

The Semantics of Emojis and Memes: Understanding  
Meaning- Making Among Social Media Users.

T Francis

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**Abstract:**

There is no doubt that the use of emojis and memes within computer-mediated communication (CMC) on social media platforms like Facebook has become an essential part of how people communicate online (see Thurlow 2018; Thurlow and Jaroski 2020; Barbieri et al 2016; Bai et al 2019 and Thurlow and Dürscheid 2020). A lot of work has been done to study meaning related to emojis and memes and how they function within communication (see Deumert 2014; Zhu and Ren 2022; Lynch 2022 and Ljubešić and Fišer 2016). This current study advocates for a user-centric approach to understanding meaning-making. The strength of what I am proposing in my research is how to draw an analysis of meaning-making practices linked to the use of emojis and memes within CMC while allowing users to advocate for themselves from their perspectives. This current research unpacked how the average person on Facebook attached meaning to emojis and memes when they are selected and used to communicate online. The goal was to understand whether the meaning attached is shared and universal or if there was room for different modes of expression and meaning-making. The data collected for this research included quantitative survey data and qualitative interview data. Surveys were used as a starting point for conducting one-on-one interviews with a selected number of people who were open to being interviewed after completing the survey. The study concluded that different emojis and memes are used by different people, in different ways, however, the meaning attached to different emojis, and memes become universal over time when it is shared by people. The data provided evidence that universal and shared meaning occurs. However, within the same data, there was evidence to support that even though shared and universal meaning is happening, there is still room for different modes of expression online.

**Keywords:** social media, Facebook users, emojis, memes, computer-mediated communication (CMC), meaning-making, semiotics, multimodality, translanguaging, surveys and interviews.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

In the 21st century, communication has evolved in numerous ways. The advent of technology has enhanced language and communication, especially regarding social networking platforms (Androutsopoulos 2011; Thurlow 2018; Bock 2013; Deumert 2014 and Deumert and Makoni 2023). Many of these platforms work through various layers, such as time-space compression, and for this work, they serve as an expression of “emotions and feelings” through the deployment of multimodal artifacts (Rodrigues et al 2017 and Bai et al 2019). A case in point is that one of the most salient realities of these advancements is how emojis and memes have become ingrained in online communication (Alshenqeeti 2016; Kaye et al 2017; Highfield and Leaver 2016; Chaudhary 2022 and Zhu and Ren 2022). This aspect of social media communication becomes particularly interesting when one considers the dynamic ways in which language is perceived, understood, and used within the context of social media. Memes and emojis have become pivotal to how people communicate their experiences, thoughts, and feelings online. A fundamental aspect of these ideas is their contextualization within the broader politics of language in ways that consider “people’s experiences” (Severo and Makoni 2023: 109). In a similar fashion, this work advocates for a “radically contextualized perspective of language, for which the condition of production... “is derived from “people’s lives” (ibid: 109). In the coming sections, I expand on this approach with what I term ‘a user-centric approach’ where user’s experiences are foregrounded, as it is the core part of what this thesis aims to contribute to existing research. Another core contribution of this work is to show how language is fluid and dynamic and that understandings of language (s) as separate are problematic, which will be highlighted throughout the thesis.

In essence, this thesis aims to explore the experiences of Facebook users within the South African context by focusing specifically on how they attach meaning to, select, and use emojis and memes within their computer-mediated-communication (CMC) while allowing users to advocate for themselves from their respective perspective. Of importance to this work is to illustrate the value of how creativity finds expression in social media users. Even people outside social media talk about how the use of emojis and memes contaminates language; however, this is not the truth and will be validated throughout the thesis. There is no basis for this argument, and my data confirms it. It is a different and creative way of using language, which can be seen as it mirrors the same processes people use to acquire language. It is mirrored in how people acquire multimodal tools like emojis and memes and incorporate them into their

meaning-making. Of interest here is how the notion of experience holds the key to analyzing the mechanisms of language in practice and language as practiced. Following Severo and Makoni (2023: 110), this work considers a crucial factor in terms of how experiences:

Allows us to broaden the concept of language inscribed in the meaning-making process of personal experiences connected to real-life social practices...[grounded in the] everyday experience of the real world.

In the quote above, the authors highlight an approach to the study of language and meaning-making based on personal experience, which is grounded in the everyday lived experiences of people. This approach to language and the study of language, highlighting peoples' lived experiences is echoed by Deumert and Makoni (2023: 109), when the authors propose a "southern perspective of language (s)...based on personal experiences". As argued by Deumert and Makoni (2023: 114):

The concept of experience matters since it allows us to broaden the concept of language inscribed in the meaning-making process of personal experiences connected to real-life social practices.

What is significant in the above is how experience holds importance for how language practices can shed light on meaning-making. For this work, it is also important to marry these ideas to crucial notions, namely *semiotics* and *multimodality*. In the context of this work, language is understood in its broadest sense. In terms of creative and ludic expressions, it fully captures the rhythm with which language has evolved. There has been extensive research on social media use and how it has contributed to the dynamic ways in which language is perceived, understood, and used (Barbier et al. 2016; Highfield and Leawer 2016; Zhu and Ken 2022 and Alshenqeeti 2016). This avenue of inquiry becomes quite interesting when such questions arise in a multilingual context where different language speakers engage in the same social media platforms. Of importance is to discern whether they use the same interpretation when reading emojis and memes as part of their linguistic repertoires. This becomes more intriguing when considering the well-established and common facts of how recent years have seen the continued dominance of English (Kamwangamalu 2016 and 2019) and whether this spreads to how social media practices unfold remains an intriguing prospect. For instance, there is a growing interest in seeing how African indigenous languages fare in media and social media. For example,

recent studies have focused on indigenous languages in the media through the lens of decolonization (see Mpofu et al 2023). At the same time, Mgogo and Nokutywa (2023) focus on analyzing the use of emojis among isiXhosa speakers. The above studies foreground the broad reading of language embraced in this work while exploring the question of indigenous languages, even though this is not the concern of this work. However, these are important in reading the complexities of language (s) and their contribution to the social life of speakers in social media.

Put differently, this work situates itself within the broad tradition of multimodality scholarship. What Thurlow and Dürscheid (2020) refer to as an approach that attends “to the way different modes interact (or not) in different digital texts and contexts” (2020: 1). This thesis also immerses itself in shining the spotlight “on understanding the particular role of visual communication in (or about) these digital media platforms as a way to better understand how linguistic and communicative practices are multimodally accomplished (ibid). Unlike other studies that have explored how registers and styles have been deployed in shorthand messaging. For example, Bock (2013) explored how cyber socializing youth achieved intimacy and multiple identities through language. The value of her study is on the idea of intimacy and how it is understood and articulated. This work looks at how users de-code the meaning and the use of emojis. As will be seen in this thesis, emojis play a pivotal role in how meaning is established. Velghe (2014) notes how the advent of mobile phones influences language and relationships. The author mentions how these developments permit:

New communicative environments create ‘new channels of communication, new linguistic and cultural forms, new ways of forming and maintaining contact (Velghe 2014).

As it is commonly known, the increasingly multi-media and inherently multimodal nature of digital communication brings forth many challenges and perspectives. For language purists, these developments taint language. Thurlow and Jaroski (2020: 43) explore specifically how “digital discourse: the perceived threat to language posed by visual communication and, specifically, emojis.” Even though this is not the point of this thesis, what is essential is to draw attention to how multimodality and emojis are perceived. This thesis follows Jones (2020:19) by attending to the “ways people make and construe meaning with visual signs.” This is done by inviting users to articulate how they construe meaning from the visual

representation of emojis and memes. The posture assumed above illustrates that this work takes a southern and decolonial stance in how language users are given a voice to articulate their understanding of what they are doing. This is both a methodological and a theoretical position (see Severo and Makoni 2023) in that it informs not only how data is gathered but how it is analysed, and how participants' voices are captured and represented.

From the above, it has been implied that language is viewed as a messy process of high dynamism. Therefore, the notion of *translanguaging* in the sense of Makalela (2016) and others is relevant to account for creative and agency-informed ways of viewing language. In the next section, I unfold the idea of translanguaging as a viable lens to understand how emojis and memes are devices that complicate narrow understandings of language, its structure, and its use. As mentioned above, a lot of what is unpacked in this work was achieved through adopting a user-centric approach. The main argument was centered around unearthing if the meaning attached to emojis, and memes online are universal among users or if there was room for different modes of expression online and which language (s) are dominant. The goal was to understand how meaning-making happens for people who speak different languages and come from different backgrounds. The focus was on their descriptions and interpretations of emojis and memes in online posts or messages. This current research contributed to an existing body of academic knowledge on the use and function of emoji and memes on social media platforms and research on CMC, semiotics, multimodality, intertextuality, and translanguaging. What this research did differently, and the strength of the study, was a focus on how the average person who uses emojis and memes within their CMC attaches meaning to, selects, and uses multimodal semiotic resources within their online communication and, secondly, how these people would go about describing their meaning-making when prompted to do so. Much of similar research relies on online corpus and surveys (e.g., Highfield and Leaver 2016; Chaudhary 2022; Van Selm and Jankowski 2006; Carbonaro et al 2002 and Boyer et al 2002) while this work also includes reflections and perspectives of users.

Data was collected in two phases: an online survey and one-on-one interviews. The specific questions guiding data collection were directed at unearthing whether the meaning attached to emojis, and memes online is universal or if there is room for different modes of expression online. In phase one, the data collection was focused on inviting participants to participate in my research using a public Facebook post with a direct link to the survey. In the survey,

participants were asked to de-code and describe what different emojis and memes meant from their perspective. Phase two of the data collection was one-on-one interviews with survey respondents who agreed to a follow-up interview to discuss their survey responses. The data was presented and analysed using a thematic analysis. The analysis was supported using the collected data, which was weaved together with academic sources and research to support my argument for the need for a user-centric approach.

## Chapter 2 - Framing the Research

### 2.1. Introduction

In the 21st century, emojis and memes have become ingrained in online communication. This aspect of social media communication becomes particularly interesting when one begins to unpack the dynamic ways in which language is perceived, understood, and used within the context of social media. The use of emojis and memes within online communication has become integral to how people communicate their experiences, thoughts, and feelings online. This dissertation is aimed at exploring the experiences of Facebook users within the South African context by focusing specifically on how they attach meaning to, select, and use emojis and memes within their computer-mediated-communication (CMC) while allowing users to advocate for themselves from their perspective ends, by adopting a user-centric approach. My main argument is centered around unearthing if the meaning attached to emojis and memes online is universal among users, or if there is room for different modes of expression online and which language (s) are dominant.

The goal is to understand how meaning-making happens for people who speak different languages and who grew up differently, based on how they would describe what emojis and memes meant to them when they used them to construct online posts or messages. This current research aims to contribute to an existing body of academic knowledge on the use and functions of emojis and memes on social media platforms and research on CMC, semiotics, multimodality, intertextuality, and translanguaging. What this research did differently, and the strength of my study, was a focus on how the average person who uses emojis and memes within their CMC attaches meaning to, selects, and uses multimodal semiotic resources within their online communication and, secondly, how these people would go about describing their meaning-making when prompted to do so.

Data was collected in two phases: an online survey and one-on-one interviews. The specific questions guiding data collection were directed at unearthing whether the meaning attached to emojis and memes is universal, or if there is room for different modes of expression online. In phase one, the data collection focused on inviting participants to participate in my research using a public Facebook post with a direct link to the survey. In the survey, participants are asked to de-code and describe what different emojis and memes mean from their perspective.

Phase two of the data collection was one-on-one interviews with survey respondents who agreed to a follow-up interview to discuss their survey responses. The data will be presented and analysed using a thematic analysis. The analysis will be supported using the collected data, which will be weaved together with academic sources and research to support my argument for the need for a user-centric approach.

In the following sub-sections, I frame this research within literature that focuses on emojis and outline the evolution of emojis as it relates to semiotics and multimodality, the research objectives, and the specific questions that guide this current research. Sub-section 2.2 frames the research as an ubuntu translanguaging project; 2.3 gives a brief background on the evolution of emojis, semiotics, and multimodality. Sub-section 2.4 outlines the research objectives. Sub-section 2.4 outlines the research questions.

## **2.2. The Ubuntu Translanguaging Project:**

The framing of this research takes inspiration from Makalela's (2016: 191) approach to the study of African languages, defined as "ubuntu translanguaging," and Blommaert's (2005:3) definition and view of discourse. Ubuntu translanguaging can be viewed as a decolonial approach to the study of language, grounded in how language is used as an act of performance by speakers, based on what people are doing with language. This is outlined in the text by Makalela (2016: 187), when the author highlights how the "ubuntu" perspective is an approach to the study of African languages and multilingualism that "emphasises what speakers do with the languages, rather than what the languages look like." It is an approach to the study of African languages grounded in what people are doing with language in different contexts in society; the focus is on how languages are used in society. The Ubuntu translanguaging approach includes a consideration for different modes of knowledge production and meaning-making, this is also central to this research. This is because it is an approach to the study of language and meaning-making that considers alternative ways of seeing and experiencing the world, grounded in the everyday experiences of people. Makalela (2016: 191) frames the approach as follows:

Ubuntu translanguaging shifts the gaze from language divisions to complex repertoires that are fluid in everyday meaning-making interactions.

In the quote above, the author describes how the ubuntu approach to studying language is grounded in daily meaning-making practices that happen when people communicate. This is further emphasised when he argues how the “application of translanguaging in the context of ubuntu practises (ie, ubuntu translanguaging) provides policy makers with a cultural measure to question the validity of language boundaries and redraw the linguistic map from a fluid position... to account do simple to complex multilingual encounters” in society (Makalela, 2016: 190). The quote allows one to see the link between language and culture in society and secondly, how the different approach to language and meaning allows for meaning-making linked to emoji and memes to be highlighted. Ubuntu as a social and cultural African practice becomes the foundation for the study of complex multilingual practices of which the study of emoji and memes are a part of. This is further emphasised by Sefotho (2022: 12) when the author argues that “the principle underpinning Ubuntu translanguaging, is that one language is incomplete without the other”, which is what the approach is built on. This can be extended further, to include meaning-making and use of emoji and memes (as it is a form of meaning-making linked to language) present on social media platforms explored in this research, a social semiotic approach to the study of language and meaning-making.

The ubuntu approach can be linked to Blommaert’s (2005:3) definition of discourse, as the similarities between the different perspectives focus on meaning-making. As argued by Blommaert (2005:3), “discourse comprises all forms of meaningful semiotic human activity seen in connection with social, cultural, and historical patterns and developments of use”. Here, discourse is defined as anything and everything humans do in society in which meaning-making happens socially, culturally, and historically in different contexts. From this perspective, emojis and memes can be viewed as meaningful only because they are used by human beings within their communicative practices when meaning is attached to them by people. Emojis and memes, the configuration of signs and symbols, have no meaning if they are not used by human beings in communication to represent their lived experiences, socially and culturally, within history. Humans give meaning to semiotic imagery that would be meaningless if human beings did not attach meaning to it in society. This view and focus on meaning-making practices and discourse exemplified by the everyday lived experiences of people will be used to frame this current research as a user-centric approach. These ideas will be linked to this current research by drawing analysis on meaning-making practices linked to emojis and memes within computer-mediated communication (CMC) within the South African

context, allowing users to advocate for themselves from their perspective. This is done by assuming a user-centric approach to bring research participants into dialogue with scholars as co-producers of knowledge with voice and agency to say how they construct meaning for themselves. The discussion and notions above are relevant to this work in terms of how they stretch an understanding of language as creative, rich, and dynamic.

### **2.3. The evolution of ‘language’: multimodality and emojis.**

The extensive research on the contributions of multimodality to understanding has illuminated the significance of how dynamically language is understood (see Thurlow 2018; Bock 2013; Deumert 2014; Barbieri et al 2016; Bai et al 2019; Highfield, and Leaver 2016; Zhu and Ren 2022; Ljubešić and Fišer 2016). Of course, this becomes significant and richer when such discussions arise in multimodal contexts. The key is how languages are engaged in social media. The crucial point of this is to discern whether these interpretations use similar or different tools of interpretation as part of their linguistic arsenal. Kamwangamalu (2016; 2019) has bemoaned the continued dominance of English despite efforts to promote multilingual practices and equality of languages. Part of the concern of this work is to understand if such realities are mirrored in social media practices. Recent studies have pointed out that despite the spread and power of English, there is a keen interest in African indigenous languages in media as sites for exploring the richness and depth of the deployment of emojis. This is demonstrated in the study by Mgogo and Nokutywa (2023), who analyse how isiXhosa speakers utilize emojis. This study considers how isiXhosa speakers embrace the evolving ways language and meaning can be expressed. My focus here is on the complexities and the evolution of language in line with the developments of technology and social media practices. So, this work enters the debate within the broad tradition of multimodality scholarship that considers and views language as multilayered, creative, and complex. Such approaches view language not as static but as a fluid and continuously evolving. This is the point emphasised and captured by Thurlow and Dürscheid (2020: 1), who put forth how this approach attends “to the way different modes interact (or not) in different digital texts and contexts.” This is important here as it illustrates how this work immerses itself in shining the spotlight on understanding the particular role of visual communication in (or about) these digital media platforms as a way to better understand how linguistic and communicative practices are multimodally accomplished (ibid: 1). By way of emphasis, this work differentiates itself from

studies that have explored how registers and styles have been deployed in shorthand messaging by considering a crucial fact, namely, how users themselves view and understand what they do. Such things were also attended to in Bock (2013) for example. The study looks at issues of intimacy and identity in the cyber socialising of the youth. Language played a role in how the youth assumed different identities using language. Relevant here is how users decode the meaning and the use of emojis. As will be seen in this thesis, emojis play a pivotal role in how meaning is established. I have also mentioned how mobile phones and social media practices have influenced language and relationships, especially when looking at issues of intertextuality, semiotics, and multimodality (e.g., Velghe 2014). The focus is on how these developments permit “new communicative environments, create new channels of communication, new linguistic and cultural forms, new ways of forming and maintaining contacts” (Velghe 2014). As it is commonly known, the increasingly multi-media and inherently multimodal nature of digital communication brings forth many challenges and perspectives. For language purists, these developments taint language as they are perceived to ‘corrupt language.’ Suggested here is how there seems to be a perception of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ language. Thurlow and Jarwoski (2020:43) pursue this point by paying particular attention to how digital discourse is stigmatised as ‘linguistic pollution.’ Even though this is not the point of this thesis, what is essential is to draw attention to how multimodality and emojis are perceived. In the previous section, I mentioned how this work also finds inspiration from Jones (2020: 19) by considering the “ways people make and construe meaning with visual signs.” To pursue this line of thought, this thesis invited users to articulate how they construe meaning from the visual representation of emojis and memes. This will be expanded on in the analysis chapter. In what follows, I unfold the idea of a user-centric approach as a viable lens through which to understand how emojis and memes can be understood.

#### **2.4. Towards a User-Centric Approach:**

This research assumes a user-centric approach to bring research participants into dialogue with scholars as co-producers of knowledge with voice and agency to say how they construct meaning for themselves. Emojis and memes have become integral to communicating online on different social media platforms like Facebook. It is hard to imagine what communicating online would look like without the use of emojis and memes. This focus on using emojis and memes within online communication has been popularised in academia as CMC (see Thurlow 2018; Thurlow and Jarwoski 2020; Barbieri et al 2016; Bai et al 2019 and Thurlow and

Dürscheid 2020). Since the rise of the internet, a wealth of academic literature has developed to try and understand what emojis and memes are, what they mean, how they function within CMC, and why it could be harmful within communication (Alshenqeeti 2016; Barbieri et al 2016; Bai et al 2019; Kaye et al 2017; Highfield and Leaver 2016; Mostafavi and Porter 2021; Chaudhary 2022; Zhu and Ren 2022; Lynch 2022; Ljubešić and Fišer 2016; and Thurlow and Jaroski 2020). A key thread, among many, is how emojis and memes can serve as substitutes for emotion and facial expressions that often characterize face-to-face interactions.

True to its essence, such expressions operate to compress distance, time, and space through technology as mediums to articulate these. To contextualise this research, it needs to be highlighted as a historical continuation of developments in the use of multimodal semiotic resources like emoticons, memes, and the language used within meaning-making practices on different social media platforms (see Bock 2013; Deumert 2014; Barbier et al. 2016 and Bai et al 2019). There is a history of developments of language use and semiosis across different social media platforms from the traditional SMS to Mxit, and in the 21st century, a variety of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Weibo, and Tik-Tok (see Bock 2013; Deumert 2014; Barbieri et al 2016; Bai et al 2019; Highfield and Leaver 2016; Zhu and Ren 2022; Ljubešić and Fišer 2016). Such evolutions carry implications for language and meaning-making.

Emojis and memes are a common thread within linguistic developments on the internet and social media culture. This can be seen in the semiotic and linguistic developments popularised within the internet culture, from emoticons and textspeak in traditional SMS to Mxit language and emojis, to how it is used in the 21st century on different social media platforms. This can be seen when one traces this development within the existing literature. More specifically, the traditional “short message service (SMS)...in 2004”, referred to as “SMS language,” which consisted of emoticons constructed using keyboard symbols, like :) (a smiley face) (Geertsema et al., 2011: 475). This construction of emoticons within SMS’s can be viewed as the basis for emojis. This is because emojis developed and became more detailed when being used on digital platforms like “Mxit, a South African mobile instant messaging service” (Deumert, 2014: 23). This is important as it indexes language development and the use of multimodal semiotic resources within online communication on different social media platforms. As stated by Bock (2013: 70), “Mxit was developed in 2005” and consisted of a specific type of language use which became referred to as “textspeak,” “textese,” or more commonly known as Mxit

language (Bock, 2013: 68). A key focus in both readings is the use of alternative shorthand/abbreviated language, the presence of emoticons within communication on different social media platforms and the developments of language use and technology as interconnected processes of which the use of emojis and memes by Facebook users are a part of.

There has been substantial research on using emojis and identity formations online, as seen above. Deumert (2014: 24) looked at how identities were constructed online through “ludic self-construction in new media contexts,” which is the playful way users can create different personas on digital platforms. In other words, it is about how people can “relate to” each other in a “playful manner.” Much more recently, the use of emojis has received more attention among scholars. Ljubešić and Fišer (2016:82) looks at the popularity of emoji usage worldwide. The authors do so to research the use and “global distribution of emojis” by analysing “17 million geo-coded tweets” on a global scale. Piotrowska (2022: 9) zooms in on the South 17 “African context specifically” by focusing on online communication during Covid-19 when digital platforms were growing for communication. It is perhaps Mabokela et al (2023: 115) that comes closest to the angle taken here when arguing that “sentiment analysis is a branch of natural language processing (NLP) that studies the emotion (opinions or attitudes) of text” to determine how users create meaning. This is a specific form of analysis of language use that focuses on the emotions, opinions, and attitudes present within language use as it relates to the meaning-making practices of the individuals who use it. This notion comes closest in the research, as there is a focus on highlighting the emotions and attitudes within processes of meaning-making from the user’s perspective. Most studies tend to rely on or assume an interpretation of emojis from a generic understanding of how social meaning develops and circulates. This is linked to this current research; however, the existing research on emojis and memes has yet to centre users’ perspectives by highlighting the average person on the ground who uses emojis and memes when communicating with other people daily. The strength of what I am proposing here is how to draw an analysis of meaning-making practices linked to using emojis and memes within CMC in the South African context through user agency. This is done by unpacking how average people on Facebook who speak different languages and come from different backgrounds attach meaning to emojis and memes, when they select and use them to communicate online. This work assumes a reflective stance to augment the voices and perspectives of users by allowing their voices to contribute as co-producers of knowledge.

## **2.5. Research objectives:**

The research objectives are geared towards unpacking how social media users in the South African context perceive and interpret their practices of using emojis and memes on Facebook. The study advocates for a user-centric approach to understanding meaning-making, in which users play a central role. The strength of what I pursue is drawing an analysis of meaning-making practices linked to the use of emojis and memes within CMC through user agency and voice. This research unpacks how people on Facebook attached meaning to emojis and memes when they are selected and used to communicate online. The objective is to understand whether the meaning attached is shared and universal or if there is room for different modes of expressions and meaning-making. A specific focus is paid to how Facebook users attach meaning to, select, and use emojis and memes, which 'languages' dominate within this context, and if the meaning is shared/universal or if there is room for different modes of expression online.

## **2.6. Research questions:**

The research questions guiding this thesis tilt towards understanding how Facebook users interpret and perceive their multimodal semiotic resources when they use emojis and memes. The specific research questions that guide this research are:

- How does an average person attach meaning to, use, and select emojis and memes online?
- Is the meaning of emojis and memes universal? Is it context-dependent? Is shared meaning happening? Or is there room for different modes of expression?
- Which languages are dominant on social media platforms? Are people more comfortable using their mother tongue/languages other than English in online interactions?
- Is multilingualism present and celebrated online? Does the use of emojis and memes aid this?
- Can the use of emojis and memes be considered a language in its own right? Or does it derive from language?

## **Chapter 3- Theoretical framework**

### **3.1 . Introduction**

In this section, I present some key theoretical concepts that relate to the scope of this thesis. Namely, CMC, translanguaging, semiotics, multimodality and intertextuality, with a special focus on how they are interconnected within online communication on social media. This will be unpacked in sub-section 3.1 and sub-section 3.2 contains some of the key definitions of terms relevant to this work.

#### **3.1.a CMC**

CMC is any form of communication between humans that occurs due to using multiple electronic devices like cell phones and computers to share images, videos, and text messages on the internet and social networking applications (see Alshenqeeti 2016; Barbieri et al 2016; Bai et al 2019 and Kaye et al 2017). Since the rise of the internet, a wealth of academic research has developed to grow a corpus of knowledge about the presence of signs and symbols (semiosis), like emojis and memes, among others, within CMC on different social media platforms. This becomes evident when one reviews the literature published within academia within the last seven years, focusing specifically on how the research was conducted. For example, Barbier et al. (2016) explore emojis in the context of Twitter by analysing how Twitter users utilise emojis within their tweets. Highfield and Leawer (2016: 1-5) look at “visual social media,” also referred to as “image-based content” like “memes, gifs, selfies, emojis and videos” online on different social media platforms like “Instagram, Vine, Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr.” Likewise, Bai et al (2019:1) focus on the use and development of emojis within “CMC” within the existing literature. Chaundhary (2022) highlights the rapidly growing use of emojis and memes within text messaging as the “visual language of communication.” The main argument made by the author is on tracing similarities between “comics,” “memes,” and “emojis” within text messaging between people (Chaundhary 2022). This draws attention to the evolution of multimodal practices, their intersection with written scripts, and the role this plays in meaning- making. Zhu and Ren (2022: 69) research the use, patterns, and functions of memes and emojis on a Chinese social media application known “as Weibo,” by looking at the presence of emojis and memes within compliments between people on the application. The above-mentioned scholarly contributions form examples of academic research developed to

study emojis and memes within CMC on different social media platforms online.

An important point to highlight here is how literature and scholars interested in semiosis within CMC first studied emojis only (see Alshenqeeti 2016; Barbieri et al 2016; Bai et al 2019 and Kaye et al 2017). For example, Alshenqeeti (2016: 56) conducts research in which the focus is to explore whether the use and evolution of emoji is the creation of a “new language...[or if it devalues] existing language”. Here, the focus is on whether emoji use, development, and evolution in the 21st century can be considered a new language or a part of the evolution of language use. The focus is on how meaning is attached to emoji within communication, however, there is no focus on people or the everyday specifically. Barbieri et al. (2016: 3967) make an argument categorising and comparing the ways in which Twitter users use emojis, to create a database of emojis known as “Unicode Consortium,” which attempts to standardise the meanings attached to emoji, based on what it might mean when people use it on Twitter. However, again, there is a focus on what different emojis mean without interacting with Twitter users. Instead, the conclusions drawn are based on observation and assumption. Likewise, Bai et al (2019: 1) conducted a literature review of the literature that has developed on the use of emojis online, from the use of the first emoji and how it developed and filtered into other “visual symbols” over time (semiotics and multimodality).

The focus of the paper is on the creative ways in which people communicate in contexts where there is a lack of non-verbal cues in CMC. However, once again, there is no focus on how people perceive their own use of emojis online. This is significant as it allows me to highlight the need for a user-centric approach within academic research, as argued in the previous section. Similarly, Kaye et al (2017) conducted psychological research, highlighting how the use of emojis online has led to more comprehensible and clearer communication. The research is interesting as it focuses on how emojis can be used online to understand modern human behaviour and communication. This is important as it allows one to see how there was first a focus on emoji only, without bringing other forms of semiotic resources into the discussion. It was only later that the study of memes was popularised and researched. Then study of memes became popularised (see Laineste and Voolaid 2016). Lastly, scholars interested in language and communication more broadly were focused on studying the presence of visual aids within online interactions, placing emphasis on both emojis and memes collectively within their research (see Highfield and Leaver 2016; Chaudhary 2022; Zhu and Ren 2022). For example, researchers emphasised emojis within their literary texts and focused on “patterns” associated

with how it is “used” within different social media platforms and how they “function” within “computer-mediated communication (CMC).” The focus of the literature is on how emojis have “developed” and “evolved” in the 21st century and the creation of “databases” aimed at standardising the meaning attached to emojis like “Unicode” (see Alshenqeti 2016; Bai et al 2011; Barbieri et al 2016; Kaye et al 2017; Mostafavi et al 2021 and Rodrigues 2017).

This allows one to see how, initially, research focused on studying emoji as a dominant area of focus only, in isolation from other multimodal resources like memes. The study of emojis was becoming popularised as an essential part of online communication; however, the story was different for memes and other visual semiotic resources. Fewer scholars focused on the use and presence of “memes” as a form of semiosis online within communication, whereas, in reality, they are cut from the same semiotic cloth as more current research has shown (e.g., Lynch 2022). The author researches the creation and spread of memes online on different social media platforms. They highlight how sharing memes leads to the spread of “misinformation and conspiracies” (Lynch 2022). The focus of the research is a warning about how memes are the primary tool used online to spread inaccurate and false news online. Among many, this type of approach and perspective is problematic because it is one-sided, is derived from an outsider’s perspective, and could potentially promote a negative representation of memes.

It is only recently that academics interested in emojis and memes started researching them as parts of a collective whole and not separate (see Chaudhary 2022 and Zhu and Ren 2022). Scholars have better studied the presence, function, and use of emojis and memes collectively online. For example, many scholars have studied emoji and memes collectively as the “visual language of social media,” as a unique “visual language of communication,” and as a “blended visual language” (see Chaudhary 2022; Highfield and Leaver 2016; and Zhu and Ren 2022 and Jones, 2020). This idea of emojis and memes as a visual language is important as it allows one to see how language use and expression extend beyond structured language use. Instead, there is a view of language that focuses on what people are doing with language socially and culturally, which we refer to as translanguaging (this will be unpacked in detail below). I argue that an in-depth analysis of multimodal semiotic resources within CMC must consider the use of emojis and memes together, not separately. This is done to highlight the “visual” similarity between them by representing the resources as “visual languages” of and within communication (Chaudhary, 2022: 1). This collective focus on similar forms of semiosis and meaning-making is the type of approach adopted in this research.

### 3.1.b Translanguaging:

Translanguaging is another theoretical pillar used throughout this work. Translanguaging is a process in which language users cross the boundaries of single language use, and instead make use of all the linguistic resources available to them for communication and socio-cultural meaning-making grounded in personal experience. This is echoed in the work by Garcia and Kleifgen (2020: 556) when the authors articulate the meaning of translanguaging as follows, “focusing on the etymology of trans- (across), as in the word transcend (go beyond), translanguaging disrupts the naturalized stable boundaries of what are traditionally understood as languages, bilingualism, language education, and language learners”. A linguistics process in which language speakers can move past the “boundaries” of single language use and the use of multiple meaning-making resources when they communicate. It is about the ways in which people use all the multimodal semiotic resources available to them to make meaning. However, this is not limited to language as it includes other forms of meaning-making like emoji and memes, which becomes more apparent when one delves into the social media practices on platforms like Facebook, in which language and other semiotic resources are combined within meaning-making practices online, present in the “everyday language practices” of people (Mazzaferro, 2018: 44). This process I refer to as *semiotic translanguaging*, the use of multiple resources for meaning-making as an act of performance and languaging, instead of only focusing of language structure and use.

This process of meaning-making using multiple semiotic resources present within practices of translanguaging is represented by Garcia (2009: 140) as “the act performed by bilinguals of accessing different linguistic features or various modes of what are described as autonomous languages, in order to maximize communicative potential”. The author highlights language use as an act of strategic performance, using all meaning-making resources at their disposal to do so. Instead, the focus is not language but the process of “languaging”, in which meaning-making are based on what people are doing with language, as an act of performance (Mazzaferro, 2018: 2). In other words, according to Mazzaferro (2018:2), “this position reverberates with the concept of languaging, or in its broad sense, how language is used to create meaning, construct knowledge and transform the social reality in which individuals act”. Languaging as a socio-semiotic performance of meaning-making, grounded in the lived experiences of people. This can be seen when one traces the existing literature on translanguaging, focusing specifically on how the term has developed.

García and Kleifgen (2020) provide a summary of the history and development of translanguaging from its use in education, to how it is used in unique and dynamic ways in linguistics in the twenty-first century. Translanguaging as an approach to the study of language and meaning-making developed from an approach to bilingual education policies and multilingual language use, to a broad sense of meaning-making that encapsulates multiple resources at once. The concept and approach developed from bi and multilingual language practices in “Welsh” schools in “1994” when the term was coined by “Cen Williams”, “where students in bilingual Welsh/English classrooms are asked to alternate languages” (Garcia and Lin, 2017: 1 and Mazzaferro, G., 2018: 2). This idea of translanguaging developed to encapsulate and extend past the boundaries and conceptualisations of language, to an act of performance and languaging in which people use multiple resources to construct meaning.

Of significance to this thesis is how translanguaging shows how language is fluid, in the same way translanguaging scholars talk about how it enables fluidity, creativity and dynamism where there is room for people to express themselves in a way that extends beyond narrow understandings of language, to translanguaging. Practices observed by the scholars mentioned above and the findings of this research can be described as semiotic translanguaging practices, a bridge and connection between semiotic meaning-making and language use. Semiotic translanguaging is grounded on social semiotics, translanguaging and multimodality. Semiotic translanguaging can be viewed as “dynamic and creative linguistic practices that involve flexible use of named languages and language varieties as well as other semiotic resources” like emoji and memes (Wei, 2018: 14). This is because people are making use of multiple semiotic resources which includes emoji, memes and language to make meaning online.

This idea of semiotic translanguaging links nicely to the work of Liu and Lin (2021: 252), when the authors make an argument about “translanguaging and trans-semiotizing”. As stated by Liu and Lin (2021: 252), based on the work by Lin (2019: 8):

Translanguaging and trans-semiotizing describe the dynamic process [in which] linguistic and semiotic resources (e.g., languages, gestures, facial expressions, sounds, visual images) (co) make meanings together with other participants... Thus, instead of focusing on individual persons using discrete languages and modes (linguistic and semiotic systems) to speak to one another, it would be more effective to view them as

“coordinated parts of an assemblage of agents and resources all entrained into the fluid, dynamic flow of meaning-making

This is important as it allows one to see the link between scholarship on translanguaging, multimodality and social semiotics (explored below). This is because it allows us to see the fluid and dynamic ways in which meaning and sign making happens for individuals, as fluid, creative and interconnected processes that extend past the boundaries of single language use and multiple semiotic modes, by combining both to understand meaning-making. It allows one to see the links between semiotic meaning-making and language use, to understand the meaning-making practices of people. This is done by looking at translanguaging and semiotics as parts of a whole, aimed at understanding meaning-making.

### **3.1.c Semiotics:**

Semiotics is another key theoretical pillar underlying this research. This is because semiosis can be foregrounded when one analyses emojis and memes within CMC. Semiotics is the study of “signs” and symbols and how, when combined, they work together to convey specific meaning within instances of communication (Chandler 1994). It is about the configuration of meaning-making. It is about different signs and symbols and what they signify/represent. This is echoed in the work by Reda (2016:19) when the author argues how:

Ferdinand de Saussure conceptualised language as a system of signs. The linguistic sign is a tool for making meaning (or encoding concepts).

In the quote, the author highlights how language can be studied using semiotics because language is a system of different signs working together to convey meaning. The core focus here is on meaning-making, which includes language and other signs like emojis and memes within instances of communication, anything that exists in the world that can encode and communicate meaning. This is important as it allows one to highlight the use and interpretation of different signs within communication and how different people describe their semiotic meaning-making practices from their perspectives. It is about how humans combine multiple semiotic resources to communicate effectively. Which can be viewed as semiotic translanguaging. Of importance here is how semiotics allows us to see the creative choices made by social media users when it comes to their meaning-making practices online within CMC,

which includes but is not limited to the boundaries of single language use.

At the primary level, emojis and memes represent meaning, emotion, and feelings from one person to another. Chandler (2007:2) argues that:

Semiotics involves studying not only what we refer to as ‘signs’ in everyday speech but of anything that ‘stands for’ something else. In a semiotic sense, signs are words, images, sounds, gestures, and objects.

The author can expand on exactly what a sign is within semiotics; most importantly, it includes language use, imagery, body language, videos, gestures and more. This draws attention to how semiosis is not just about the sign or the symbol itself, it also includes what is being signified or indexed by a particular sign or symbol within a given context. This is important as it allows one to see what meaning-making that extends beyond language use looks like within CMC. In addition to this notion, multimodality is important here.

### **3.1.d Multimodality and Social Semiotics:**

Multimodality framed as social semiotics is another useful theoretical pillar used throughout this work. At its core, multimodality is about how different forms of resources combine within a single instance of discourse in a context. It is about the use and configuration of multiple semiotic resources used within meaning-making practices, therefore, multimodality can be viewed as a social semiotic approach and sign/meaning-making as a social and cultural process embedded within the experiences of people. As highlighted by Eisenlauer and Karatza (2020: 129), multimodality deals with “texts with multiple meaning-making resources”. It has to do with the configuration of multimodal tools like language, images, and other semiotic resources that work together to convey meaning in creative ways, in different contexts, on social media platforms like Facebook. “Multimodality” as an “approach” and “concept” allows us to talk about the communicative practices of social media users in terms of the resources (language, visual resources like emoji, memes, and videos, gestures) used to construct their messages and posts online because they are using “multiple different semiotic resources” within their meaning-making (Adami, 2016: 454, see also Flewitt et.al 2019: 18 and Jewitt 2004: 184). The authors highlight how multimodality allows one to examine how multiple semiotic resources are combined to convey meaning within communicative interactions. This work builds on the

work of Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) on visual grammar, also referred to as the “grammar of visual design.” Specifically, how they investigate the connection between multimodality, semiotics, and discourse. Multimodality is defined as the combination of multiple semiotic resources within discourse. This is vital for creating meaning among different users. This is more exciting when users are multilingual. The interest is on whether meaning transcends language (s). This focus on discourse as linked to multimodality is discussed by Van Leeuwen (2015:447) arguing that, “discourse can no longer be adequately studied without paying attention to multimodality.” This draws attention to how multimodal semiotic resources that hold meaning function within different discourses that are not limited to languages but include multiple types of texts. It is about the relationship between different texts: “the relation each text has to the texts surrounding it, we call intertextuality” (Bazerman, 2003: 84). The above notions crystalize the depth and richness of language modalities.

Multimodality is further extended within what has become popularised in academia as “social semiotics” or “social semiotic theory”, an approach to the study of multimodal resources that is made meaningful based on what people are doing with language and other sign making and meaning-making practice, socially and culturally (Adami, 2016: 455; O’Halloran, 2011: 3, Kress and Mavers, 2005:173 and Liu and Lin, 2021: 248). This enables us to see exactly which semiotic resources people use and how they do so within the meaning-making process. This can be seen as social media users share and use language, images, videos, and other multimodal resources to express themselves online. The definition of what social semiotics is and how it relates to discourse and multimodality, which I find most useful, is taken from Kress and Mavers (2005). As stated by Kress and Mavers (2005: 173):

In social semiotics, the idea of sign-use is replaced by sign-making, a move away from the conventionally accepted view that there are (relatively) stable signs which are used in representation and communication. Instead signs are seen as constantly newly made, out of the interest of the (socially and culturally formed and positioned) individual sign-maker.

The quote above allows one to see how social semiotics shift the focus from the actual sign and how it is being used, to a focus on sign making and what people are doing with those signs, socially and culturally. This is echoed in the work of Adami 2016: 455-459), when the author argues that:

Social semiotic theory [or] social semiotics conceives of sign making as the expression of social processes.... modes [are ] socially specific. What constitutes a mode depends on the social group that uses it and the range of meanings that the group can express through its resources

Social semiotics is about sign making and social semiotic processes linked to multimodality that is dependent of the individuals who use is, in other words meaning-making is based on the people who use it. From this perspective, emojis and memes become a starting point to unpacking the social and cultural sign making of social media users. This becomes particularly interesting in this current research, aimed at unpacking the meaning-making processes of social media users.

### **3.1.e Intertextuality**

Like multimodality, intertextuality can be seen within multimodal semiotic resources like emojis and memes, where the same resources circulate in discourse. Intertextuality is about the relationship between texts (Orr 2010 and Allen 2011). In other words, it is about the ways in which one text can be used or references within another; we call this relationship intertextuality. It allows us to interpret and analyse how a text's meaning is influenced by a different text. This is echoed in the work by Orr (2010), when the author states:

“Intertextuality” names a text's relations to other texts in the larger “mosaic” of cultural practices and their expression.

This highlights the core focus of intertextuality, which is about the relationship between texts. Secondly, how that relationship links the text to other forms of cultural practice outside the text. Relevant to this thesis is how intertextuality allows one to see the relationship between texts and other practices, like the culture of the internet and popular culture, which is grounded in the creative ways people express themselves online using multimodal tools like emojis and memes within CMC. This notion is important when analysing emojis and memes within CMC. Memes are intertextual as they are a configuration of images, figures, and language used to represent events and images that are culturally relevant within a given time, era, or specific context. This idea is supported by Laineste and Voolaid (2016:39) when the authors articulate the intertextual nature of memes specifically:

Intertextuality is most noticeable in...memes: the memes usually use widely known images/texts and add references to local events. Most often, the mold is already available at this time, being popular at that very moment.

The authors can precisely index how and why memes exemplify intertextuality. This is done by highlighting how memes are constructed using “popular” and culturally relevant material (Laineste and Voolaid, 2016:39). This is important as it allows one to see how this current research perceives multimodality and intertextuality.

### **3.2 Definitions:**

#### **3.2. a. Computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA):**

The data was analysed using a computer-mediated discourse / digital discourse analysis with an added semiotic twist (how signs and symbols work together to convey meaning) within language use on social media specifically. Emojis and memes are signs and symbols used with language to convey meaning. For example, analysing language use and, more specifically, using emojis and memes as a discourse while foregrounding the semiotic elements present. An approach to studying language use, semiosis, and social media that studies the interconnections between online communication and the importance of semiosis within interactions. This approach to studying language use on social media with a focus on semiotics follows Thurlow and Jaroski (2020) idea introduced above. The authors emphasise the importance of an approach to studying language on digital platforms. Thurlow and Jaroski (2020: 53) point out that:

Digital discourse studies [has a specific focus on] semiotic ideologies [which] are concerned with people’s beliefs about signification or meaning-making.

This attends to a particular type of discourse analysis based on users’ beliefs and ideologies that they attach to their meaning-making practices. That is a user-centric approach to the study of discourse on social media based on the meaning-making practices of users. This links nicely with an essential aspect of the research based on a user-centric approach. This can be linked to

one of the core theoretical pillars that guide this research, namely computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA). Thurlow (2018), based on the pioneering work of Herring (1996), forms a body of research known as “computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA).” In his text, Thurlow (2018:1) introduces CMDA and how it analyses what people are doing with language on “new-social media platforms” and not language orthography only. It is an approach to studying discourse or language use on social media that includes other “semiotic resources” that insert new meaning into the social-communicative interaction (not just language use or function) (Thurlow (2018:1) . Thurlow (2018: 1) argues that there are “three broad organizing principles in digital discourse research: discourse, multimodality, ideology.” Much of this research will lean towards this proposition as it explores emojis and memes.

### **3.2.b. Emojis and Memes:**

Many definitions have developed in academia to unearth what emojis and memes are, how they are used by people online, and how they function. Here, I will highlight valuable definitions for the type of research conducted here. Understanding how signs and symbols encode meaning, multimodality, and intertextuality is important. Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols. When constructed together, they convey meaning or signify “something else” (Chandler, 2007:2). The definition of emojis useful for and adopted in this research is taken from Bai et al (2019), based on an observation made by Rodrigues et al. (2017). The authors highlight how emojis are more than signs or symbolism that represent emotions or feelings; they represent an array of human emotions, experiences, actions, body language, forms of life on earth and beyond, and many more. As stated by Bai et al (2019:4), drawing on the work of Rodrigues et al. (2017), emojis are:

Graphic symbols [which] can represent not only facial expressions, abstract concepts, and emotions/feelings but also animals, plants, activities, gestures/body parts, and objects.

This definition is helpful, as it encompasses an array of human emotions, feelings, actions, body language, and more, and indexes how emojis are not restricted in what they can and cannot represent. Emojis can represent everything around us that can be represented and is not limited to faces or human emotional responses. However, it enriches the user’s experience by

bringing in the virtual emotions and expressions that distance creates. In addition to the above, Chaudhary (2022: 3) defines a meme as:

A unit of cultural information, such as a cultural practice or idea, is transmitted verbally or by repeated action from one mind to another. Memes can be of many types, like without captioned funny images, captioned images, videos, and GIFs. [It is] media using a blended visual language.

The author highlights how memes represent and configure any culturally relevant or popular material that can exist in various forms with one thing in common: shared meaning and replication. The visual and semiotic are emphasised; however, it is not limited to memes only. It includes multiple other forms of media or semiosis that contain “blended visual language” like memes, images, videos, and more (Chaudhary, 2022: 3). This is interesting as it allows one to see how emojis, memes, and other semiotic resource vehicles for the transmission of culturally relevant material, emotions, self-expression and identities within society, and the world at large among people who may or may not speak the same language. The constructions of memes are intertextual and multimodal; therefore, I use these two theoretical pillars to ground this current research.

## **Chapter 4- Methodology**

This methodology chapter is divided into sub-sections. Sub-section 4.1 is an outline of the methodology. Sub-section 4.2 is about the research participants and how I introduced the research and 4.3 deals with ethical issues.

### **4.1 Methodological approach**

Even though the societal restrictions linked to COVID-19 in and outside of Cape Town have eased, the research was carried out online, using surveys and interviews. This was done by collecting twenty-two survey responses; however, I was only able to analyse twenty-one because one person did not grant me permission to use the data. Additionally, I scheduled and conducted five one-on-one interviews with participants who agreed to a follow up interview in the survey. I decided to conduct online research because we were still experiencing restrictions and fear due to the pandemic, and people are only somewhat comfortable coming face-to-face with people outside of their immediate circles for research purposes. The pandemic has forever shaped how research is conducted in academia. There is no need for physical contact between researchers and participants for data collection. There are now new ways of conducting research and interacting with participants for research purposes, such as online surveys and interviews. Phase one of the data collection process was distributing online surveys to Facebook users via a post. Please see the appendix for the post, labelled figure four. This is because surveys are cheaper, time- effective, and more convenient for all participants and the researcher. This perspective of the advantages of surveys is supported by Van Selm and Jankowski (2006: 452), who argue that:

The main benefits of online surveys [are the] reduction of costs and time, ease in reaching large numbers of potential respondents, and providing anonymity to participants.

This ties in well with the theme in my research, namely languages in online spaces. The authors highlight the “advantages” of using online “surveys” to collect data from the perspectives of researchers who have used online surveys (Carbonaro et al 2002: 280 and Boyer et al 2002: 358). In the quote, the authors show how surveys reduce costs, save time, and allow participants

to remain anonymous. Anonymity was important; I wanted participants to feel comfortable sharing their experiences with me. Using surveys to collect data for research purposes within academia is not new. This current research exists within a corpus of research using survey data. For example, Carbonaro et al (2002: 275) conducted research that made use of online surveys, referred to as “web-based surveys,” to collect data from “elementary school teachers.” The author uses the survey to study the technology they use “within the school” and “teachers’ homes,” in which “170 completed surveys” were received (Carbonaro et al 2002: 282). Phase one was conducted by creating a unique public Facebook post that contained a link to complete the survey about their use and experience of emojis and memes. The goal was to generate a Facebook post on my profile about my research as an invitation for anyone interested in participating to complete the survey. However, the post was not private, as it was left open to the public, so anyone on Facebook who came across the post had an opportunity to complete the survey and share it on their profiles (a snowballing approach). This was to ensure that participants were chosen at random. The survey itself was created using Microsoft Forms. This online platform allows one to generate a survey around a given topic for data collection. Surveys alone can sometimes be impersonal, as there is no physical contact between the researcher and the participant.

To work my way around making my research more personal, I conducted follow-up interviews with participants who agreed to further questioning after the survey. Phase two of the data collection was one-on-one interviews to get participants to talk about how they completed the survey, their experiences, and how they de-coded the given emojis, phrases, and memes. I was aware that interviewing on Teams would result in participants incurring data costs (as they needed data to do the interview); however, considering the bigger picture allows one to see how doing the interviews in this way was cheaper and more convenient for both the participant and me as the researcher. Face-to-face interviews would have been more expensive, as specific equipment and a venue was needed to ensure the interviews could take place, and participants would need to give out traveling costs if the interviews were conducted face-to-face. Other equipment needed for in-person interviews included a tripod, a camera to record the interview, and microphones, so I decided to conduct the interviews online, on Microsoft Teams. Participants could participate in the interview in the comfort of their homes without needing to travel or prepare. Secondly, conducting the interviews online, I allowed participants to turn their cameras off to ensure they were more comfortable and remained anonymous.

The data analysed in this research was solicited via online surveys and one-on-one interviews with participants. The data consists of twenty survey responses and five transcribed interviews. The data is approached and presented using a thematic analysis, in which similar responses in the data will be grouped as sub-sections and analysed according to themes. This is done using Braun and Clarke's (2006: 86-93) "six phase...thematic analysis," which involves grouping specific responses in the data according to themes for ease of analysis. Braun and Clark (2006: 87) state that step one toward thematising the survey and interview data analysed below is "immersion and familiarization." This step involves reading and re-reading the data to highlight important aspects. Step two in the thematization is focused on "producing initial codes...[and] features of the data (semantic content or latent)", based on what the researcher highlighted as necessary in step one (Braun and Clark, 2006: 87-88). Step three involves, "converting the different codes into themes" to thematise the data (Braun and Clark, 2006: 89). As stated by Braun and Clark (2006: 91), step four in thematising the data involves "reviewing" or refining the themes. This is done by either grouping themes together or deciding which needs to be left out entirely. Step five involves the further refinement of the themes, by "defining and naming themes," which is finalised for analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006: 92). Step six involves analysing the data and producing a "write-up." Using this method to present the data, similar responses will be grouped as themes.

## **4.2 Research participants**

My participants were civilians (non-academics) on Facebook who spoke English and other African languages, who reside in and outside Cape Town, and who were over 18 years old for consent purposes. This age group was interesting because it combines millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) and Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012). My participants are exposed to and contribute to meme culture and use emojis online within their online practices. I chose this specific group of participants because they fall into a category of people who grew up experiencing the restrictions of the traditional SMS, which had a character limit, the use of the very first emojis, symbols made from keyboard characters, and linguistic developments like MXIT language. I wrote a public Facebook post to recruit participants. Please see the appendix for the post labelled figure four.

### 4.3 Ethics

Ethics is about respect, representation, and creating research that is mutually beneficial to all people involved in the research. Getting informed consent from participants was one way to respect them and their personal information. In my research, I abided by the “codes and standards” outlined in UCT’s Humanities Ethics Guidebook (2016: 37). According to the Humanities Ethics Guidebook (2016: 43), ethical research is about:

The rights and well-being of the research participants themselves and the accompanying responsibilities of the researcher towards them.



















Ethical research aims to create and generate mutually beneficial research for everyone involved; one of the ways to do so is by getting informed consent from research participants. Informed consent was obtained from users in question one of the online surveys. Issues of anonymity were given to participants before and during the survey. Firstly, this was done in excellent detail when I explained what the research was about when I invited participants to be a part of my research. Secondly, question one in the survey read as follows: “Do you give consent to me using your survey responses within my research? (Please know that I am not allowed to use your real name or any other personal information)”. Participants then granted me, as the researcher, consent to use their responses by saying “yes” or “no.” If participants answered yes, I was able to use the responses related to their meaning-making practices; if not, then I had to discard their responses from the data analysis. This method was used to gain participants’ consent instead of having them sign a separate document.

In the following chapter, I present my findings.

## Chapter 5- Constructing Meaning Through Users Narrativizing Their Meaning-Making Practices- Key Findings.

In this section, I present the key findings that came up when thematising the data. This will be done by focusing specifically on how research participants describe their meaning-making practices and language choices in the context of social media, which language (s) they use to do so, and why. Sub-section 5.1 is an analysis of the key findings in the data. Sub-section 5.2 is a brief discussion of the key findings in the data. This will be done through the lens of semiotic translanguaging and social semiotics, this can be done as the data is centered on the meaning-making practices of people, based on how the emojis and memes are used within social media groups. This is because meaning-making is based on shared/collective meaning-making. This is echoed in the work of Adami 2016: 455-459) on meaning-making within social semiotics, when the author argues that “what constitutes a mode depends on the social group that uses it and the range of meanings that the group can express through its resources”. In the quote, the authors highlight how a mode or method of meaning-making is based on the social group that uses it. This can be seen throughout the data analysed below.

The table below shows the emojis and emoji phrases given to survey participants to de-code. Hereafter, I give a detailed analysis of the survey responses and interviews.

In this section, I present participants' responses about the key findings according to themes around the emojis and emoji phrases in the table above. The data analysed below are examples of “semiotic translanguaging” and social semiotics, grounded in what the emoji looks like, and the meaning the social group attaches to it (Wei, 2018: 14). It is an example of the creative ways in which people use semiotic resources combined with named languages to describe it, to highlight and describe their own meaning-making practices.

### **5.1 a. Emojis and Meaning-Making**

Here, I represent the key findings related to the yellow "winking" smiley face emoji participants were given to de-code. The emoji was de-coded by most people in the following ways: as 'the winking emoji, or they described how the emoji is used as a form of agreement. Fourteen people de-coded the emoji as the "winking" emoji. However, it can mean different things depending on the context and person you are communicating with. Winking is also de-coded as a form of agreement by four people who indicated that they used the emoji in this way when they interact with other people online. In terms of meaning, the winking emoji illustrated the ability of a visual image to represent a human action. There are general and dominant interpretations in these instances. The above shows uniformity in how meaning is ascribed in these instances. In some ways, this highlights the specificity of interactional contexts online. However, there were slight differences in the data, in which people described the meaning of the emoji completely differently from the responses mentioned above. The winking emoji was de-coded by one person as "happy" and another as "you're welcome." The former person describes the emoji as representing the feeling of happiness.

In contrast, the other person describes the meaning of the emoji as an acknowledgment of being thanked (a context specific response). Important here is how multimodality, intertextuality, and multiple semiotic resources work together to convey context-specific meanings in what has been articulated as “social semiotics” (Adami 2016: 455-459). In the examples, the visual nature of the emoji and words used to describe the meaning attached to it as context-specific can be seen. This ties in with the points raised by Thurlow and Jarwoski (2020: 447) on "multimodality" and how multimodal semiotic resources or "modes (for instance language and image) are combined and integrated in a given instance of discourse". A key point here is how the survey data from respondents illustrates this. When it came to the descriptions of the fire emoji, responses were interesting. All the responses connected the emoji to either feeling hot and/or describing how

they use the emoji to compliment another person or a literal "fire." The responses show how the emoji can be used to communicate admiration, endearment, and love (figurative meanings like "killing it" and "lit"). Here, multiple compliments can be attached to the same fire emoji by different people based on how they use it in different contexts. Secondly, people described how the emoji can be used to index an actual fire (giving reference to the literal meaning). One particularly interesting response, consisting of the word "fire," stood out. For example, one person described the meaning of the emoji using the Kaaps phrase, "*Ani Brand On Fire*," which uses the word fire directly when translated into English. However, the meaning relates more to highlighting when someone or something is incredible or amazing when it is used within social interaction among "Kaaps" speakers (see Bock, 2013: 87 and Williams, 2021:1). This response was unique, engaging, and stood out from the rest. This illustrates how multimodality and semiotic resources grounded on the visual work together to convey meaning when communication uses emojis.

The meanings attached to emojis allow one to see how multimodal forms and language (s) can encode symbolic meanings when used in communication. This is significant as it relates to ideas about multimodality and semiosis, which focus on how signs and symbols (of which language and emojis are a part) work together to convey meaning. This view of multimodality and how language is only meaningful when combined with other semiotic resources is evident. Support for this claim can be extracted from the work of Thurlow (2018), who highlights how "language...is only made meaningful through its interaction with – other semiotic systems" and how it builds on other ways of signification as it circulates among users. This speaks to how respondents de-coded the fire/flame emoji as language alone would not be sufficient to communicate online; instead, language and "symbolism" like "emoji" combine to form meaning (Bai *et al.*, 2019:4). This is important as it allows one to see how different people, attach similar meanings to the same fire/flame emoji and the meaning is influenced by how they would use the emoji when they communicate.

The angry/swearing emoji was the next emoji given to people in the survey. In the data set, what becomes apparent is how many people described the emoji by linking it to unpleasant human emotions or a combination of both meanings. This is reflected in the data. For example, nine people de-coded the meaning of the emoji above as being representative of "anger," being "angry," and or feeling "upset," indexing various human emotions in the context of online interactions. Here, people reference how the emoji indexes anger. Eight people described the

meaning of the emoji by linking it to "swearing" specifically, and three people described anger and swearing in their responses. What is particularly interesting in this set of responses is how only one person said something completely different. The meaning of the emoji is described using the "Kaaps" phrase, "*laat ek my mond hou*" **let me keep my mouth** (Bock, 2013: 87 and Williams, 2021:1). Here, the meaning of the emoji is described as representing a persons' choice to remain silent and be quiet in a particular interactional context. This analysis summarises how different people attach similar meanings to the same emoji which is, therefore, evidence in the data to support that the meaning can indeed be shared and universal among different people, while still leaving room for a different expression. This emphasis on the emoji as being able to represent human emotion and feeling is echoed in the work by Bai et al (2019:4), when the authors describe how emoji are "graphic symbols" that can represent "emotions/feeling" because of their visual semiotic nature.

Here, I summarise the main finding related to the ghost emoji. Of importance in the data is the creative ways in which social media users attach meaning to the ghost emoji, by using the noun as a verb. The word ghost is a noun (it names a dead person); however, in the context of social media users, they are using the word as a verb (to describe the process of ghosting). Ghosting as an action, which means to avoid, ignore, or disappear. This is reflected in the data. Survey respondents described the meaning of the emoji in one or the following ways: the emoji is described as a literal "ghost," the process of "ghosting," and a few people indexed how they use the emoji in a variety of different ways to represent human emotion and actions when they communicated online. In addition, ghosting is an expression that shows the evolution of language.

A small group of respondents gave unique responses that stood out. The responses were as follows: two people indexed playfulness in their response by describing it as "playful," "playing," "silly," "bored," "crazy," "prank," and "boo," Here people are indexing what the ghost emoji means to them, highlighting the visual, multimodal and intertextual nature of emoji use in online communication and how it can uniquely represent human emotions and actions, using language to do so. Therefore, yet again another example of "semiotic translanguaging" (Wei, 2018: 14, Lin, 2019: 8 and Liu and Lin, 2021: 252). The ways in which different people decoded the meaning of the emoji are significant to this research. This is because it allows one to see multimodality, semiotics, and universal meaning-making. Thurlow (2018:5) makes an argument about the link between multimodality and meaning-making that relies on semiotics

as follows:

Multimodality is about semiosis and how signs and symbolism work together to convey meaning, an emphasis on the visual which includes: gesture and emoji.

This shows the ways in which signs and symbolism combine within meaning-making practices that emphasize the "visual", and also the importance of language in this moment to describe their own multimodal meaning-making practices online. The ghost alone illustrates this, as it had a separate meaning if certain respondents did not go on to describe ghosting as a process instead of a sign. For example, within online communication, a person could use the ghost emoji in a sentence if it is hard for the person to tell someone else that they have been ghosted. This is because of how signs and symbols combine to represent meaning, which can be seen when one zooms in on how different respondents describe their meaning-making.

Next, I highlight the key points that came up when participants indicated what the side-eye emoji meant to them. Many people de-coded the emoji similarly. This is because people used a variety of different words to give reference to the same object and process. All the responses reference "eyes," or they mention specific actions people perform with eyes. For example, "looking," "seeing," and "watching." These are terms that are all related in one way or another. This makes sense as the side-eye emoji is representative of a pair of eyes, indexing the literal meaning of the emoji by linking it to something that exists in the world and could also be representative of shock or mood. This is significant as it shows how meaning can indeed become universal among different people online when emojis are used and circulated within online communication. This brief discussion illustrates that it can attain a generic meaning depending on the emoji's circulation and most importantly the ways in which a specific "social group" (in this instance social media users) use the emojis, because "modes [are ] socially specific" (Adami, 2016: 455-459). However, some gave unique responses that could not be grouped with other responses.

For instance, different people de-coded the side-eye emoji as being representative of being "curious," "waiting.", feeling "Shock or surprise," and one person responded using a Kaaps phrase, "*Wag wag Se weer!?! Wait Wait Come again!?!". Finally, one person describes how the side-eye emoji represents a rhetorical question being asked when they communicate: "When I ask a question, I already know the answer to. Here, the inclusion of the emoji allows us to see*

how semiotics and multimodality thrive on the "visual" (Highfield and Leaver, 2016). This focus on the visual within meaning-making is echoed in the work of Highfield and Leaver (2016: 1-5) when the authors highlight that "the visual is critical to story-telling and meaning-making," The importance of the visual can be seen in the responses above, as the laughing emoji adds an extra layer of meaning to the response, this combined with the approach of "semiotic translanguaging" allows one to see the dynamic ways in which people make meaning, using language and other semiotic resources (Liu and Lin, 2021: 252). This is significant as it allows one to see how semiotic resources work together to convey meaning that relies on the visual to encode meaning, when people use emojis to communicate online.

Here, I highlight the findings related to the goat emoji given to respondents to describe. The emoji has double meanings; it can be used literally to refer to a goat. However, in the 21st century, the term has developed to refer to someone who is the best at what they do, and the person would be referred to as the Greatest of All Time (GOAT). This can be seen as meaning-making, which is cemented in posts and texts beyond social media as people use the term offline, as it has filled into popular culture when it is circulated online. The double meaning can be seen in the survey responses, as many respondents are split between the double meaning attached to this specific emoji, and only a few people gave completely different responses. This is reflected in the data. About twelve people referred to the literal meaning of the emoji, "goat," as an animal or referenced other similar (four-legged) animals without naming any specifically. For example, by de-coding the meaning of the goat emoji as representing "livestock" and a "dog."

Secondly, five people responded to this question by writing the abbreviated phrase "greatest of all time" or as an abbreviation "GOAT". Here, people are indexing the other meanings that people attach to the emoji online. Specifically, when one person calls another person "a goat," it is simply another way of saying that person is the best at what they do. Similarly, other respondents de-coded the meaning of the emoji as follows: "Goat/OG ". This response included "OG," which, when uncontracted, means "Original/Old Gangster." However, the abbreviation is not used in a gangsterism and crime type of way, but instead, as someone who has been doing what they do for a very long time when people use the term (online and offline). Much like GOAT, OG has its roots in hip-hop and popular culture. A significant element here is how multimodality and language illustrate the intertextual nature of semiotic resources despite the above discussion on the intricacies of emojis. There are instances where some describe how they "never used this one" when asked to de-code the meaning of the goat emoji.

This illustrated that meaning is ascribed only through the circulation of semiotic and linguistic resources. Here, the goat emoji as a sign and symbolism has both a literal and social meaning, based on how social media users use it online. Chandler (2007: 9) points out that "the meaning of a sign is not in its relationship to other signs within the language system but rather in the social context of its use." This is a fundamental point as it highlights how meaning-making is influenced not only by the relationships between signs and what they signify but also by alternative meanings that become attached to a given sign within social contexts using language. This is important as it can be linked to the meanings attached to the goat emoji above by social media users, more specifically, the ways in which a goat emoji or the term goat has extended beyond the literal meaning to include other meanings that have developed over time based on how different people use it.

Unlike some of the emojis above, other emojis generate a plethora of accepted meanings in intriguing ways. A case in point was the purple eggplant emoji. The emoji is a purple aubergine/eggplant, two words indexing a specific vegetable. Again, like the "goat" discussion, we observe the duality of "literal and metaphorical/ representational" meaning. The literal meaning of the emoji is used to represent a vegetable. However, a different meaning has developed. The emoji is used to refer to the male sexual organ or sex in general because of the shape of the emoji. Of significance here is the taboo, when people do not want to mention or talk about sex in specific responses. This will be highlighted and linked to my own observations of why people shy away from discussing taboo topics. The double meaning linked to the eggplant emoji can be extracted from existing literature, for instance, Highfield and Leaver (2016), where the authors highlight the double meaning attached to vegetables like the eggplant and the peach emoji by social media users. Drawing on the work of Highfield and Leaver (2016:7): "the eggplant...can represent... foodstuff but are also stand-ins for parts of the body not featured in their emoji [like] the penis". The double meaning attached to the eggplant emoji by different social media users has become shared and universal over time.

This is reflected in the data. For example, eight people used the word "sex", "dick," or "penis" when de-coding the meaning of the emoji. In essence, this is a codified way of discussing a topic that might be taboo for others regarding religion, culture, or differences in age. However, like the double meaning explored above, other respondents exhibited similar understandings. Many people thought of the literal meaning of the emoji when asked to indicate what it means

to them, either using the words "aubergine," fruit or vegetable to describe it. The entirety of these literal descriptions illustrates how different people can present different understandings of the same semiotic feature. This shows how multimodality is subject to different interpretations that hinge on exposure to the interaction where these multimodal devices are deployed. This is a significant point as it relates to initial thoughts that informed this research, in which I realized that not all people would de- code the purple eggplant emoji according to the double meaning, and perhaps for a vegetarian, it would index an idea for a good meal. The much more significant point relates to how 'language' and ways of speaking may differ according to what each person is exposed to. So, context becomes a vital part of such realities.

Crucial to the above point is the issue of awareness in terms of how language is used. Concerning the eggplant, one of the respondents made mention of this when they directly referred to the awareness of the dual meaning as follows: "I know its used for sexual content for young pupils but to me it's just a veg". This is a vital clue covered by variationists who often point out how age influences language use. The explicit differences here show an awareness of language as a generational thing. It is interesting to see how semiotic devices are not exempted from such developments. Classic variation studies have often highlighted how young people have different ways of speaking. Mortensen et.al (2006: 238) discuss how:

Speech changes with age: Adults speak differently from children and older adults differently from young adults... older adults tend to be more verbose and more disfluent than young adults, especially when the task is difficult and when it places few constraints on the content of the utterance.

This is a significant point that acknowledges age as a serious factor. What is also apparent is how, for some participants, such discussions were taboo. For instance, one participant refused to mention any description of the eggplant; they said, "Yeah, let's not go there." This can be viewed as a refusal to describe the meaning of the emoji due to a discomfort with talking about sex or sexual organs in one way or another because that was the only meaning they knew of being attached to the eggplant emoji. This choice of response could be due to religion, culture or age, meaning they do not engage in topics of this nature because it is taboo. This double meaning and refusal to discuss the taboo observed can be linked to the responses to the peach emoji below.

Similar descriptions as in the above analysis were encountered when one begins to unpack the

descriptions of the peach emoji. Again, dual meanings were given. The first meaning attached to the emoji is literal, as it is seen as a "peach" and "fruit." Five people responded in this way. In contrast, the second meaning links the emoji to a "bum"/"ass" or sex in one way or another using different words. Nine people described the meaning of the peach emoji by linking it to a human body part. Highfield and Leaver (2016: 7) highlights how the "peach emoji...can represent foodstuff [and a] butt" simultaneously. The data contains descriptions such as "peach," "peachy," or "fruit." One person said, "As mentioned with the veg, I take it as a fruit as it should be used." This participant was constant in avoiding any sexual-related description. However, other descriptions were constant with the sexual nature of the meaning as they gave responses ranging from "ass" without mentioning anything else to "Sexual gesture and ass." An interesting response was a reference to the word "pie." It is a peculiar response in comparison to the above. This case is similar to ambivalent responses where, for example, one person refused to give a description, by saying "hmmm... Let's also. It go there". What is apparent above is the diverse interpretations of emojis. This can point to the dynamism and creative way in which multimodal interpretations can be afforded when one begins to view it through the lens of semiotic translanguaging. This notion is supported by Liu and Lin (2021: 252), based on the work by (Lin, 2019: 8), "instead of focusing on individual persons using discrete languages and modes (linguistic and semiotic systems) to speak to one another, it would be more effective to view them as "coordinated parts of an assemblage of agents and resources all entrained into the fluid, dynamic flow of meaning-making". This is significant as meaning-making is not limited to the semiotic resources in question, or the language used to describe it as separate resources, instead multimodal semiotic resources are viewed as parts of a collective whole that contributes to the overall meaning attached.

Here, I discuss the key findings related to the red heart emoji. Most of the responses contained the words "love," "heart," or both, in some instances when asked to share what the emoji meant to them when they used it to communicate. Firstly, a few people used the word "heart" specifically to describe the meaning of the emoji, while others linked it to love. One could argue that the red heart emoji represents love, therefore making the words heart and love related to love. When asked to describe the meaning of the emoji, two respondents gave the same description. Many people kept the description of the red heart emoji simple by using the word "love" to describe the meaning of the emoji. Showing that shared meaning can indeed happen between different people online. Other participants explicitly attached the meaning to romantic relations, "That's when I'm talking to my girlfriend, I use it often." At this moment, the person

is referring to a specific moment when they use the red heart emoji when communicating with their girlfriend; however, there is no mention of love specifically. The emoji highlighted in the responses allow one to see how the emoji are used/organized within a text by people to flirt, compliment, to solicit attention, show love, and more.

The importance of emoji being included in texting on social media and how they combine to communicate meaning is mentioned in the work of Zhu and Ren (2022: 90-91) when the authors point out that "emojis complemented the textual message and facilitate the receivers' understanding of the illocutionary force of the accompanying text." This shows how emojis add a layer of semiotic multimodal meaning that helps the receiver understand the text as the sender intended. A vital point here relates to how emojis and language work together to communicate meaning. This can be seen as one person confessing their love for another person via text messaging without including an emoji, and the message could be perceived as friendship instead of a romantic relationship. However, including a red heart emoji in a message would narrow down the possible meanings of the emoji, as the red heart emoji is associated with romantic love. Therefore, including the emoji makes the message straightforward to understand. Testament to the above, emojis can be used in interesting and creative ways. One example is that it can stand-alone in a text and convey meaning (like the responses above), and it can be strung together to portray a phrase or sentence (like the responses analysed hereafter). This multifaceted view of emojis and how they can be used is echoed by Ashenqeeti (2016:57) when the author argues, "emojis can be inserted individually or together to create a string." Such occurrences were observed in the current survey. However, the next set of responses that will be analysed were constructed, stringing together different emojis to create emoji phrases and sentences for people to de-code in the survey.

The following three emojis were grouped to create an emoji sentence for respondents to de-code: a red 'x,' a blue and white play button, and the yellow and orange fire/flame emoji. When one analyses the emojis together, the emoji phrase/sentence can be de-coded as "don't play with fire"; however, this is only one possible meaning. This is reflected in the data. For example, seven people used the exact phrase to de-code the emoji sentence. In contrast, others said something similar by highlighting how the emojis represent a fire "hazard" and "fire warning,". I argue that different people attach different meanings to an emoji sentence, constructed by stringing multiple emojis together in the same way, even using the exact words, purely based on what the emoji sentence looks like and what it means to them. This is proof that shared

meaning can occur among social media users. As with other emojis analysed above, there were differences here too. This can be seen as one person describes the meaning of the emoji using the following sentence: "stop/stay away from the fire." In other words, the emojis are described as a "warning notice" (Akindele 2011: 1). A notable point in the analysis is the dominance of English as a language with which emojis are understood. Such occurrences indicate how multimodality can potentially unmask or hide issues of language dominance, which reflect the ecology of languages and their power in society (see Laihonon and Szabó 2016; Akindele 2011 and Cenoz and Gorter 2008). The theme of warning signs was common with other respondents using phrases like "stop the flames." However, doing so by combining it with the words 'not' or 'no' creates the negative form of the sentence. Phrases like "no heat" and "no fire" were commonly used. There were also instances of uncertainty; for instance, one respondent said, "I am not familiar with this phrase." Another said, "not sure". These responses point to the fact that despite the common understanding of emojis as substitutes for written scripts, there are still cases where the 'language' is unknown. I argue that this potentially illustrates how language use is tied to learning to use language appropriately.

The following set of emojis: a grey-scale, side profile emoji of a talking person and a hand emoji were presented to participants. The possible meanings attached to these emojis are 'talk to the hand', "be quiet," or "stop talking" This can be seen in the data. A common response was an instruction to be quiet and/or stop talking; one person described the meaning as "talk to the hand". Here, the person is describing the process in which one person tries to stop another from speaking by saying, "talk to the hand." Similarly, six other people used the phrase "speak to the hand". Here, different people used the exact words to describe the given emoji set, therefore indexing how universal and shared meaning happens among social media users. In other instances, it was described as "just shut up," which is a very clear instruction to be quiet and stop talking. The understanding of the emojis seems similar across the responses. Others, though continuing with the same theme, they exhibit a slightly different expression. Such as, "stop shouting". What is apparent here regarding the meaning is that the emojis contains symbols that represent a loud sound coming from a person's mouth. All the responses highlight something about 'speaking.'

The vantage point of users and their perspectives remains an interesting site to excavate meaning. Interestingly, the meaning of the given emoji set was seen differently. This is proof that there is room for different modes of expression when meaning is attached to emojis by

people when they use them. For example, one person described the meaning of the emoji set as an instruction to "take a break." This is because the set is de-coded using the words "take five ". This reads as an instruction to take a five-minute break. Another person saw this as an 'example of a greeting.' In this response, "hi there" is highlighted as the meaning. One can speculate that the talking person emoji can represent any verbal speech, and the hand can be perceived as a waving hand within context from the person's perspective. This difference could be attributed to differences in culture, where different hand gestures mean different things, or differences in age groups, where hand gestures have different meanings attached to them based on the context in which it is used and the participants using them.

Liu and Lin (2021: 252), make an argument about “translanguaging and trans-semiotizing”. As stated by Liu and Lin (2021: 252), based on the work by Lin (2019: 8):

Translanguaging and trans-semiotizing describe the dynamic process [in which] linguistic and semiotic resources (e.g., languages, gestures, facial expressions, sounds, visual images) (co) make meanings together with other participants...Thus, instead of focusing on individual persons using discrete languages and modes (linguistic and semiotic systems) to speak to one another, it would be more effective to view them as “coordinated parts of an assemblage of agents and resources all entrained into the fluid, dynamic flow of meaning-making

As with the data discussed above, many perspectives were brought forward when engaging with a red and yellow carton of popcorn, a television, a blue snowflake, and a kissing couple emoji, in which the couple has a pink heart hovering above them as they are kissing. An interesting take emerged, arguably intertextual, as respondents referred to "Netflix and chill" or "chilling." Phrases that were made popular through social media and television pop culture in movies. In essence there is a “trans-semiotization of the same symbols”, in which language and other “semiotic resources...co-make meanings together”, known as semiotic translanguaging (Liu and Lin (2021: 252). Another possible interpretation has a connotation that is shared online and offline among social circles and has come to mean "watching a movie romantically with a person you are interested in with the hope that the night will end in sex." The metaphorical meaning of the phrase echoes most of the discussions on the symbolism of multimodal artifacts. In essence, it can be viewed as a unique way that has developed for people

to talk about and schedule sex without needing to be explicit. Therefore, it enables users to talk about topics they might be uncomfortable discussing. This is reflected in the data. The emoji phrase is de-coded in the same way, using the phrase "Netflix and chill" specifically. Here, respondents agree with the meaning of the emoji phrase above. One person describes the meaning of the emojis as representing "Popcorn and movies on a cold romantic night." The reference to romantic involvement was explicitly mentioned.

Similarly, the emoji set represents "Movies and popcorn with your mate or spouse on a cold evening.". This was repeated in the following phrase, "popcorn watching a movie as a couple ." There seems to be a unanimous agreement and reference to an intimate moment between two people while watching a movie. The shared meaning suggests the dominance of popular culture and its influence on the construction of meaning. Though the above discussion of the survey data provided brief responses, it illuminated some essential aspects, particularly the importance of multimodal artifacts for language.

### **5.1. b. Memes and Meaning-Making:**

The data presented here relates to memes and meaning-making, in which participants describe what different memes mean to them. The goal was to highlight how people would describe their meaning-making based on how they described the meaning of the different memes. The examples analysed here, contains both visual imagery and language as some memes contain text, which once again allows one to analyse examples of semiotic “translanguaging” in action when participants are prompted to describe their own meaning-making practices. This is because it is examples of “dynamic and creative linguistic practice that involve flexible use of named languages and other semiotic resources” like memes (Wei, 2018: 14 and Liu and Lin, 2021: 252). This can be seen in the data.



The first meme given to people, depicted above, consisted of three dragons, each representing Coke from different sources. This dominant meaning can be extracted from the meme, allowing me to group specific responses. This is because the different responses were similar, as people either made a comparison between different types of Coke and described what they thought the difference was, or the meme was viewed as a warning about the health concerns related to drinking Coke. This can be extracted from the data. For example, certain responses could be grouped since users index the differences between the sources of Coke in their responses by comparing them. Most participants described how the meme represents a comparison between different sources of Coke, and others focused specifically on what makes McDonald's Coke stand out when compared to Coke from another source. For example, one person described the meme's meaning by saying, "it just doesn't taste the same," indexing how Coke from different sources does not taste the same. Similarly, a different person indexed how "It shows the quality of one product in Different forms for anyone to understand." Here, the person described how the meme represents quality differences between Coke in "different forms." Likewise, another person describes something similar by indexing the meaning of the given meme as representing "Quality differences of different forms" in agreement with the previously highlighted responses. This allows one to see how shared and universal meaning happens between people. This is because different people are describing the meaning of the meme in similar ways by indexing a comparison represented visually in one way or another.

Secondly, a few people described the meme as a warning sign, representing how dangerous it is to consume Coke. For example, "coke is dangerous", therefore, indexing how Coke is a "dangerous" beverage. Similarly, another person described the meme by saying, "this is a warning sign." Finally, one person responded by highlighting that they were "not sure" about what the meme meant, which could mean that they were unfamiliar with the specific meme or

did not use memes often enough to know what the meme could mean. The response stood out because the person said something different, showing uncertainty regarding the meme's meaning. This can be due to age; the person may not be familiar with memes as a recent development within social media communication due to their age or because multiple possible meanings might come to mind for this person when they encountered the meme in the survey.

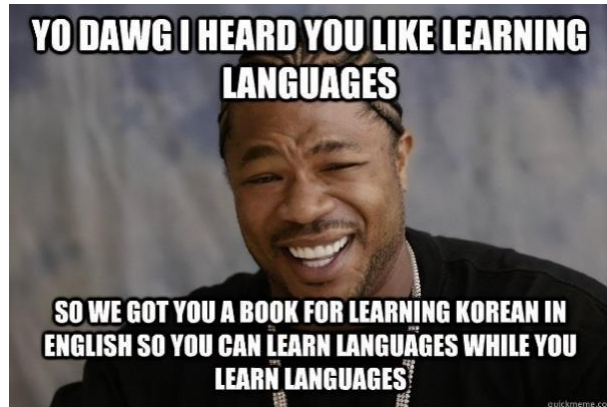


The next meme given to people consisted of a close-up shot of a smiling man with an added caption that reads: “OH YOU WEAR A NORTHFACE JACKET? YOU MUST GO ON SO MANY ADVENTURES”, represented in the meme above. A possible meaning that could be attached to the meme (hereafter referred to as the North Face meme) is that it is a sarcastic comment about people who wear the brand, however not for outdoor adventures and activities specifically but as a fashion statement, or as a sign of high status because the brand is expensive. The sarcastic nature of the meme can be linked to survey responses. Nine different participants described the North Face meme as an example of “sarcasm” and a “joke” about The North Face as a brand in the meme within their responses. This allowed me to group specific responses to be analysed collectively, as everyone de-coded the meme’s meaning as an example of sarcasm without explaining why the meme is sarcastic from their perspective. Furthermore, a few people used the words “adventure” and “adventurous brand” within their description of what the meme means; however, they still index the North Face as a brand. This can be seen in the data when, for example, one person refers to the meaning of the meme as follows:

Northface is an outdoors brand for adventurers... but in today’s time a lot of young people are buying the brand for fashion which is okay however this is the joke.

Here, the person indexes the North Face as a brand in their response. This is done by emphasising how the brand was initially intended for outdoor/adventurous activities; however, it is also clear how young people have started buying the items associated with the brand because it is considered “fashion.” Finally, in the remaining responses to the meme, people gave various responses that could not be grouped. This can be seen as each person responded entirely differently to de-coding the same meme. For example, one person described the meme’s meaning as “Showing an interest in another.” I understand that the person is discussing a specific person showing interest in another. The response, coupled with an analysis of the imagery in the meme, allows one to exact a possible meaning for this response. The person could be describing the behaviour of the man in the picture, who appears to have a flirtatious smile on his face. However, this is my interpretation, not fact, because the person did not describe what they meant. Another person indexed how the meme is an “informational meme,” which is not far-fetched because the meme represents information.

Another participant responded to de-coding the same meme doing so by using the word “*Salaam Peace*.” The greeting, when translated from Arabic to English, means peace. However, there is no link to the meme. Another respondent indexed “111” to describe the meme’s meaning. However, due to a lack of information, I could not extract any meaning from the response. Lastly, one person, in response to de-coding the meme, indicated not knowing what the meme’s meaning might be as follows, “I don’t know”; therefore, no possible meaning was attached to the meme by the respondent in the final two instances analysed above. The set of responses analysed here is interesting as it allows one to see how meaning between different people attached to a given meme can be shared and universal while still leaving room for different modes of expression.



The following meme given to survey respondents depicted above is a medium close-up shot of a laughing man with an added layer of bold text. A possible meaning that can be extracted from this meme is that it is a multilayered joke about learning languages. This meaning can be extracted from survey responses, as most people indexed that the meme is a joke, a commentary about language learning, or people said something completely different. This can be seen as people responded by indexing languages or they said something completely differently to other people who participated in the survey. This can be seen in the collected data, as seven participants used the words “joke,” “joking,” “funny meme,” “sarcasm,” and more to describe the meme’s meaning. Secondly, a few people responded to de-coding the meme by indicating they did not know what it meant. For example, one person says, “I don’t know what to make of this, a speshul person.”

Likewise, a different person responds by describing how they are “Not sure” about what the meme means. Thirdly, many people described how the meme represents learning languages or languages more generally. For example, one person described how the meme represents how one can never fully understand a language completely by stating “that you will never understand it fully,” in which “it” refers to the language. A different person responds by commenting on how they need help understanding why people learn different languages if many people speak English. The person says, “I will never understand why all the learning is necessary when every country or most speaks English.” In the response, the person shared an option about why they believe it is unnecessary to learn other languages when “most people speak English.”

This response is interesting from a sociolinguistic perspective because it is an example of a non-linguist making a statement about observing linguistic knowledge about the “dominance of English” in society (see Alexander 2000: 14 and Mahjoob 2009: 5). Finally, the remaining responses analysed here could not be grouped because the responses were so drastically different from the responses above. This can be seen in the data, for example, when one person described the meme as ironic by highlighting that the meme represents the “irony of things.” Likewise, another person described the meme as representing an incomplete workload, highlighting the meme’s meaning as “work never done.” These responses are interesting as they allow one to see how shared and universal meaning is indeed happening among different people on social media, which can be seen with the intertextual nature of memes and how meanings circulate and develop while still leaving room for new meanings to be attached to the same meme by other people. The beauty of contextual meaning-making/“discourse” is exemplified here, specifically its ability to be rendered meaningful due to human interaction and communication on social media (Blommaert, 2005:3).

### **5.1.c. Memes and Representations of Desire and Mood:**

This section represents the key findings in the data related to the theme, memes and the representations of desire and mood. Here, desire is viewed as something people long for and/or wish to have, and mood has to do with how a person feels at a given moment.



The meme given to people to de-code consisted of a white fluffy dog wearing oversized black spectacles, accompanied by added layered text at the bottom of the meme. Most of the survey participants de-coded the meaning of the meme by describing it as a representation of desire and mood related to “Friday” or “the weekend,” specifically in different ways. However, there was slight variation too, as a few people said something related to time. This can be extracted from the data. For example, most participants responded to de-coding the meme above by referring to how the person feels. This is done by indexing “happiness,” “excitement,” and “relief,” or how the meme is “funny” and “happy” because it is Friday and the weekend. This concerns the visual representation and configuration of semiotic resources in the meme. For example, one participant describes the meme as follows:

It’s a funny meme, to me it means that people should be excited that it’s Friday and that the dog can’t believe his eyes even though his wearing glasses and his excited too.

Here, the person indexes how funny the meme is. This is followed by a detailed explanation of why the meme is funny. The reason given is that the meme represents how excited one can become when it is Friday, which can be seen as the dog has big “eyes” while wearing glasses, which shows excitement. Similarly, another person described the same meme as representing how “Friday as arrived”, indexing that it is Friday. Likewise, other people indexed how the meme represents happiness by indexing how it represents how they are, “Super happy that its Friday”. Likewise, a different person highlighted the meme’s meaning and the extent to which South African people love Fridays as follows:

“It’s South Africa, people love Fridays.” When describing the meme’s meaning, the mention of Friday is followed by a laughing emoji. The inclusion of the emoji in the response could be an indication of how the person was feeling while constructing their response. This has to do with the visual representation and configuration of semiotic resources in the given meme. Here, once again, one can see the importance of “the visual” within semiotic multimodality as it relates to meaning-making, “which includes gesture, emojis, memes” and more (Thurlow, 2018: 5) . This allows one to see how memes are an example of semiotics and multimodality, as it is an arrangement of signs and symbols working together to convey meaning.

Lastly, a few people used the word “time” within their description of the meme’s meaning in

one way or another, which enabled me to group the responses. The meme is de-coded to represent “Time to party.” Here, the meme’s meaning is indexed to indicate party time. Similarly, a different person described the meme’s meaning by describing how the meme is representational of how “time went by fast”. Here, different people gave similar responses by referencing time in different ways. This is interesting as it allows one to see how different people respond to de-coding the same meme in different and unique ways that can be seen when one looks at how people describe their meaning-making practices.



The following meme given to participants related to the theme of memes and representations of desire and mood consists of a man wearing a suit and holding a suitcase, who can be seen gracefully leaping into an elevator accompanied by added layered text. The meme represents how excitingly some people leave work on a Friday; however, this is only one possible meaning that can be used to exemplify users meaning-making practices on social media. This can be extracted from the data set. In response to de-coding the meaning of the meme, people described the meme in similar ways, highlighting how it made them feel by linking the meme to “excitement” and “happiness”. All the respondents described “excitement” or “happiness” because it is Friday/the weekend, meaning they get to leave work and have a few days off. For example, one person indexed how the meme represents “leaving work on a Friday,” which represents how they feel and how it looks when they leave work on a Friday. Similarly, a different person used the following phrase to describe the meme’s meaning, “Excited for leaving work,” in which the meme is associated with the excitement of leaving work on a Friday. Likewise, a different person responded similarly by saying that the meme represents feeling “Excited to leave work on Friday.” Here, the man jumping out of the office becomes the focal

point of meaning-making from this participant's perspective. Here, different people again describe similar meanings attached to the same meme.

Finally, a few people gave responses that stood out from the rest and could not be grouped. This can be seen as people gave different answers to de-coding the same meme. For example, one person describes the meme's meaning as representing "the best feeling ever" without giving a specific explanation. Likewise, a different person indexed how the meme represents how they "can't wait to get home and relax." This response, coupled with the wording and imagery configured in the meme, allows one to see how a person wants to get home and rest because it is the weekend. This is interesting as it allows one to see how, with the same meme, there is room for shared meaning and different modes of expression regarding how users attach meaning to memes online. Hereafter, I analyse the interview data.

#### **5.1.d. Users, Voice and Reflections:**

The interview data further support the above survey data analysed. The interviews gave specific attention to getting people to talk about how they decided what each emoji meant while doing the survey. This was addressed by question 3 of the interview (see appendix, figure one). The key was to see how users would talk about their meaning-making practices. Ultimately, to get to the *how* of their choices. Considering this, participants indexed the physical characteristics of the emoji or its appearance as the main factor for the meaning attached to an emoji. There are similar ways of acquiring the meaning they attach to the emojis, despite participants describing their meaning-making process as personal. For example, participant 1, in lines 19, 20, and 21 of the interview, described thinking about the actual emoji, focusing on how they understand it, and then deciding what each emoji means based on how it would be used in context. The description of how meaning-making happens for participant 1 is articulated as follows:

19 Participant 1: So I just looked at it and I would- I gave it a thought and I was like

20                    this is how I would understand it personally. So I just looked at it and  
21                    thought this is I how would use it in a context you- (.) *Ya Yes*.

In the above, participant 1 describes a step-by-step meaning-making process with a specific focus on the physical characteristics of the emoji and how the emoji would be used. Evident from this is how the process is not random but conscious. Similarly, participant 2, in lines 21, 22, and 23, again here the emphasis is on ‘recognition’:

21 Participant 2: Well it was like pretty obvious. So I just- er- er note the first thing that  
22                    came to mind when I looked at the pictures. So the first thing that came  
23                    to mind I just linked it with that.

Both instances foreground the physical semiotic characteristics that make up the different emoji to determine what each emoji means. There is evidence of cognitive engagement through how the visual taps into the schema of semiotic knowledge. This interesting account of meaning-making sheds light on how meaning-making happens from the perspective of Facebook users who attach meaning to, select, and use emojis within their online interactions. In other situations where intimate social circles engage in interactions, like with Participant 3. The findings point specifically to interacting with “family and friends.” In the participants’ description of how they decided what each emoji meant to them; the different emoji are decoded based on how it is used within their communicative interactions as follows:

12 Participant 3: Uhm based on how I use the emojis from day to day. So I went with  
13                    that and mostly with the emoji I use on family and friends

In the response, frequency of use was a key element. In essence, this also highlights the fact that in the deployment of semiotic material and resources, knowledge and biographies of the audience are crucial. So, the meaning-making is linked to whom the emoji is used with, not only the specific emoji. One constant with these descriptions is the ‘look’ – what participants can see and recognize. This point is echoed by Participant 4, who describes the process by concluding that the meaning is based on how the emoji “looks.” Participant 4’s response stands out because it is not limited to the look but also the physical characteristics like a face and the emotion evoked by the emoji. Put differently, it is about the emotion being conveyed by the emoji and what the specific emoji invokes in them that contributes to the overall meaning as

follows:

18 Participant 4: Depending on how it looks and emotion that's where everything  
19 comes in- like emotion and the face and- Basically just looking at it you  
20 can sense what the- the emojis giving off.

Participant 5, in lines 14-16 describes the process of de-coding different emojis as being a process of considering what the different emojis means to them personally, taking the meaning other people might attach to it into consideration, and then trying to put the meaning into words by forming a "sentence." Despite the views expressed here regarding meaning-making as a personal/'intimate' thing. However, what I see is that meaning is universal among different people, and the meaning attached to the different emojis seems to mirror what is already circulating and intertextual (intertextuality). This point is captured in the following response:

13 Participant 5: I just went on Uhm- I would say- The way I broke it down was  
14 I guess the meaning that not just I attached but different other  
15 people that attaches meaning to it. I just used what I know and  
16 then just broke it down into a sentence that made sense for me.

In the above, we observe how this participant hints at the plurality of meanings. In fact, it is the only interviewee who considered the meaning other people might attach to the emoji. The significance of this becomes apparent when we think about how meaning is negotiated and developed, which is based on a sense of shared meaning-making. This allows us to see that meaning-making among social media users can be based on shared meaning that reflects what circulates online. In this instance, meaning-making is based on the shared meaning that is agreed upon by different people when it circulates online.

### **5.1.e Language Choices, Facebook Practices, and the Dominance of English:**

The data presented here deals with issues of language choices, Facebook practices, and the dominance of English. One thing that becomes apparent is the dominance of English, as it is flagged as 'thee' language, which again re-enforces the argument I bring forth about how the creativity of social media also illustrates some of the same patterns we have observed with

regard to the dominance of English among the participants. However, there is slight variation and diversity present when participants use Kaaps. What is significant concerning the use of Kaaps is the negative attitude towards the language when one participant refers to the language as “gham.” This is problematic and interesting as it allows us to see the unequal ways in which different languages are perceived by users on social media. In the survey, people were asked which language or languages they use the most when creating online posts on Facebook.

This becomes apparent when one analyses how different people responded to the survey questions about their language choices. The theme of language choices is significant and can be linked to the "dominance of English", as compared to African languages in South Africa in academia and society at large (see Alexander 2000: 14 and Mahjoob 2009: 5). This becomes obvious when one sees how the dominance of English unfolds in different people's language choices and Facebook practices, present in the data below. In the survey data, fourteen people indexed "English" as the language they use most when constructing Facebook posts. Of significance here is a response where a participant highlights emojis as a language, saying that they use "English and Emojis" when creating Facebook posts. From the perspective of the person, "multimodality" is perceived as a language and means of communication (see Thurlow 2018: 5 and Thurlow and Jaroski 2020: 447). Secondly, a few participants indexed using two different languages when they created Facebook posts. For example, this can be seen when one person described how they use:

Something call gham 😊😊 I'm Afrikaans but I have to use English in between as well, you know to add flavor. (Drama is the spice of Life 😊😊 A famous quote from Boss Baby Christmas Edition - Dongle the Elf).

In the response above, the person lists how they use both "Afrikaans" and "English" to communicate, sometimes referred to as "gham." This is interesting due to how the person speaks about language, indexing the negative attitudes toward Kaaps. "Kaaps" is a language spoken on the Cape Flats in Cape Town and elsewhere, a language with a linguistically, socially, and culturally rich and complex lineage within South African language politics (see Bock 2013: 87 and Williams 2021:1). This is because in the past, "Kaaps" as a language was perceived (due to a lack of knowledge) as a lesser form of "Afrikaans" by describing it as "gham" in the process of "standardization" (see Williams 2021:1). The response stood out to

me linguistically as a sociolinguist and home language speaker of Kaaps because I know that the speaker is highlighting Kaaps as a language here. The word "gham" is a word specifically used to represent the language as a lesser version of suiwer Afrikaans within South African language politics. It is an example of a negative attitude and representation of Kaaps, specifically how it becomes internalized as speakers start to refer to their language use in this way.

In a different survey question, participants were asked to respond to whether they thought "the use of emoji can be considered a language or not ." Sixteen people said "yes" to the question. This proves that many people believe emoji can be considered a language. Two people highlighted how they did not believe emojis can be considered a language by answering "no", "I don't think it can..." and "Not really..." to be exact. One respondent indexed "maybe." Finally, one person said "English," which did not directly relate to the original survey question. The uncertainty expressed by the final responses analysed here shows how some believe in using emojis as a language, and some are unsure. At the same time, another strongly disagreed with the idea of emojis being considered a language.

The survey responses analysed above can be linked to the interview data highlighted below. This can be seen when one zooms in on the responses to interview question 6, which focused on what language (s) they use the most on Facebook. English as a language remains dominant within multilingual countries like South Africa, which has many local languages; this can be seen in the interview responses. For example, most participants indexed English only versus a single instance where two languages are listed; however, English is still listed first. For example, participant 1, in lines 32 and 33 of the interview, describes using two languages online as follows:

32 Participant 1: The languages I use the most on Facebook is English and Afrikaans because  
33                   some memes are in Afrikaans.

Participant 1 is the only interviewee who mentions and lists using a language other than English on Facebook. Namely, "English and Afrikaans," including an explanation about how they come across memes in both languages on Facebook.

The next set of responses analysed hereafter are linked to a question in which participants are

asked to list the language (s) they speak. There were varying answers to the same question; some people stated they were monolingual, some listed two languages, and others listed three. However, once again, the "dominance of English," regardless of how many languages people speak, is apparent when one looks at how people list the language or languages they speak (see Alexander 2000: 14 and Mahjoob 2009: 5). For example, a few people indicated they only speak "English," making them monolingual. Secondly, many of the responses made by people indicated that they were bilingual, which can be seen as respondents named the two languages they speak. For example, "English and Afrikaans," "English and Northern Sotho" and "English and Afrikaans". Here, all respondents listed two languages.

Thirdly, two people indexed being multilingual by listing three languages. For example, one participant listed "English, Afrikaans and Kaaps" and the other "English, Afrikaans and Xhosa ." What stands out is how most survey responses first list English as a language, regardless of whether they speak one, two, or three languages. The different languages people speak are significant in how they attribute/ascribe meaning to emojis as they can think in and talk about meaning-making in any of the different languages they have access to. However, what can be extracted from the data is that even though people are listed as bilingual and multilingual, they still choose English to describe the meaning they attach to the emoji they select and use when communicating. This might be because of the dominance of English as a language or because the surveys and interviews were conducted in English.

The above is further supported by the interview data below. The question in the interview was structured to unpack if the interviewees were monolingual or multilingual. For example, a few people indexed English as the only language they spoke; one described being bilingual, and another highlighted being multilingual by listing three different languages they speak. For example, Participant 1, in line 13 of the transcribed interview: "I speak English." Similarly, Participant 2 highlights English as the language they speak by jokingly saying, "Uhm most of the time uhm it's actually English believe it or not (h)," in line 16 of the interview, followed by a loud laugh. Here, two interviewees and Facebook users are indexing English as the only language they speak (making them monolingual). Participant 3 describes being bilingual by listing two languages in their response to the interview question. This can be seen in line 12 in the interview where the participant says, "Uhm English first additional and Afrikaans second," highlighting English and Afrikaans. Participant 5 describes being multilingual, which can be seen as the interviewee lists three languages. For example, in line 8 of the interview, participant

5 says, "I speak English (.) A little bit of Afrikaans and mainly Afrikaaps".

The responses analysed above, using the theme of language choices and Facebook practices linked to the "dominance of English," can be linked to the dominance of English as a language in academia and society at large (see Alexander 2000: 14 and Mahjoob 2009: 5). This can be seen as the people describing their language practices in the responses acknowledging they are multilingual, however, there still exists the preference to emphasise English by listing it first. This is interesting from a linguistic perspective as it allows one to see even in situational interactions where people are multilingual and speak a combination of English and other languages like "Kaaps," "Northern Sotho," "Xhosa," and other languages. However, in all instances, people still list English first. This shows an awareness (whether conscious or subconscious) of the dominance of English in society compared to the other languages they speak. This can be linked to the work of Mda (2010: 14) when the author makes an argument on how, in the 21st century:

Speakers of the African languages are still in the majority, but the languages of the minority, English and Afrikaans languages, are the languages of power.

In the above quote, the author is indexing how speakers of different African languages are the "majority"; however, the languages of people in the "minority," namely speakers of English and Afrikaans remain powerful (Mda 2010: 14). I agree with what is being said by the author. Evidence in the data analysed above supports the claim about the politics of language and the dominance of English and Afrikaans as languages. This can be seen as many people indexed speaking English, Afrikaans, and other languages. For example, one person describes speaking "English, Afrikaans and Xhosa"; however, listing "Xhosa" (that is probably a mother tongue) last. Similarly, in one of the interviews, one person mentioned speaking "English (.) A little bit of Afrikaans and mainly Afrikaaps". Once again, someone acknowledges being multilingual by listing three different languages. However, English and Afrikaans are listed first, while Kaaps is listed last. This is significant as it allows one to see how the responses in the data set can be used to exemplify the theme of language choices and Facebook practices linked to the dominance of languages like English and Afrikaans in comparison to a variety of socially and culturally rich "South African languages" (Mda 2010: 14). This is significant as it allows one to see how colonial languages like English and Afrikaans remain dominant in highly





to why they think emojis have become so popular and understood by different people online. There were a variety of different responses to this question. Namely, the popularity and shared meaning linked to emojis are linked to “social media trends” because they are used frequently, allowing people to express themselves better, making for easier communication. However, there were differences where people had completely different answers. For example, many agreed on how emojis have become popularised due to their use in social media trends. One person highlights how emojis became popularised due to their use in “social media trends.” Furthermore, a different person described how emojis have become so widely understood due to “trending videos on Tik-Tok.” Here, respondents agree, with the former highlighting social media in general, while the latter indexed Tik-Tok as a social media application. Likewise, a different person comments on how meaning becomes shared among different people as follows:

The meaning of an emoji spreads like wild fire, literally every single person on this planet uses a mobile device, so if you do not understand the meaning of an emoji now you can literally look it up on Google ... Or just browse through your socials I bet you would know in less than a few minutes.

In the response above, the person explains how meaning becomes shared and universal among social media users because emojis spread so quickly from one person to the next. The reason given is that the meaning attached to emojis spreads rapidly like a “wild fire” on social media, and it has become as simple as searching for the meaning of an emoji online if you do not know how to use it. In the response, the person highlights how easy it has become to find out what an emoji means by using “Google” or searching social media platforms. This is an interesting observation on how meaning-making becomes universal, as online tools aim to standardise the possible meanings attached to certain emojis like “Unicode consortium” exist (Barbieri et al 2016: 3967). “Unicode consortium” is an online platform aimed at standardising emoji meanings, as expressed by the respondent above when they index how one could search for the meaning of an emoji if it is unknown (Barbieri et al 2016: 3967). This is interesting as it allows one to see how people observe and understand meaning-making from their perspective.

These responses are interesting as they allow us to see shared universal meaning linked to “multimodality” is indeed happening between people when emojis are used, and how specific meanings attached to them become normalized over time (Thurlow 2018: 5). This is because

people are using multimodal resources like emojis to encode and share meaning when they communicate or create posts online, on different social media platforms like Facebook. Secondly, a few people described how emojis have become so popular because they aid in “self-expression” and improve how people communicate their emotions to others online. Thirdly, a small number of people indexed how the use of emojis allows for quicker communication because it is simple and easy to use. This can be seen in the responses. For example, one person described how using emojis is convenient because “It’s quicker than typing however I prefer typing.” Here, the person can index how using emojis is quicker than typing a long message. Other people indexed how the use of emojis is simple and aids in easier communication. For example, one person does so by indexing how when one uses emoji:

It’s like going back in time images were used to tell Stories like cave art or hieroglyphics something that seems is already imprinted in humans to understand but just made simple.

In the response above, the person goes into detail about the link between emojis in the 21st century and the use of “hieroglyphics” to tell visual “stories” from the past. This response is fascinating as it allows one to see the possible birth of the foundations of what became popularised as emojis as a continuation of a legacy of storytelling that relies on the “visual” and semiotic to encode meaning (Chaudhary 2022: 3). This can be linked to the work of Chaudhary (2022: 3) when the author can highlight how the use of multiple semiotic resources to encode meaning, of which emojis is a part of can be viewed as a “visual language.” This is an example of semiotic translanguaging, which includes the visual as a form of language use. This is significant as it indexes “semiotic translanguaging” practices online, which includes but is not limited to language (Wei, 2018: 14 and Liu and Lin, 2021: 252). Instead, it includes the visual elements and language use to describe the act of meaning made by the participants that extends beyond language use.

Lastly, a few people gave different responses that could not be grouped as the responses were so different. For example, one person responded to the survey question by simply agreeing to the information stated in the question. For example, by simply answering “yes”. Finally, a different person gave a very vague answer by describing how people use emojis because they do not want people to understand what they are saying, which is sarcasm. For example, the

response reads: "Its for people to use that never wants others really to know what they mean". Here, the person highlights how people who use emojis do so to be vague and elusive when communicating with others. This is because, from the respondents' perspective, the use of emojis is perceived as the opposite of being straightforward. The responses analysed here are significant as they allow one to see evidence of shared and universal meaning happening between different people while room is still left for completely different modes of expression when multimodal semiotic resources are used to communicate.

### **5.1.h Emojis Used to Emphasise Personal Stories and Feelings Online:**







The final set of survey responses analysed here will be presented with a focus on how they use emojis to emphasise their stories and feelings online. In the question, people were asked which emoji was their favourite and why. Many participants gave similar answers as they indexed the same emoji. However, there were still differences; and some participants gave completely different answers. Firstly, to my surprise, many people highlighted the "heart" and/or "love" emoji as their favourite by linking it to the heart and love in one way or another. This can be seen when one zooms in on the specific responses to the survey question. One example is when a person indexed a heart and love by adding the emoji and highlighting the connection between the heart and love as follows, "❤️ The heart because sending love to others is important." Here the person is both highlighting their favourite emoji and indexing that it is their favourite because it allows them to send love to other people online while including the red heart emoji in their response. Secondly, a few people highlighted the laughing until crying emoji or just the normal laughing emoji as their favourite. For example:

I normally use the laughing emoji's because I'm generally a happy person. But I will switch it up when I'm feeling gracious.

This person describes their favourite emoji and why it is their favourite. Then, two other people described how they do not have a favourite emoji. One person indicated that they "don't have one" when asked to describe their favourite emoji. Similarly, another person's response reads as follows: "I don't really have a favorite emoji." In the responses highlighted here, different people agree about not having a favourite emoji.

Lastly, many people described the emoji in a way that could not be grouped with other

responses. For example, one person highlighted the butterfly emoji as their favourite emoji followed by a reason why as follows: "Butterfly. It resembles change, life and beauty". From the user's perspective, a butterfly represents change, life, and beauty, which is beautiful symbolism. Another person refers to the "Smiling emoji because it's a smile." Here, the smiley face emoji is highlighted as their favourite because it represents a smile. A different person gave a short and straightforward answer by highlighting the "flower" emoji without explaining why. The following response is completely different as it includes a detailed explanation of the emoji; however, the person did not include it in the response. For example, the person responded as follows, "The emoji who is face down praying./performing salaah...". Here, a very specific praying emoji linked to Islam is being indexed. This can be seen as the person describes how the emoji is "performing salaah." Salaah is a Arabic word that, when translated into English, means prayer, linking the emoji to Islamic prayer.

One response stood out for me as the respondent gave a list of all their favourite emojis to use as follows, "All the important blue ones, like the blue heart , Planet Earth , praying hands , cry facey , Angel  and this one also .

" This response was unique as the person included the different emojis and a description of each emoji in their response instead of only one. Finally, one person described their favourite emoji without including it in the response as follows, "The one with a panty and bra with that face that look like you are blushing." The responses analysed here are significant in meaning-making because it allows one to see how meaning-making is happening from the users' perspective, and how they describe their favourite emoji can be extracted from the text by Rodrigues (2017). As argued by Rodrigues (2017: 401):

Participants described the meaning in terms of what the stimulus directly represents (e.g., wink); they were also likely to go beyond this mere description and infer its intent (e.g., being cheeky). This is particularly relevant because it allows researchers to assess the extent to which the intended meaning overlaps with the meaning attributed by users and, more importantly. After all, the findings show that this is not always the case.

In the quote above, the author highlights how people can describe the literal/"direct" meaning attached to an emoji and what the specific emoji might symbolise or index beyond the literal meaning. Secondly, the author highlights how users describe their meaning-making practices when prompted to do so. It allows one to see where "intended meaning overlaps" between

different users or moments where meaning does not overlap and people say different things. This can be linked to the interview data below.

In the interview, people were asked to share a memory of the funniest text they had ever received from a friend, focusing on *how* they knew the text was funny and not serious. Many people highlighted using "emojis" in a specific text as an index for determining whether a text is funny or not, from their perspective. For example, participant 1, in lines 82-83, gives a detailed account of what a funny text from a friend would look like. The response is interesting as the person gives a two-fold answer by describing how they would identify the difference between a funny and serious text based on emojis and font size within a given text as follows:

82                    Participant 1: So I knew the text would be funny when she uses a whole lot  
83    of emojis- the laughing emoji and the serious text is when they  
84    put capital letters and that angry face emoji.

The response is interesting as it consists of a detailed explanation of the difference between a funny and serious text from their perspective. Furthermore, the response made by Participant 2, in lines 99-105, can be contrasted with the response above. Participant 1 compares the difference between a funny and serious text, whereas Participant 2 only explains how they know when a text is funny. What the responses have in common is how the emojis used within a specific text influence whether a text will be perceived as funny. Participant 2 described what a funny text looks like from their perspective as follows:

99                    Participant 2: OK my thing- when I know when a text is very very funny  
100    from the other side- from the senders side is when they- they-  
101    use that little emoji where the head is like tilt and the tears- the  
102    tears are- are- running from the eyes because of laughter. Then  
103    know no- something- because they will start with that then  
104    I already know now something funny is coming here (h). The  
105    story gonna be like cracking me up.

In the extract above from the interview, the description of a funny text is long and detailed. Participant 3 describes the text exchange as follows:

74 Participant 3: Uhm This actually happened quite recently. One of our neighbors passed and  
75 then my friend sent me a text saying that uh- it was in Afrikaans. She  
76 said that *die ou mense gaan- die ou mense laas nie lank in die winter nie*  
77 *the old people- the old people do not last long in winter* with  
78 a laughing emoji.

Another aspect of how Participant 3 describes the text exchange is that most of the response is in Kaaps. This can be seen as the participant used English and Kaaps to describe their memory. At this moment, including the emojis completely changes how the message is received. The importance of using emojis as an index for a funny text can also be seen in Participant 5's response. In lines 91-103, participant 5 describes how they interact with their "wife" via text while leaving work. Participant 5 gave a detailed description of which emojis is used when texting with his wife; one can see the importance of how an emoji is used and its placement, which determines how a particular message is received. Another aspect of the response that stood out to me is that it contains a hint at the possibility of the text being perceived as "negative"; however, his wife includes emojis like the "heart," "kissing," and "hug" emojis in the text. The use of emojis here is important because it indexes love and affection. The use of emoji as a determining factor for a funny text is a common similarity between the responses analysed here.

Furthermore, participant 4, in lines 109-115, describes a funny text exchange in response to the interview question. This response can be sharply contrasted with the similarities highlighted in the previously discussed responses, where emojis is an important determining factor for whether a text is funny or serious. However, the memory of a funny text shared by Participant 4 does not rely on emojis. Instead, prior discussions about the discussed topic determine whether a text will be received as funny and not serious. The interaction happened as follows:

101 Participant 4: (h)

102 Tasneem: (h)

103 Participant 4: That was like- Obviously it wasn't- It was actually nice for her (.) She said  
104 like- *Chommie hy het dit geslaat van agter af Friend he hit it from the back*  
105 *(h). ↑Maalf Sorry Joh Wow (h).*

106 Tasneem: (h) It's okay.

107 Participant 4: (h)

108 Tasneem: (h)

At this moment, participant 4 starts laughing loudly before even telling me what the funny text exchange was about. What stood out to me was how she did not reference emojis in the text; instead, because she continuously laughs throughout the re-telling, I can tell she perceived the text as extremely funny. This is interesting, as there is no specific indication in the words that can be highlighted as funny. Instead, the presence of actual laughter within the re-telling of the text exchange indexes that the text was funny and not serious.

The following responses analysed hereafter can be linked to a different interview question. In the interview, people were asked what their favourite emoji was to use and why. Here, I wanted to get a sense of which emoji interviewees were drawn to using to find out more about them as individuals as it relates to their own experiences of online communication. An analysis of the responses enabled me to see the specific words that different people used to describe the semiotic resources present within their favourite emojis. For example, participant 1, in lines 24 and 25, highlights their favourite emoji to use as the "shy emoji" by being very specific about the emoji appearing to be holding hands over its eyes as an index for being shy.

Furthermore, participant 2 briefly describes their favourite emoji by saying, "Oh the little smiley face with the hearts," without going into detail about naming a specific emoji. This is interesting as so many emojis exist, so it becomes hard to pinpoint precisely which emoji the person describes in their response. This is because the person gives a detailed description of the emoji's physical characteristics and semiotic configuration. For example, there is a smiley face emoji with red hearts as eyes and a different smiley face emoji with three red hearts around the smiley face. There is no way of knowing which one the participant indexed; it could be both. Then, participant 3, in lines 21-22, clearly indicates exactly what emoji is their favourite and why. This is because the person describes the emoji as follows, "the heart shape" emoji. In the follow-up interviews, the next participant, participant 4, says something similar: the response contains the words "heart" and "love" within their response. For example, participant 4, in lines 27-30, responds to the interview question by talking about their favourite emoji.

This is done by referencing the emoji as a "heart shape" and including a detailed explanation of what the shape "symbolises" and how it makes them feel when they use and receive the specific emoji. Thus far, in the previous four responses, people only highlighted one emoji as

their favourite. However, the response by Participant 5 is long and detailed, and it indexes two different emojis as their favourite to use. This can be seen in lines 28-32 in the interview, highlighting the "Blushing emoji" and "the hug" emojis in their response. The named emojis is their favourite to use because, from their perspective, it is viewed as a "nice gesture" when the emojis is added to the "end of a message." Here, the person uses the emoji as a form of punctuation, as the participant mentions that they use it at the "end of a message". The responses analysed here are significant as it allows one to see examples in the data to show how people use emojis to emphasise personal stories and feelings over text.

## **5.2 Discussion of Key Findings: Emojis and Memes:**

Practices observed show what can be described as “semiotic translanguaging” practices (see Wei, 2018: 14, Lin, 2019: 8 and Liu and Lin, 2021: 252). Semiotic translanguaging can be viewed as “dynamic and creative linguistic practices that involve flexible use of named languages and language varieties as well as other semiotic resources” like emoji and memes, central to this current research (Wei, 2018: 14). This can be seen in the data set below, when I unpack the unique and fluid meaning-making practices of people on Facebook. This is further emphasised when one links semiotic translanguaging with a socio-cultural grounding of multimodality known as “social semiotics”, in which multimodal semiotic resources are rendered meaningful based on what people are doing with language, “socially and culturally” (Kress and Mavers, 2005: 173). Multimodality is further emphasised in “social semiotics” because it is an approach to the study of multimodal resources which is made meaningful based on what people are doing with it, socially and culturally (Adami, 2016: 455; O’Halloran, 2011: 3, Kress and Mavers, 2005:173 and Liu and Lin, 2021: 248).

Firstly, within the data set, evidence supports that the meaning attached to emojis, and memes become shared and universal over time when people use them. This is because different people were given the same set of emojis, emoji phrases/sentences, and memes to de-code, and respondents gave similar answers. They described similar meaning-making practices while using different words to do so when asked to de-code the meaning of given emojis, emoji sets, and memes. In addition, I analysed responses from the interviews where users described their meaning-making practices. This enabled me to group responses as examples of universal and shared meaning between different people. This was done by grouping the responses for ease of analysis using the following themes: Emojis and Meaning-Making, Memes and Meaning-

Making, and Users, Voice, and Reflections. The data analysed using the named themes provided evidence that universal and shared meaning occurs between people who speak different languages and come from different backgrounds, based on how they attach meaning to the emojis and memes they select and use when communicating with others. However, within the same data, there was support that even though shared and universal meaning is happening, there is still room for different modes of expression online.

Secondly, the following themes are used: Emojis Used to Emphasise Personal Stories and Feelings Online, and Memes and Representations of Desire and Mood. Using the named themes, I could group-specific responses from the data in which people spoke about how emojis are used in texting to emphasise personal stories and feelings when communicating. Likewise, I could group specific responses using the latter theme above, based on moments in the data where people de-coded memes that brought about ideas of desire and mood linked to it being Friday and/or the weekend. Then, I could group certain responses using the following themes: Language Choices and Facebook Practices Linked to the Dominance of English; Meaning-Making and Social Media Practices; and Emoji Popularity and Shared Meaning Linked to Social Media Trends. These themes were exemplified by focusing on the analysis of various responses related to the theme of language choices and Facebook practices linked to the dominance of English. Here, I could analyse responses where people discussed and described their language choices and Facebook practices. What became apparent in the data is that even though people were bilingual and multilingual, they still used English to respond. Even when people list the different languages they speak, English is still listed first, even though people are multilingual South Africans. This allowed me to group certain responses by linking them to the dominance of English in the data.

The main findings of this current research are significant as the strength of what I proposed in the research was to draw analysis on meaning-making practices like the use of emojis and memes within CMC within the South African context, which has been highlighted as examples of semiotic translanguaging linked to a social semiotic view of multimodality. The unique aspect of this research was to allow Facebook users to advocate for themselves, providing their perspective on how they understand their meaning-making. This was done by analysing various responses in the data set, in which people describe their meaning-making practices, language choices, and social media practices, from their perspective. The goal was to contribute to existing literature about emojis and memes by adopting a user-centric approach. This is

important as it gives voice and agency to the people behind the use, selection and meaning attached to emojis and memes within the circulating discourse and academic literature on emojis, memes, and language use on social media. Furthermore, this is important as the discourse about meaning-making practices and emojis and memes includes the voices of the people who use them in their daily communicative practices.

## Chapter 6 -Conclusions

This is where this current research on how Facebook users attach meaning to, select, and use emojis and memes within their CMC within the South African context, specifically while allowing users to advocate for themselves from their perspective ends comes to an end. This current research aimed to contribute to an existing body of literature on emojis and memes, as they relate to multimodality and semiotic representation, by researching the meaning-making practices of Facebook users as examples of semiotic translanguaging linked to a social semiotic view of multimodality. Specifically, by exploring the existing literature, I discovered a gap in the representation of how the average person who uses emojis and memes attaches meaning to them when using it online, and more importantly, what these semiotic resources mean from their perspective.

The strength of my study was its focus on how the average person who uses emojis and memes within their CMC attaches meaning to, selects, and uses multimodal semiotic resources within their online communication as examples of semiotic translanguaging linked to a social semiotic view of multimodality. Secondly, it delved into how these people would go about describing their meaning-making when prompted to do so. This was exemplified by unpacking how Facebook users, interpret and perceive their practices of using emojis and memes within their CMC. Secondly, this was done by studying how Facebook users attach meaning to, select and use emojis and memes by seeing if universal and shared meaning was happening or if there was room for different modes of expression and interpretation within CMC. This research was supported by collecting survey and interview data. The data was analysed and presented by grouping responses according to themes, concerning the initial research questions.

While this research has provided valuable insights, there is still more work that needs to be done. Other avenues of inquiry that would be interesting are how different people from different age groups attach meaning to emojis and memes and how meaning has changed over time. Additionally, one could research the use of emojis and memes on different social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram or Tik-Tok and not just Facebook. These potential areas of research hold promise for further understanding the dynamic and evolving nature of meaning-making practices in the digital age.

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**Appendix:**

**Figure one- The Microsoft survey:**

1-Do you give me consent to me using your survey responses within my research? **(Please know that I am not allowed to use your real name or any other personal information).**

.....

2-What do the following emoji mean to you when you use it?

2.a 😊

.....  
.....

2.b 🍌

.....  
.....

2.c 🙄

.....  
.....

2.d 🤪

.....  
.....

2.e 👁️

.....  
.....

2.f 🙌

.....

.....

2.g 🍇

.....  
.....

2.h ❤️

.....  
.....

2.i 🍑

.....  
.....

3 -Which languages do you speak?

.....  
.....

4-Do you think the use of emoji can be considered a language or not?

.....  
.....

5-What emoji do you use the most and why?

.....  
.....

6-What do the following emoji phrases/sentences mean to you:

6.a   

.....

.....

6. b  

.....

.....

6.c    

.....

.....

7. Which language (s) do you use the most when creating online posts on WhatsApp and/or Facebook?

.....

.....

8. How do you think the meaning of emoji becomes so popular and understood by different people online?

.....

.....

9. Provide a sentence for what you think the following memes mean:  
10.



9. a

.....

.....



9. b

.....

.....



9. c

.....

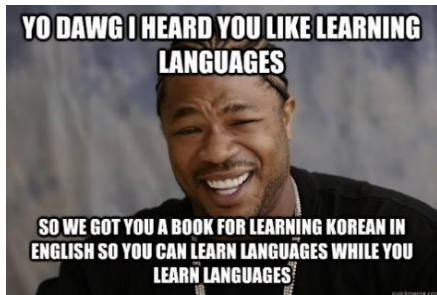
.....



9.d

.....

.....



9.e

.....

.....

10. Where did you grow up?

.....

.....

11. What do you like the most about using emoji?

.....

.....

12. Would you be open to a short interview in May on **Microsoft Teams**, about how you experienced the survey and how you went about answering the questions?

.....  
 .....

**Figure two: Interview schedule.**

Participants:	Digital Interview Date:	Transcribing:
Participant 1	22 <sup>nd</sup> of May 2023 at 1pm	5 <sup>th</sup> and 6 <sup>th</sup> June 2023
Participant 2	26 <sup>th</sup> of May 2023 at 2pm	7 <sup>th</sup> and 8 <sup>th</sup> June 2023
Participant 3	3 <sup>rd</sup> of June 2023 at 1pm	9 <sup>th</sup> and 12 <sup>th</sup> June 2023
Participant 4	3 <sup>rd</sup> of June 2023 at 3pm	24 <sup>th</sup> July 2023
Participant 5	27 <sup>th</sup> of May 2023 at 1pm	25 <sup>th</sup> July 2023

**Figure three- interview questions:**

1. Which language (s) do you speak?
2. How old are you?
3. I liked how you de-coded the emoji in the survey. Tell me how you went about deciding what each emoji means to you?
4. Where did you grow up? Which languages do you remember coming into contact with as a child?
5. Which is your favourite emoji to use and why?

6. What language (s) do you use the most on Facebook?
7. Do you remember life before emoji? When we had to create emoticons using keyboard symbol? :-)
8. Did you enjoy de-coding the memes? What was your favourite part?
9. How often do you use emoji and memes within your online posts?
10. Which emoji is your least favourite and why?
11. What stood out to you the most in the survey you completed?
12. Tell me about your favourite meme you have ever seen?
13. Do you ever caption a post or write a direct message (DM) without using emoji and why?
14. Can you imagine a version of Facebook without emoji and memes?
15. Share a memory about the funniest text you received from a friend. What did your friend say and how did she say it in the text? How did you know the text was funny and not serious?

**Figure four: Facebook post:**

The public Facebook post will be structured as follows:

**Do you make use of emojis and/or memes in your online posts or texts? Do you speak English , Kaaps, Afrikaans or IsiXhosa? If yes, please continue reading!**

My name is Tasneem Francis, and I am twenty-five years old. I am currently a master's student

in the African Studies and Linguistics department at the University of Cape Town (UCT). Linguistics is the scientific study of language use and society as interconnected social processes. **I am currently researching how people attach meaning to, use, share and select emojis and memes online.** I want to research if the meaning attached to emojis and memes are universal (for example, if we all collectively decide that the red heart emojis means love) or if there is room for different ways of expression when a person selects, uses, and shares specific emojis and memes online.

The survey is **voluntary** and completely **anonymous**. It is important that you know that all of the information from the survey will become publicly available to other staff members at the University of Cape Town (UCT), however, **I am not allowed to use your survey responses without your consent. You need to give me consent. Consent also includes not being allowed to state your real name or any other identifying information** to people who will read my research once it is published. **I will only analyse the survey answers you provide.** You are allowed to withdraw consent at any moment in time without being judged or asked why consent was withdrawn if you feel that you no longer want to be a part of the research. **You remain in control** of your information and what I am allowed to use as a researcher.

**If you make use of emojis and memes online, I would like to invite you to complete a short online survey.** The survey should take no longer than **10-15 minutes** to complete.

**Follow the link to complete the survey: <https://forms.office.com/r/FnGaNhrKJt>**

If you have any questions, feel free to email me at **[FRNTAS004@mvuct.ac.za](mailto:FRNTAS004@mvuct.ac.za)** or you can send a **WhatsApp** to **074 861 4484**.

Tasneem Francis – UCT Post-graduate Researcher.

**Figure five: Transcription key – Jefferson’s transcription conventions:**

SYMBOL	DEFINITION AND USE
[yeah] [okay]	Overlapping talk
=	End of one TCU and beginning of next begin with no gap/pause in between (sometimes a slight overlap if there is speaker change). Can also be used when TCU continues on new line in transcript.
(.)	Brief interval, usually between 0.08 and 0.2 seconds
(1.4)	Time (in absolute seconds) between end of a word and beginning of next. Alternative method: “none-one-thousand-two-one-thousand...”: 0.2, 0.5, 0.7, 1.0 seconds, etc.
wo::rd	Colon indicates prolonged vowel or consonant. One or two colons common, three or more colons only in extreme cases.
WORD	Upper case indicates syllables or words louder than surrounding speech by the same speaker
word-	A dash indicates a cut-off. In phonetic terms this is typically a glottal stop

<b>SYMBOL</b>	<b>DEFINITION AND USE</b>
.hhh	Inbreath. Three letters indicate ‘normal’ duration. Longer or shorter inbreaths indicated with fewer or more letters.
hhh	Outbreath. Three letters indicate ‘normal’ duration. Longer or shorter inbreaths indicated with fewer or more letters.
whhord	Can also indicate aspiration/breathiness if within a word (not laughter)
w(h)ord	Indicates abrupt spurts of breathiness, as in laughing while talking
£word£	Pound sign indicates smiley voice, or suppressed laughter
#word#	Hash sign indicates creaky voice
~word~	Tilde sign indicates shaky voice (as in crying)
(word)	Parentheses indicate uncertain word; no plausible candidate if empty
(( ))	Double parentheses contain analyst comments or descriptions