sheer volume of messages sent and the many different types of emoticons and emojis included in these

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<sup>74</sup> J. Thomas, 1995, pp.7

<sup>75</sup> L. Garratt & S. Poulter, 'Number of text messages being sent falls for the first time ever as more people turn to Whatsapp and iMessage', *Daily Mail online* [website] 13 January, 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2538488/SMS-takes-seat-IM-number-texts-sent-Britain-falls-time.html> , accessed 6 December, 2014.

<sup>76</sup>Internet Live Stats [website] <http://www.internetlivestats.com/twitter-statistics/> , accessed 6 December, 2014.

messages, it is obvious that many decisions and interpretations take place every second of the day. It is important to acknowledge this, not just because people might be misunderstood or misinterpreted, but because this might change the way we look at language and making sense. As people become more and more used to communicating via social media including Twitter, Facebook, IM and SMS, the degree of acceptance of what constitutes a conversation may well change.

The results show that the symbols, i.e. emoticons and emojis, are not interpreted in the same way by everyone: the interpretation, for example, of just one emoji ranges from sarcastic, humorous or friendly to sincere or hostile. With regard to the number of messages that are sent daily, it is very interesting that there is such wide discrepancy in interpretation.

Relevance Theory offers an explanation of the process that recovers meaning through implicature, whilst achieving the highest cognitive effect with the least effort. Inference is the full meaning that is received, including that which lies outside the literal meaning of the words used in their syntactic order. A message is dependent on this to make sense; Wilson and Sperber state that what establishes the intention behind a utterance is what they refer to as ‘the Principle of Relevance’<sup>77</sup>.

Implicature is of the essence of being able to understand the messages used in the different examples in this study. The results differed very much when the participants tried to understand the context in which an emoticon/ emoji was used. This indicates that the interpreter needs both a context and a reference, otherwise they must make assumptions as to what the sender of a message means with the emoji included after the text. There is, in other words, no such thing as a universal or individual understanding of the emoticons/ emojis in themselves, as they need not only to be put in a context of whole text, but also in a context of what is being communicated.

## **6. Conclusion**

On reexamining my son’s statement, I now realise that we use different emoticons/ emojis, depending on the context we have created with the person with whom we are communicating. My son has a different relationship to his friend’s mother than I do and, because of this, we use different ways to enhance what we are writing.

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<sup>77</sup> D. Sperber & D. Wilson, 1987,pp.697

By using Relevance Theory as a theoretical approach or reference point, it was possible to analyse the results to establish their significance. We are exposed to implicatures in every interaction we have, whether consciously or unconsciously. They occur when we speak and, as this study shows, they also occur when we write messages and that includes what we believe to be an innocent little symbol of an emoji/ emoticon. However, it does not always mean that we succeed: to be successful, we must have a context. Friends ask each other which emoji to include in a message, and they also ask for help in interpreting a message with an emoji that they find hard to understand, which accounts for the role of implicature as central to the process of achieving complete understanding.

The questionnaires supplied the necessary information needed to be able to analyse the importance of understanding emoticons and emojis and reach a general conclusion on their importance in textual communication. The purpose of this essay was to research whether or not there is a 'universal understanding' of the symbols used in text messages. The answer is: there is not. It was interesting, for example, that the symbol of a heart can indicate so many different phenomena, moods and emotions. The need for the ability to generate and recover implicature is more important than I had anticipated.

It is hoped that this study will make some small contribution to understanding the role played by emoticons and emojis both as signifiers, and as aids to generating desired implicatures, in our technological age.

This study has just scratched the surface. The subject is more far-reaching than I expected and there is a need of more research in order to further establish the implicature, interpretation and context within the use of emoticons and emojis in text messages. To compare different age groups would be a natural continuation of this study, but additional research is certainly needed for future understanding and language development.

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## Appendix I

### Questionnaire about the use of emoticons and emojis.

General information- tick or write your answers

<p>1) I identify my gender as:</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Female</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Male</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Neither</p>
<p>2) I am</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Between 15-25 years of age</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Between 25-35 years of age</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Between 35-65 years of age</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Over 65 years old</p>
<p>3) What type / model of phone do you have?</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>4) Have you downloaded emoticons/ emojis to your keyboard on the phone or do you 'type' them?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> I have downloaded them</p> <p><input type="radio"/> I type them</p>
<p>5) Do you know the difference between an emoticon and an emoji?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="radio"/> No</p> <p>What do you call these    ? _____</p> <p>What do you call these &lt;: / :-) &lt;3? _____</p>
<p>6) Why do you use emoticons/ emojis?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> I don't use them</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Because everyone else does</p> <p><input type="radio"/> To make the text easier to understand</p>



- Because it is quicker than writing the actual word

**7) In what way do you use emoticons/ emojis?**

- I don't use them
- to express emotions
- to enhance
- I find it hard to use words
- They are fun

**8) How many of the messages that you send include emoticons/ emojis?**

- No messages
- >25 %
- >50 %
- >75 %
- 100 %

**9) How many of the messages that you receive includes emoticons/ emojis?**

- No messages
- 25 %
- 50 %
- 75 %
- 100 %

**10) If you for any reason have no access to emoticons/ emojis, do you feel "frustrated" by not being able to express your emotions, sarcasm, anxiety or being annoyed?**

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes

**11) How many emoticons/ emojis can/ should a message include?**

- 0
- <4
- <5-10
- <11-20

**12) Is it important to include emoticons/ emojis in a message?**

- Yes
- No

**13) How do you interpret an angry message without an emoticon/ emoji as opposed to an angry message with an emoticon/ emoji?**

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**14) If you are.....? Draw to illustrate or explain with words**

- angry, what emoticon/ emoji do you use? \_\_\_\_\_
- happy, what emoticon/ emoji do you use? \_\_\_\_\_
- sad, what emoticon/ emoji do you use? \_\_\_\_\_
- are joking, what emoticon/ emoji do you use? \_\_\_\_\_

**15) Which emoticons/ emojis are your favorites? Draw to illustrate or explain with words**

**16) What emoticons/ emojis do you dislike? Draw to illustrate or explain with words**

**17) What type of emoticons/ emojis do you use- the ones in your phone or those that you have downloaded or typed?**

- Both the downloaded ones and the typed ones
- Only the typed ones
- Only the downloaded ones
- None of the above

**18) Do you use the illustrated emoticons/ emojis 🤔 or do you type, such as; :-P, :-)?**

- Both the illustrated ones and the typed ones (like 🤔 and :-P)
- Only the typed ones (like :-P)
- Only the illustrated ones (like 🤔)
- None of the above

**19) Do you sometimes find it hard to interpret what your friends mean when they use emoticons/ emojis?**

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes

**20) Do you ever send a message containing only emoticons/ emojis and no text?**

- Yes
- No

**21) Do you think there are enough emoticons/ emojis to choose from?**

- Yes
  - No
  - I miss emoticons/ emojis that describe; \_\_\_\_\_
- 

**22) How would you interpret these sentences? Honest, sarcastic, as if the person doesn't care, regretfully etc???**

- I miss you 😊 \_\_\_\_\_
- I miss you ❤️ \_\_\_\_\_
- I miss you 😞 \_\_\_\_\_
- I don't miss you 😊 \_\_\_\_\_
- Are you angry? ❤️ \_\_\_\_\_
- I might be late for the meeting 😞 \_\_\_\_\_

**23) Do you interpret the same emoticons/ emojis differently depending on who wrote the message?**

- Yes
- No
- I have never thought about it
- I don't use emoticons at all

**Why?** \_\_\_\_\_

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**24) Can emoticons/ emojis mean different things depending on who send you the message? (sibling, parent, partner, friend)**

- Yes
- No
- I have never thought about it
- I don't use emoticons at all

**25) Do you send the same type of emoticons/ emojis to your parents as you do to your friends?**

- Yes
- No
- I have never thought about it
- I don't use emoticons at all

**26) Is it important what type of emoticons/ emojis you include if you are angry, sad, happy etc?**

- Yes
- No
- I have never thought about it
- I don't use emoticons at all

**27) If you get an angry message, can you tell the seriousness of the message depending on the emoticon/ emoji?**

- Yes
- No
- I have never thought about it
- I don't use emoticons at all

**28) Have you ever asked a friend to help you interpret a message depending on the emoticon/ emoji?**

- Yes
- No

**29) Do you ever ask a friend which emoticon/emoji you should include in an important message?**

- Yes
- No

**30) What is the worst type of emoticon you would use? Describe in words or illustrate**

**31) Do you ever judge a person depending on the emoticon/ emoji s/he is using?**

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes

**32) Which emoticon/ emojis would you use for the following moods & messages?**

**If you are angry: You are late \_\_\_\_\_**

**What do you mean? \_\_\_\_\_**

**If you are sad?: I am just very sad \_\_\_\_\_**

**It is just too much \_\_\_\_\_**

**If you are happy?: Things are looking great \_\_\_\_\_**

**I feel great \_\_\_\_\_**

**If you are in love with the person you're texting?: You look amazing today \_\_\_\_\_**

**When can we meet? \_\_\_\_\_**

**If you pretend you are honest (ironic)? No, I am not angry \_\_\_\_\_**

**Green is your colour \_\_\_\_\_**

**If you are sarcastic: Yes, I am fine \_\_\_\_\_**

**No, I changed my mind \_\_\_\_\_**

**Of course I'll be there \_\_\_\_\_**

**33) Can you give examples of when it is hard to understand an emoticon/ emoji in a message and please illustrate if possible;**

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**34) How would you interpret the mood of the sender in the following messages? If you don't know, put a cross on the line.**

**I'm fine ❤️ \_\_\_\_\_**

**I'm fine 🍌 \_\_\_\_\_**

**I'm fine 🤖 \_\_\_\_\_**

**No, I am not angry ❤️ \_\_\_\_\_**

**No, I am not angry 😬 \_\_\_\_\_**

**No, I am not angry 🙌 \_\_\_\_\_**

**Can I ask you something? ❤️ \_\_\_\_\_**

**Can I ask you something? 😬 \_\_\_\_\_**

**Can I ask you something? 😬 \_\_\_\_\_**

**Did you really say that? 😬 \_\_\_\_\_**

**Did you really say that? 😬 \_\_\_\_\_**

**Did you really say that? 🤖 \_\_\_\_\_**

## Appendix 2

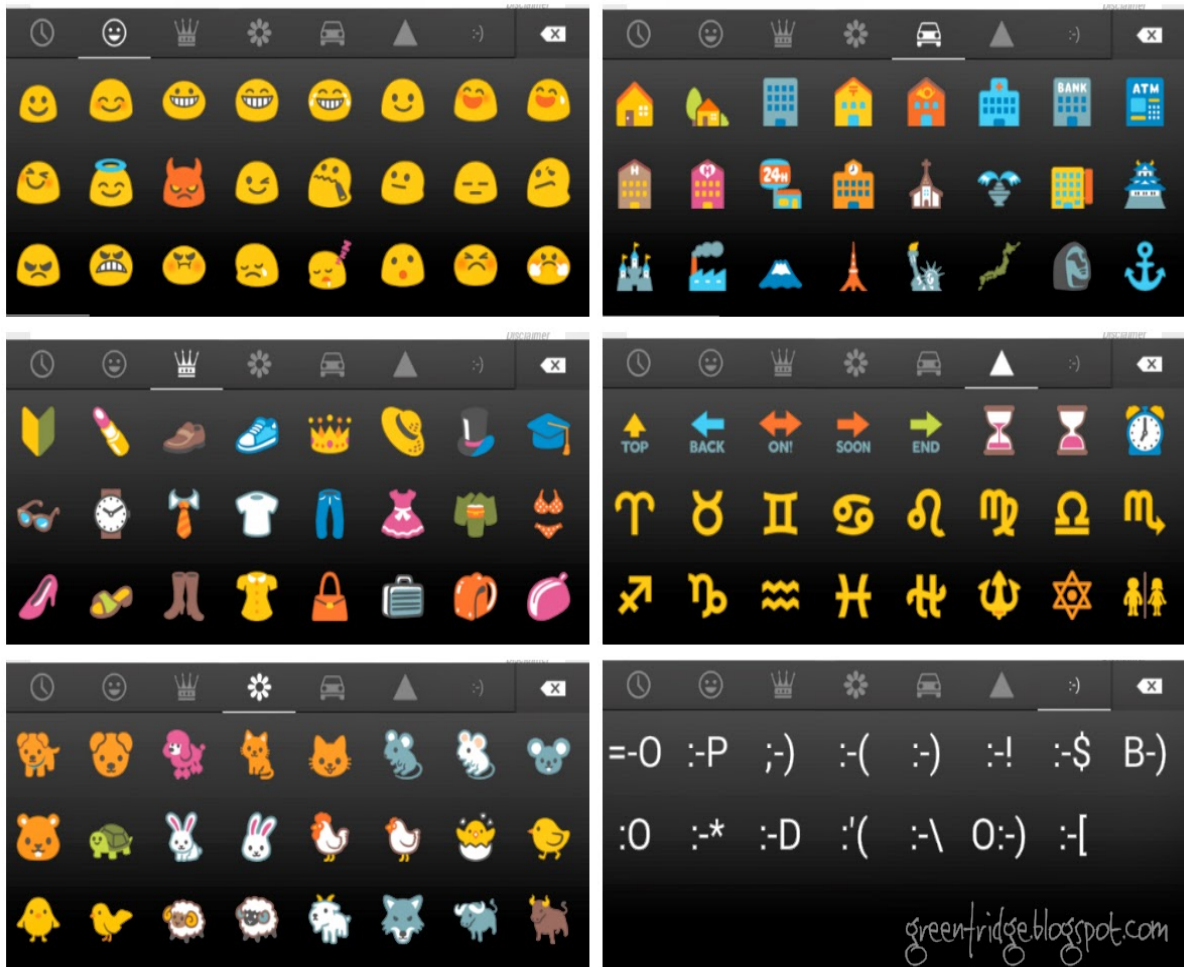
Emojis possible to download to I-Phone



Source: <http://inner.geek.nz/archives/2009/02/06/the-truth-about-iphone-emoji/>

### Appendix 3

Emojis possible to download to Android



Source : <http://forum.cyanogenmod.org/topic/98053-android-442-stock-emojis/>



## Appendix 4

### List of common Emoticons

<pre>:- ) :) :D :o) :] :3 :c) :&gt; =] 8) =) :} :^) :つ)</pre>	<p><u>Smiley</u> or happy face.<sup>[3][4][5]</sup></p>
<pre>:-D 8-D 8D x-D xD X-D XD =-D =D =-3 =3 B^D</pre>	<p>Laughing,<sup>[3]</sup> big grin,<sup>[4][5]</sup> laugh with glasses<sup>[6]</sup></p>
<pre>:-))</pre>	<p>Very happy or double chin<sup>[6]</sup></p>
<pre>&gt;:[ :- ( : ( :-c :c :-&lt; :   &gt;C :&lt; :-[ :[ :{</pre>	<p><u>Frown</u>,<sup>[3][4][5]</sup> sad<sup>[7]</sup></p>
<pre>;(</pre>	<p>Winky <u>frowny</u>, used to signify sadness, with a bit of sarcasm. It is easily misunderstood.<sup>[8]</sup></p>
<pre>:-   :@ &gt;:(</pre>	<p>Angry<sup>[6]</sup></p>
<pre>:'-( :'(</pre>	<p>Crying<sup>[7]</sup></p>
<pre>:'-) :')</pre>	<p>Tears of happiness<sup>[7]</sup></p>
<pre>D:&lt; D: D8 D; D= DX v.v D- ':</pre>	<p><u>Horror</u>, <u>disgust</u>, <u>sadness</u>, great dismay<sup>[4][5]</sup></p>
<pre>&gt;:O :-O :O :-o :o 8-0 O_O o-o O_o o_O o_o O-O</pre>	<p><u>Surprise</u>,<sup>[2]</sup> shock,<sup>[3][9]</sup> yawn<sup>[10]</sup></p>
<pre>:* :^* ( ' ){ ' )</pre>	<p>Kiss, couple kissing<sup>[6]</sup></p>

<pre>i-) ;) *-) *) ;- l ;] ;D ;^) :-,</pre>	<p><u>Wink</u>,<sup>[3][4][5]</sup> <u>smirk</u><sup>[9][10]</sup></p>
<pre>&gt;:P :-P :P X-P x-p xp XP :-p :p =p :-p̄ :p̄ :p̄ :- p̄ :-b :b d:</pre>	<p>Tongue sticking out, cheeky/playful,<sup>[3]</sup> <u>blowing a raspberry</u></p>
<pre>&gt;:\ &gt;:/ :-/ :- . :/ :\ =/ =\ :L =L :S &gt;.&lt;</pre>	<p><u>Skeptical</u>, annoyed, undecided, uneasy, hesitant<sup>[3]</sup></p>
<pre>:  :- </pre>	<p>Straight face<sup>[4]</sup> no expression, indecision<sup>[7]</sup></p>
<pre>:\$</pre>	<p>Embarrassed,<sup>[5]</sup> blushing<sup>[6]</sup></p>
<pre>:-X :X :-# :#</pre>	<p>Sealed lips or wearing braces<sup>[3]</sup></p>
<pre>O:-) 0:-3 0:3 0:-) 0:) 0;^)</pre>	<p>Angel,<sup>[3][4][9]</sup> saint,<sup>[7]</sup> innocent</p>
<pre>&gt;:) &gt;;) &gt;:-)</pre>	<p>Evil<sup>[4]</sup></p>
<pre>}:-) }:) 3:-) 3:)</pre>	<p>Devilish<sup>[7]</sup></p>
<pre>o/\o ^5 &gt;_&gt;^ ^&lt;_&lt;</pre>	<p><u>High five</u><sup>[10]</sup></p>
<pre> ;-)  -0</pre>	<p>Cool,<sup>[7]</sup> bored/yawning<sup>[9]</sup></p>
<pre>:-J</pre>	<p><u>Tongue-in-cheek</u><sup>[11]</sup></p>
<pre>:-&amp; :&amp;</pre>	<p>Tongue-tied<sup>[7]</sup></p>

#-)	Partied all night <sup>[7]</sup>
%- ) %)	Drunk, <sup>[7]</sup> confused
: -###. . :###. .	Being sick <sup>[7]</sup>
<:-	Dumb, dunce-like <sup>[9]</sup>
ಠ_ಠ	Look of disapproval <sup>[12]</sup> The Unicode character ಠ is from the <u>Kannada alphabet</u> and can be called differently in HTML notation: <code>&amp;#3232;</code> and <code>&amp;#x0CA0;</code> (for Unicode)
<*))) - { ><((( (*> ><>	Fish, something's fishy, <sup>[9]</sup> Christian fish <sup>[6]</sup>
\o/	Cheer "Yay, yay." <sup>[6]</sup>
*\0/*	Cheerleader <sup>[6]</sup>
@}-;-'- ---- @>--->---	Rose <sup>[3][9]</sup>

Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_emoticons](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_emoticons)

Caroline Kelly is working with students diagnosed with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder), and daily encounters situations which emphasise the importance of understanding each other and what to do to improve or be aware of the differences in understanding.



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