



Storytelling for Geeks. A Multimodal Analysis of Disney's Stickers

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1. INTRODUCTION

In September 2016, the Walt Disney Company – one of the top global media companies in the world¹ – launched through its digital segment (Disney Consumer Products and Interactive Media), a series of packs of animated GIFs featuring characters and art from Disney stories². Each pack comes with 21 stickers and can be purchased for 1.99 dollars on Apple App Store. The Disney stickers can be then attached to the texts created on iMessage, the instant messaging service developed by Apple, on iOS 10.

Stickers are – along with *emoji*, GIFs, videos and images – graphical devices or “graphicons”, that is “a blend of ‘graphical’ and ‘icons’” (Herring and Dainas 2017: 2185) which are used to communicate on social media platforms. Specifically, stickers are elaborate character-driven emoticons, that feature the illustration of one or more characters and are visually realized as a mix of cartoons and comics-like representation of emotions and/or of actions.

¹ “The World’s Most Valuable Brands”, *Forbes* (2017), <https://www.forbes.com/powerful-brands/list/#tab:rank>

² See ‘*Disney Stickers*’ now available for iMessage, <https://dcpi.disney.com/disney-stickers-now-available-imessage> (consulted September 2017).



The origin of this category of “graphicons” can be traced back to LINE, the social media platform which is widely used by people in Asian countries such as Japan, Korea, Indonesia, Thailand and, more recently, also in Spain (Lim 2015). The platform was created in 2011 by the South Korean Internet company Naver for post-tsunami Japan. At the time, the company opted for data-based call and text message systems because they were more efficient than regular telephone calls on the telecommunication networks which had been affected by the disaster (Russell 2013).

Stickers have rapidly become not only a new tool that can be used, like *emoji*, to make communication easier and faster on mobiles, as Kanji (the system of Japanese writing which uses Chinese characters) may present difficulties in being input digitally; stickers have also become a lucrative business as they may be customized for brands, products or limited-edition events and thus turned into a sort of collectibles. Indeed, the collection of characters created by LINE – such as Brown the bear, Cony the rabbit and Moon – has developed into a cult with huge off-line merchandising (Dingle 2014).

LINE has set up a model of business according to which the free messaging app is expanded with an in-app games portfolio where users can buy virtual goods through games and messaging content like stickers and where stickers are used to promote movies, music and more (Dogtiev 2017). The platform LINE cannot thus be defined just a free calls messaging app, more precisely, it is a social entertainment platform with a freemium approach that sells stickers in app and offers official accounts to celebrities and brands in each country it has been localized to (Lomas 2013).

Facebook (Fb) was one of the first Western social platforms to adopt such a social/entertainment business model that intertwines social media with pop culture (Yeun 2013). As a matter of fact, on both the web and the mobile versions of Fb messaging system, it is possible to find, along with the sticker pack modelled on the social media platform founder’s dog, Beast – other sets of sticker collections based on intellectual property (IP) products like the Smurfs, the Peanuts or Trolls (Constine 2013).

Going back to Disney stickers, they were launched by a virtual campaign named *As Told by Emoji* created by the interactive agency Curious Media for Disney’s YouTube Channel³, the aim of which was to retell Disney tales adopting a so-called “emoji storytelling approach, that is through custom designed emoji”⁴. To date, the campaign is composed of a series of twenty-one short, animated videos that – according to Andrew Sugerman, the executive vice president of Disney Consumer Products and Interactive Media’s Publishing and Digital Media business unit – “reimagine both classic and contemporary Disney films through the language of the contemporary digital age, with all the associated playfulness and humor” (Grobar 2017). Through stickers, thus, Disney seems to have adopted LINE’s

³ “As Told by Emoji Playlist”, *YouTube Disney Channel*, https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLpSnISGciSWPZtUvIHLEp9_M5FPIC8LLa (consulted September 2017).

⁴ See “As Told by Emoji Disney Project”, *Curious Media*, <http://curiousmedia.com/projects/as-told-by-emoji> (consulted September 2017).



social/entertainment business model in what appears as a strategy of cross-platforms re-branding in a digital age and for a digital audience.

The present essay will analyze the features of Disney stickers as a resource to make meaning in digital language adopting a socio-semiotic multimodal approach integrated with mediated discourse analysis. Specifically, it will start from illustrating the theoretical and methodological standpoint which underpins the research, it will then focus both on the examination of the “modal affordances” (Kress 1993) of Disney digital stickers – that is on “what it is possible to express and represent readily, easily with a mode, given its materiality and given the cultural and social history of that mode” (Jewitt and Kress 2003: 14) – and on the semantic components added to stickers by the ‘translation’ of Disney stories into digital language in the *As Told by Emoji* campaign.

2. THEORETICAL/METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Communication through stickers is intended here as an instance of the process of mediation, “the age-old human practice of using tools to take action in the world” (Jones and Hafner 2012, 2). Stickers can be considered “cultural tools that mediate our actions in the world, the ability to use [which] is the hallmark of human consciousness” (*ibidem*). In detail, they can be referred to as “symbolic tools” that, like language, are the “carriers of social structures, histories and ideologies inasmuch as they manifest certain patterns of affordances and constraints” (Jones and Norris 2005, 49-50) in the meanings they can help realize and the actions that can be taken through their use. Indeed, these tools may “enable us to express new kinds of meanings, establish new kinds of relationships” but, at the same time, can “prevent us from doing other things” or expressing in other ways (Jones and Hafner 2012: 3).

In the post-print communicative scenario of contemporary knowledge society (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006 [1996]; Lankshear, 1997), these tools represent the tiles of what Kramsch has defined “symbolic competence”, that is the “ability to produce and exchange symbolic goods in the complex global context in which we live today” (2006, 251). By the term, Kramsch means to refer to the rather “sophisticated competence in the manipulation of symbolic systems” in their diverse discursive modalities (e.g. spoken, written, visual, aural...) and in relation to the different sets of contemporary hybridized genres, styles and registers. A competence which appears to be crucial in the path to fully active citizenship, where people need to be able to “interpret meanings from discourse features” and to “understand the practice of meaning making itself”, including the “semiotic choices” (2006: 251).

As said above, the Disney Stickers will be here analyzed as symbolic tools sign-makers can exploit to create meaning in digitally mediated communication adopting a social semiotic and multimodal perspective which is focused on the socially shaped process of creating meaning (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001; 2006 [1996]; Kress 2010). According to Kress and van Leeuwen, multimodality is “the use of several semiotic modes in the design of a semiotic product or event” (2001: 20). Even if a variety of



theoretical perspectives can be adopted to investigate the process of meaning making in a multimodal scenario, multimodality has been historically associated to three main approaches: conversational analysis, systemic functional linguistics and social semiotics.

Social semiotics follows Michael Halliday's socio-linguistic theories (2007 [1975]) that view language primarily as a resource for meaning making and have shifted the focus of linguistics from the "syntactic age" into a sort of 'semiotic age'. Social semiotics is an approach that "extends the social interpretation of language and its meanings to the whole range of representational and communicational modes or semiotic resources for making meaning that are employed in a culture" (Jewitt 2009: 1). It was pioneered by Bob Hodge and Gunther Kress (1988) in the 1980s "building on critical linguistics, systemic functional linguistics, semiotics and social theory" (Jewitt, Bezemer, O'Halloran 2016: 9) and is based on the motivated sign theory of meaning, according to which, the relation between the signifier and the signified is never arbitrary (Kress 1993).

Central to the epistemological perspective of social semiotics is the concept of "mode", that – according to Kress – can be defined as a "set of socially and culturally shaped resources for meaning making" which features a diversified range of "affordances" (2009: 54). In van Leeuwen's words, "semiotic resources have a meaning potential, based on their past uses, and a set of affordances based on their possible uses, and these will be actualized in concrete social contexts where their use is subject to some form of semiotic regime" (2005: 285).

According to the MODE glossary of multimodality (2012), the term "affordance" can be traced back to the psychologist James Gibson (1979) who, working on agent-situated interaction, defined affordances "all the 'action possibilities' latent in an environment, where the potential uses of a given object arise from its perceivable properties". The term was later used by Kress (2010: 80) to "identify the potentialities and the constraints of different modes, what is possible to express represent or communicate easily with the resources of a mode, and what is less straightforward or even impossible – and this is subject to constant social work"⁵. From a multimodal and socio semiotic perspective, the word 'affordance' refers to the "materially, culturally, socially and historically developed ways in which meaning is made with particular semiotic resources" (*ibidem*).

As said above, the present paper will analyze the "modal affordances" of Disney's stickers, that is it will explore the potentialities and the constraints for meaning making these symbolic tools offer to sign-makers both in terms of the types of representations fostered and hindered at a material and at a cultural level. From a methodological point of view, the next paragraph will be dedicated to the main communicative and technical features of such a digital artifact drawing data from the promotional videos posted on the official Disney stickers website⁶, the aim of which is to illustrate the potentialities of the new "graphics" in simulated chats. The decision

⁵ See <https://multimodalityglossary.wordpress.com/affordance/> (consulted September 2017).

⁶ See <http://lol.disney.com/games/disney-stickers> (consulted September 2017).



to opt for this source of data instead of collecting actual anonymized conversations is due to the fact that the main focus here is to investigate the properties of the new type of digital icons and not to analyze the way users actually exploit it – which could potentially be a second step in the research path on this communicative resource.

Along with the material logic of the icons as technical products, the second part of the analysis will be dedicated to the exploration of the semantic-discursive ('content') meaning potential of Disney stickers (Debray 2000). Indeed, for the creation of these digital tools Disney Consumer Products and Interactive Media has built on a 'pantheon' of already existing characters and has "resemiotized" (Iedema 2001, 2003) them into "custom designed emoji"⁷. The concept of "resemiotization", which arose in the realm of social semiotics and multimodal studies, focuses on the process of "re-construal of semiotic resources within and across multimodal processes and texts" (Jewitt, Bezemer and O'Halloran 2016: 159).

The analysis of the semantic-discursive dimension of Disney stickers will be conducted with a qualitative approach: examples from one out of the twenty-one short animated videos of the *As Told by Emoji* campaign will be selected to explore the processes of "remediation" (Bolter and Grusin 1999) and "recontextualization" (Bernstein 1990) of Disney stories on digital platforms. More precisely, the multimodal discourse will investigate how typical user interactions with mobile interfaces and applications are exploited along with the stylistic features of digitally mediated communication to re-tell the stories to a contemporary audience.

3. THE MODAL AFFORDANCES OF DISNEY'S DIGITAL STICKERS

As said above, the concept of "modal affordance" was adopted by Kress to describe the material, cultural, social and historical potentialities (and constraints) of different modes in his theory of the motivated relation of signifier and signified (1993, 2010, 2003). To understand the potentialities and the limitations offered by the new Disney "graphicons", it is necessary to start from the technical digital features underpinning their main functionalities.

Indeed, one of the main characteristics of these stickers is that they can be "put anywhere" in chats: even on "sent and received photos".⁸ This implementation of the functionalities of stickers is related to the Messages framework in the operative system iOS 10 that enables developers to create app extensions that let users interact with them within their chats. Users can thus take advantage of a new ecosystem built on top of the standard Apple Messaging application, that enhances users' experience of the on-line chat, opening new possibilities for mashing up contents⁹.

⁷ See "As Told by Emoji Disney Project", *Curious Media*, <http://curiousmedia.com/projects/as-told-by-emoji> (consulted September 2017).

⁸ See <http://lol.disney.com/games/disney-stickers> (consulted October 2017).

⁹ See <https://developer.apple.com/imessage> (consulted October 2017).

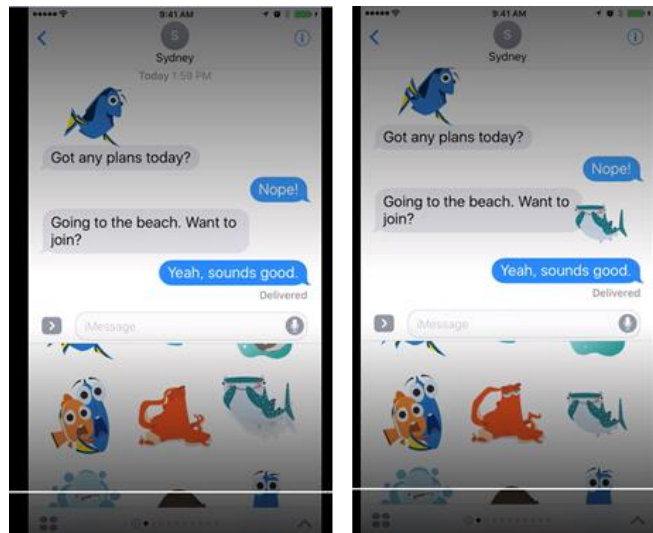


Figure 1. Screenshots of Disney Stickers' *Finding Dory* Video (retrieved at <http://lol.disney.com/games/disney-stickers>, November 2017)

From a linguistic point of view, the possibility to add stickers to already sent and received messages in instant messaging dyadic chats appears to add a new dimension to Grice's relevance maxim (1975, 1989), according to which a partner's contribution to a conversation is expected "to be appropriate to immediate needs at each stage of the transaction" (Grice 1975: 47). Indeed, with Disney Stickers, it is possible for the participants in the speech act to contribute to the conversational goal of the other speaker/hearer by exploiting the layout of the site of display as a meaning making resource. As shown in figure 1, the sequential relevance can be realized not only through a temporal sequence, but also through a spatial dimension that can be modulated being, as it is, free from the usual constraints of the layout of instant messaging interfaces.

The promotional video features a conversation between speaker A and speaker B, where the latter – once invited to the beach – expresses her consent not only at the verbal level through her enthusiastic and highly informal reply ("Yeah, sounds good"), but attaches the whale sticker from the *Finding Dory* pack to the invitation as her second reply.

An intersemiotic connection is thus created between the verbal message of speaker A ("Going to the beach. Want to join?") and the added "graphicon", which aims at encoding inter-subjective coherence through the spatial proximity of the two elements in the visual layout. It is a feature that has the potentiality to affect the coherence of the conversational relevance, which is usually rendered across turns of talk, and to disrupt turn adjacency (Herring 1999) even in dyadic interactions, since adjacency sequences can be created when turn talks are already over.



Figure 2. Larger version of the Disgust sticker from Disney's Inside Out Pack (personal communication)

If intratextual references can be created by spatial associations, the salience of visual replies can be modulated by the size of icons (see figure n° 2) since stickers feature the technical potentiality to be “scaled”¹⁰. This functionality pragmatically turns the spatial dimension of the icons (when magnified), into the functional equivalent of emphatic exclamation marks or of the orthographic use of capital letters in Netspeak (Crystal 2004), even if without the default negative connotation of yelling.

As said above, stickers are elaborate character-driven emoticons, that represent emotions and/or actions in a mix of cartoon and comics-like representations. At representational level, Disney Stickers feature a highly complex multimodal composition. Indeed, on the one hand, they present a recursive structure which is similar to that of animated GIFS (graphic interchange format); on the other hand, they mainly exploit the cultural and visual conventions of Japanese comics (manga).



Figure 3. Screenshots of Disney's Leading Ladies Sticker Pack (Retrieved at <http://lol.disney.com/games/disney-stickers>, November 2017)

¹⁰ See <http://lol.disney.com/games/disney-stickers> (consulted October 2017).



Animated GIFs are “web-based graphics that contain a series of frames [which] can be used to create graphics in the form of looped moving images” (Gürsimsek 2016: 330). It is a digital format that is usually exploited in micro-blogs such as Tumblr or Twitter. At the level of the expression plane such a structure adds “movement” to the semiotic components of the multimodal artifact that stickers constitute. From a communicative point of view, the repeated sequential use of the same combination of visual and verbal structures in Disney’s digital stickers seems to have the function of emphasizing the illocutionary force of the multimodal ensemble (its intended communicative aim), as in the example shown in figure 3.

In that figure, two shots of the same sticker from the *Leading Ladies* pack have been selected and pasted in a sequence which aims at reproducing the chronological order of the represented recursive action where the main participant (Princess Mulan) jumps using a wooden stick while a comic-like typographic message encodes her thoughts/words (“Yes!”). A token of multimodal cohesion between the verbal and the visual modalities is given by “homospatiality”, that is the “spatial parallelism between language and pictures” (Lim 2004) that are here framed by the light blue circle which marks the multimodal unit. The relationship between words and images in that figure can be described as an “assertive relationship [where] all the involved modalities use a grammar” (Cohn, Taylor, Pederson 2017: 22). More precisely, it could be defined as a “vis-assertive” relationship as the visual appears to “carry more semantic weight” than the verbal text and “the primary gist is retained even when text is deleted” (Cohn, Taylor, Pederson 2017: 22-23).

In addition to that, since meaning in multimodal texts is created out of the co-contextualization of the different semiotic resources (Thibault 2000), the relation that operates in figure 3 is a “co-contextualizing relation [where] the meaning of one modality seems to ‘reflect’ the meaning of the other through some type of convergence” (Lim 2004: 239). Indeed, the association of the visual image and the verbal component sets the frame for the interpretation of the polysemic informal affirmative expression, the semantic focus of which is shifted from an expression of agreement to an expression of pleasure and excitement for an achieved goal. It is a shift on the content plane which is reinforced by the direction of both the underlying mark and the movement of the kinetic icon. On the expression plane, the narrative vector constituted by the wooden stick of the represented Actor strengthens the transactional action process of jumping (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006 [1996]: 63) and the underlying sign under the word “Yes” follows the direction of the Western reading path that is from left to right in a potentially infinite looping sequence.

The second component of the representational level is the comics-like realization of these symbolic tools which mainly exploits the language of Japanese manga as highlighted by the Disney corporation itself when they defined the new stickers as the transformation of their well-known characters into “custom designed emoji”¹¹. The term “emoji” is a loanword from Japanese, a portmanteau that blends “e

¹¹ See “As Told by Emoji Disney Project”, *Curious Media*, <http://curiousmedia.com/projects/as-told-by-emoji> (consulted September 2017).



'picture' and *moji* 'letter, character' and identifies "a small digital image or icon used to express an idea or emotion in electronic communication" (OED 2015). Even if Disney animated stickers are a typology of "graphics" with a set of affordances that is different from those of *emoji*, the reference to this now well renowned item of digital communication (Moschini 2016) outlines both the resemiotization process that occurred and the process of the progressive merging of American and Japanese cultural and semiotic components in global postmodern digital culture (Murakami 2005, Napier 2007), as the example selected in figure 4 shows.



Figure 4. Screenshots of Disney's Pirates of the Caribbean Sticker Pack (Retrieved at <http://lol.disney.com/games/disney-stickers>, November 2017)

Indeed, figure 4 portrays the leading character of the Pirate of the Caribbean saga, Captain Jack Sparrow, realized as a sticker. Not only has the human character on the screen interpreted by the actor Johnny Deep been turned into a cartoon figure, but such a translation has transformed it into an infantilized cute (*kawaii*) character, which is typical of contemporary Japanese visual language.

From a semiotic point of view, such a figurative strategy exploits a depictive technique labelled "super deformed" (SD) which is very frequent in Japanese comics language (Bouissou 2011 [2010], 129). Super deformed bodies become symbolic icons since the emotions of the characters are encoded in the distortions of their bodily proportions. It is a technique which traces back to traditional Japanese cultural practices like the ancient woodblock printing and the masks and the performances of the Kabuki theatre.

In particular, the kind of distortion that has been operated on the Jack Sparrow character has turned it into a "*chibi*" figure. "*Chibi*" is a Japanese slang word for "small" or "short" that has its roots in classical Japanese language and describes a "tiny, rounded thing", something the sharp edges of which have been rounded out (Suzuki 2016). In manga and anime jargon, the term refers to characters which are represented with the head/ full body proportions of children, that is from 1:2 to 1:4 even if they are adult people or animals, or also objects (Hayashi 2012: 61). On the content plane,



manga *Chibi* figures aim at conveying the idea of cuteness and are one of the main “signifiers” of contemporary Japanese popular culture and, more precisely, of the so called “*kawaii*” (cute) style that flourished in the 1980s. One of the most famous icons of “*kawaii*” style is the popular fictional character Hello Kitty which was created in 1974 by the Japanese company Sanrio. This childlike style “celebrates sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, simple, genuine, gentle, vulnerable, weak and inexperienced social behaviour and physical appearances” (Kinsella 1995: 220). *Kawaii* culture is not only “not threatening”, it is also “actively reassuring”: these are all features that seem to be “particularly attractive in a world that appears increasingly chaotic and dark” (Napier 2007, 129).

According to the artist Takashi Murakami (2005), the infantilization of Japanese contemporary popular culture and the rise of *otaku* (geek) culture, which can be generally defined as a kind of pop-cult fanaticism, are related to the defeat of Japan in the Second World War and to the post-war relationship with the United States. In the words of Hiroki Azuma, they are “the result of the Japanization of American pop culture” (2004). Conversely, Disney digital stickers’ *kawaii* style may represent a token of the Americanization of Japanese popular culture. Indeed, the flow of cultural and subcultural material between America and Japan has been creating a global postmodern culture where aesthetic, artistic, and intellectual traditions influence each other across national boundaries (Kelts 2006, Tatsumi 2006). It is the interweaving of two cultural traditions, which, in the case of digital language, has occurred largely thanks to the exchanges of the discursive practices of computer culture communities, which are deeply intertwined with the practices of geek communities such as sci-fi, fantasy and comics fandom (Moschini 2016: 22), to which the *As Told by Emoji* campaign seems to be addressed.

4. THE CAMPAIGN

As said above, Disney stickers were launched by a virtual campaign named *As Told by Emoji*, the aim of which was to narrate both classic and contemporary Disney’s movies through custom designed *emoji*. The campaign is composed of a series of twenty-one short videos the declared aim of which is to retell Disney films “through the language of the contemporary digital age, with all the associated playfulness and humor” (Grobar 2017). The multimodal strategies chosen for the adaptation of Disney films to the digital context as well as the related resemiotization processes are manifold.

Indeed, starting from the title of the campaign, it is possible to highlight the choice of conferring agency to the *emoji* that, instead of being portrayed as if they were the tools selected to create meaning, are rendered at the verbal level as the agents of the passive sentence, while the object, “the story” – here elicited – is turned into the subject acted upon. It is a sentence structure which is highly flexible from a communicative point of view since the name of the story which is ‘told’ by each video can be added without altering the tagline. In addition to that, at orientational level, the



passive structure constructs the image of the *emoji* as personified, thus introducing the role as actors that the animated icons will play in the video.

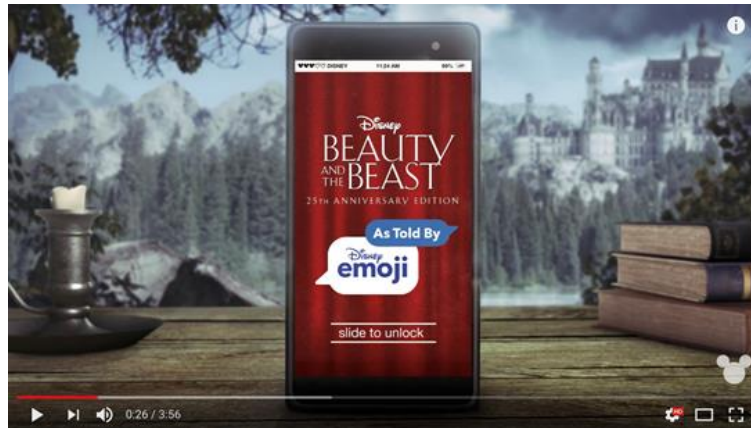


Figure 5. Disney's *Beauty and the Beast As Told by Emoji*
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o4gMJynUqCI>)

The example selected here for the analysis is the *emoji* translation of the movie *Beauty and the Beast* released in theatres in 1991 in its animated version and in 2017 as a live action movie. The animated version was chosen by the Library of Congress for preservation in the National Film Registry since it is considered “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant” (Cannady 2002).

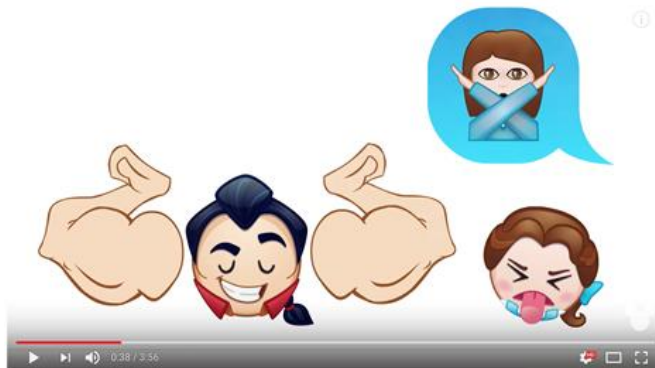


Figure 6. Disney's *Beauty and the Beast As Told by Emoji*, a snapshot
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o4gMJynUqCI>)

As far as the “recontextualization” of Disney’s stories is concerned, the first multimodal step is the conflation of the two sites of displays in the opening of the videos. Indeed, as figure 5 shows, a mobile phone is set on a theatrical stage: while the latter represents a visual anchor to the old movie context, the display of the phone will



now function as the new context of narration, and this new role is highlighted by the central position of the smart phone in the visual layout which confers it salience (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006 [1996]). Such a recontextualization is the starting point of a process of resemiotization, where the characters are portrayed in their *kawaii* version, analyzed in the previous paragraph, and making use of all the digital resources in terms of the features and the applications of the mobile as their story progresses. See, for instance, figure 6 where Belle from the *Beauty and the Beast*, communicates with Gaston through an actual *emoji* and, more precisely, “the person gesturing no” *emoji*¹². In addition to that, even if – as said above – the encoders of the campaign message decided to use the term “*emoji*” in the tagline, actually the “*graphicons*” they are referring to are “*stickers*” that feature not only a set of affordances which is different from those of *emoji*, but also a different pragmatic function. Indeed, the comics-like semiotic structure of stickers make them more similar to *kaomoji*, the Japanese ancestors of *emoji* (see figure 7).

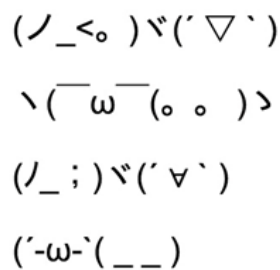


Figure 7. Examples of *kaomoji* expressing sympathy (<http://kaomoji.ru/en/>)

As Katsuno and Yano (2007) explain, *kaomoji* present a quite complex structure that may incorporate words, movements and onomatopoeic sounds like single frames of manga which consist not only of “simply drawings and words”, but present “a complex visual grammar of subject, object, word balloon, movement, back-ground *keiyu* (figure symbol) and *on’yu* (sound symbol)” (2007: 213). Such complexity allows *kaomoji* to stand on their own and to express, along with emotions, objects, actions and even stories, like the verbal code. While many of the analyses on the pragmatic function of *emoji* (e.g. Chiusaroli 2015; Nasser, Benenson et al. 2013; Stark and Crawford 2015) show that, when *emoji* are used in global digital discourse (that is not in the specific cultural context out of which they originated), they are able to convey common and ‘universal’ meanings, while their full semantic and pragmatic realization is highly dependent on the presence of a verbal co-text/context (Moschini 2016).

¹² See the U+1F645 and U+1F3FD emoji in the *Full Emoji List, v5.0* at <https://unicode.org/emoji/charts/full-emoji-list.html> (consulted in November 2017)

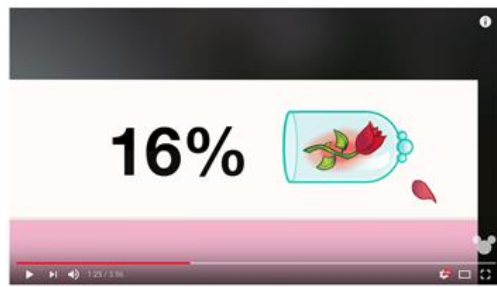


Figure 8. The Enchanted Rose multimodal metaphor from the *Beauty of the Beast as Told by Emoji* video

Going back to the ‘translation’ of the language of cinema in terms of the language of mobile technologies, an interesting example of the chosen adaptation strategies is given by the “multimodal metaphors” (Forceville 2008) used in the videos such as the one represented in figure 8, which could be transliterated as LIFETIME IS BATTERY POWER. The image shows the Enchanted Rose, the mystical flower that the prince is offered by the old beggar asking for shelter in his castle. Once the prince refuses to host her, she reveals her true form as enchantress and curses him. The Enchanted Rose, which would bloom until the prince’s twenty-first birthday, symbolizes an hourglass, a timing device indicating the time left to him to change his heart. In the *As Told by Emoji* video, the Enchanted Rose is in the right upper section of the mobile screen, the position where battery icons are placed on iPhones (the model of smartphones used in the Disney campaign videos). In addition to that, the glass dome containing the Enchanted Rose is portrayed horizontally to reproduce the direction of the battery icon. The construal of such a multimodal metaphor leverages on the familiarity the receivers of the messages need to have with the visual layout of the mobile screen interface which makes them able to decode the informational value associated with that portion of the site of display.

In terms of adaptation strategies, it is also important to highlight that the linear temporal progression of the movie stories is turned in the videos into the flow of displayed texts or graphics on mobile screens which is usually due to the act of scrolling. Indeed, the characters unfold their actions through movements that make use of all the potential space offered by the site of display to symbolize the passing of time; while changes in the spatial settings are often represented with the launching of apps, such as an e-book application that is turned into the set for the scene of the movie taking place in the library, or a travel app that provides the description of the Beast’s castle as if it were a hotel. Highly interesting is the use of game apps, like the one modelled on the puzzle video game *Candy Crush* which is used to recontextualize the “Be Our Guest” Broadway-inspired musical number performed by the castle staff to welcome Belle or the assault to the Beast’s castle scene, which is set to a *Crush the Castle* game-like context (see figure 9).



Figure 9. The Crush the Castle game like recontextualization of the assault on the Beast's castle scene

The aim of the above-mentioned original game was to kill all the inhabitants of various castles by using a trebuchet to hurl large rocks, while – in the video – Gaston, the antagonist, uses the machine to break in the castle. From a linguistic point of view, if viewers are already familiar with the game, such a “constitutive intertextual” reference (Fairclough 1992: 85) activates reading practices based on the syntax and the semantics of the target ‘language’. As a matter of fact, according to Gee, video games can be conceptualized as “conversational spaces”, where participants engage in “probe-response-reflection-probe again” cycles, as in a conversation between two people with the difference that it is the gaming platform, not a person, which answers back (2015: 25-26). Specifically, the distinctive syntax of games is “composed of the objects and space relevant to action in the game” while the semantics of a game “is a conceptual labelling of [its] spaces and things [...] in terms of what they are functionally good for in the game” (2015: 20).

As per the register of the video, it features an ironic communicative stance which, in the words of Disney corporation, was a key component in the process of re-branding for a digital audience. In particular, the process aimed at recreating the “playfulness and humor” usually associated with contemporary digital language (Grobar 2017). As a matter of fact, as Brenda Danet highlighted in her sociolinguistic investigation on the language of the internet, “the nature of computer as medium fosters playfulness” (2001: 24). The promotion of this defining feature is associated by Danet to factors like the immersive and the interactive characteristics of the medium itself. She relates also the joyful attitude of the (then) emergent Net practices to the culture of hackers, the community of enthusiast computer programmers and systems designers that arose in the 1960s around the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's (MIT's) Tech Model Railroad Club (TMRC) and the MIT Artificial Intelligence Laboratory (Isacson 2014), the influential group of ‘techies’ who fostered the digital revolution¹³.

¹³ The concept has later been expanded to refer to the hardware hobbyist home computing community of the 1970s and to software and video games programmers in the 1980s. Hackers are not to be confused with “Crackers” who, in hacker jargon, break the security on a system in order to steal data or plant malicious software.



As a matter of fact, “playfulness” is “central to what hackers do and how they perceive themselves” (Danet 2001: 26) since it is deeply connected with the intellectual challenge of creatively overcoming or circumventing limitations both in programming language and in verbal language (Raymond 1993).

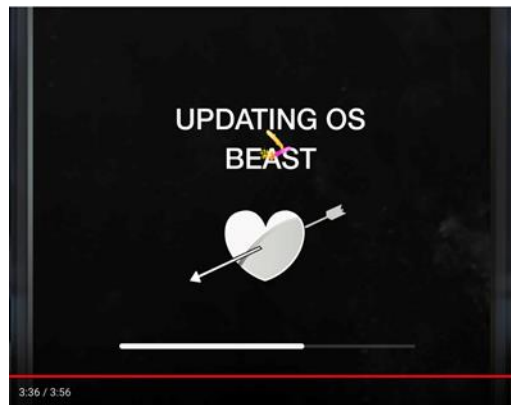


Figure 10. The Beast/Prince transformation process translated into digital language

A pivotal example of this ‘hacker humor’ in the analyzed video is offered by figure 10 which shows the translation into digital language of the moment in which the Beast is transformed into the prince. The process is resemiotized as the updating of an operating system, the system software that manages computer hardware and software resources and provides common services for computer programs. The metaphor which underpins the image (THE BEAST/THE PRINCE IS AN OPERATING SYSTEM) can be considered an ironic reference to a foundational component of cybernetics and, more broadly, to the conceptualization of the world which lies at the very heart of computer culture: the “computational metaphor”. According to this metaphor, any process or thing, even biological entities, can be represented in terms of computational processes. Digital language is thus conceptualized as the new universal form of notation with “a vocabulary and a syntax” that is “able to describe in a single language all kinds of phenomenon” (Kelly 1998). The transformation/updating of the beast into the prince in the video is thus ironically translated into the verbal/visual output of a computational process, it is adapted to this new universal contemporary form of notation and encoding.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The aim of the present paper was to study the digital stickers released in 2016 by Disney Corporation as a resource for meaning making in electronically mediated communication from a socio-semiotic and multimodal perspective. Specifically, the



focus of the essay was to analyze the “modal affordances” of Disney stickers, that is, to investigate the potentialities and the constraints that these branded “graphicons” offer to sign makers in terms of the kinds of representations that they foster both at a material and a cultural level. The material logic of the icons as technical products has been taken into account in the first part of the analysis; while the exploration of the semantic/discursive content meaning potential of these symbolic tools has been investigated as a second step.

The results of the analysis are that, on the expression plane, Disney’s digital stickers present a set of new communicative features that were made possible by the technical characteristics of the operative system, Apple iOS10, a system which enables developers to create app extensions and enhances users’ experience in on-line chats. The first technical feature is that it is possible to “put stickers anywhere in chats”, overcoming the usual constraints of the textual boxes layout in instant messaging interfaces. From a linguistic point of view, this seems to add a new layer to Grice’s relevance maxim since the sequential relevance in chats can be realized not only through a temporal sequence, which is usually spatially represented as a stream of boxes in chronological order scrolling to the top, but also through the exploitation of the entire spatial layout. Moreover, since stickers can be added to already sent and received messages, inter-subjective coherence may be realized by the spatial proximity between the sticker and the message it is attached to. Potentially, this feature can affect both the coherence of the conversational relevance and the turn adjacency in dyadic interactions as adjacency pairs can be created when the turn talks are already over.

The second outlined technical feature is the possibility to “scale and resize” stickers. From a communicative point of view, the act of scaling embodies the possibility to modulate salience thus visually realizing the functional equivalent of emphatic exclamation marks or of capitalization. In addition to that, stickers are animated “graphicons” which present a recursive structure like that of animated GIFS: it is a structure that not only adds movement to the set of resources which converge in the process of meaning creation, but that appears to have the function of emphasizing the illocutionary force of the messages vehicled by these multimodal ensembles.

On the content plane, Disney stickers seem to mainly exploit the cultural and visual conventions of Japanese visual language. Indeed, the characters of almost all the stickers packs released until now (with the exception of the Mickey Mouse pack) feature a distortion in their bodily proportions which make them seem like children. These “*chibi*” (small) figures are one of the main signifiers of contemporary Japanese popular culture and, more precisely, of the so-called *kawaii* (cute) culture which flourished in the 1980s and which is an emblem of global postmodern culture, the aesthetic and intellectual traditions of which have been emerging out of subsequent transnational and transcultural exchanges especially in the area computer culture communities. And it is exactly to these communities that the campaign promoting Disney stickers – the *As Told by Emoji* campaign – seems to be addressed.

The campaign is an important step in the digital re-branding of Disney corporation and has been taken into consideration for the cultural components it may



add to the semantic/discursive meaning potential of these branded icons. The strategies chosen to adapt Disney movies to digital culture have been highlighted through the qualitative analysis of a selected example: the video which tells the story of *Beauty and the Beast*, the 30th Disney animated feature film released in 1991 and chosen by the Library of Congress for preservation in 2002.

From the investigation, it has emerged how *kawaii* style characters exploit many of the technical resources of the new digital site of display, the mobile screen, to tell their stories. In this process of recontextualization, the characters, who are conferred an agentive role, present a pragmatic function which makes them similar to *kaomiji*, the Japanese ancestors of *emoji*. Indeed, they become part of multimodal artifacts with an articulated structure that may incorporate words, movements and onomatopoeic sounds, as well as *keiyu* (figure) symbols and *on'yu* (sound) symbols that are typical of the language of manga. In addition to that, while the linear progression of the temporal setting in the movie stories is turned into the flow of displayed texts and images on the screen, changes in the spatial settings are often represented with the launching of apps. These multimodal processes of translation into the syntax and the semantics of the language of applications can be decoded only by the receivers who are familiar with digital discourse. Also the type of ironic register chosen for the videos is a marker of the adaptation to digital culture, since it exploits a kind of humour that is based on the code play which is typical of hacker culture (Moschini: forthcoming).

To understand the semantic load added by the *As Told by Emoji* series of video to the symbolic tools here analysed, it is important to focus on the concept of "mediascape", theorized by Appadurai (1990: 298-299) to describe the world created by electronic media. Building on Appadurai's work, Susan Napier speaks of a "fantasyscape" (2007: 11), a transmedial/transcultural imaginary world where people can escape. The concept is further unpacked by Brian Ruh in his "database fantasyscape" (2014) which merges Napier's "fantasyscape" with Azuma's concept of "database", that is, the "shift from the supremacy of narrative to the supremacy of characters" (2007: 181). As Ruh highlights, this shift toward characters "signals an increased emphasis on affective elements such as characters' looks, personality traits, and other archetypes that can be easily recognized and transferred from medium to medium" (2014: 170). It seems that, through digital stickers, the Walt Disney Company is adding its own pantheon of characters to such a "database fantasyscape", adapting them to the transnational, transcultural, digital language of the 21st century.

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