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Emoji are Gesture

Using LingComm to Debunk Linguistic Misunderstandings

(research article)

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Abstract

In this article we reflect on a sustained, multi-part myth-busting project to scaffold media discourse around emoji through the production of academic and general consumption media regarding the role of emoji in communication. This work, which commenced in 2017, centred around building an argument that emoji use with text is the equivalent of gesture with speech. That is, emoji and text contribute differently to building up a richer multimodal form of communication, an analogy drawing on the extensive literature from the field of Gesture Studies. This work was undertaken as part of our ongoing commitment to communicating about linguistics to general audiences, using our understanding of linguistics to do this work effectively, a practice known as Linguistics Communication (or LingComm, analogous to SciComm). This paper highlights specifically how our knowledge of linguistics practice (such as discourse analysis and metaphor design) and related communications disciplines (debunking in psychology) enriched our capacity to communicate about emoji for a variety of audiences.

Keywords: emoji, debunking, metaphor, lingcomm, media

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1 Introduction

Technological advances in how we communicate are met with social commentary that illuminates the way people feel about the role of this new technology in human interaction. Socrates famously decried writing for deterioration in human thinking, and there was a major panic in the early twentieth century that women were driven to gossiping distraction by the invention of the telephone. The rise in use of emoji as part of written digital communication in the mid-2010s led to a great deal of social commentary. Not all of this commentary was productive for understanding how emoji or human communication operates.

In this article we reflect on a sustained, multi-part myth-busting project we undertook to scaffold media discourse around emoji through the production of academic and general consumption media regarding the role of emoji in communication. This work, which commenced in 2017, centred around building an argument that emoji use with text is the equivalent of gesture with speech (Gawne/McCulloch 2019; McCulloch 2019; McCulloch/Gawne 2018). That is, emoji and text contribute differently to building up a richer multimodal form of communication, an analogy drawing on the extensive literature from the field of Gesture Studies (Cienki 2024; Kendon 2004; McNeill 1992). This work was undertaken as part of our ongoing commitment to communicating about linguistics to general audiences, using our understanding of linguistics to do this work effectively, which is a practice known as Linguistics Communication (or LingComm, analogous to SciComm, Conrod 2024). As LingComm is a reflexive practice that aims to share linguistics with general audiences, using linguistic theory to make best practice choices about how to develop that communication (Gawne/McCulloch 2023), this paper highlights specifically how our knowledge of linguistics practice (such as discourse analysis and metaphor design) and related communications disciplines (debunking in psychology) enriched our capacity to communicate about emoji for a variety of audiences. LingComm is a community of practice spanning media professionals, educators and academics, with a regular conference, mailing list and grants for projects.¹

We have been doing LingComm collaboratively through our podcast *Lingthusiasm*² since 2016. Lauren Gawne is an Australian academic and has authored the *Superlinguo* blog since 2011, and Gretchen McCulloch is a Canadian author and has written the *All*

1 <https://lingcomm.org/resources> [06 Jan 2026]

2 <https://www.lingthusiasm.com> [06 Jan 2026]

Things Linguistic blog since 2012. We also collaborated with Complexly and PBS, two media production companies in the USA, to write the *Crash Course Linguistics* YouTube video series (Gawne et al. 2024). Lauren Gawne is a full-time tenured Teaching and Research Associate Professor at La Trobe University in Australia. Gretchen McCulloch is a full-time professional writer, and wrote the New York Times bestselling *Because Internet*, published in 2019 as well as a resident linguist column for Wired magazine. Our different professional perspectives are vital to the success of our LingComm work, and we also leveraged both collaborative and individual work to advance our aims of changing public discourse around emoji.

In this article we write collaboratively using first person plural. We flag individual contributions to the work using our first names, which is most natural to us as the conversational discourse style that we use in our podcast.

We begin with a brief outline of early discourse around emoji, in both popular media and academic literature (§ 2). We then discuss how we employed theoretical frameworks to challenge myths and discourses around emoji use, drawing on the debunking literature, metaphor in cognitive linguistics as well as media analysis techniques (§ 3). We then look at the variety of different media we used to communicate our message and the impact of this work on media discourse (§ 4), and consider lessons from this work for future linguistic myth busting in the media (§ 5). In making this process transparent, we hope to provide usable insights for how other linguists and science communicators can apply media analysis to their work in sharing factual information about their field of interest.

2 Discourses around emoji

In this section, we outline discourses around emoji that were prevalent when we commenced our work and briefly sketch some of the limitations with these discourses. For more detailed discussion see Gawne/McCulloch (2019). We commence with discourses in the academic literature, where there is a wider and more nuanced range of evidenced analysis, before turning to the flatter media discourses that were prevalent when we commenced our work.

Emoji have been described in pop academic cross-over work as a “visual language” (Danesi 2017) and a “truly universal form of communication” (Evans 2017). Emoji meet very few criteria in their use to be treated as a language, and in the academic literature this line of argument has been critically dismantled (Dürscheid/Siever 2017). The argument for universality is based on the iconic properties of emoji, without understanding that “reading” an image is a culturally-

driven skill (Cohn/Schilperoord 2024), and there is a growing body of literature on the limits of emoji as a visual system both across (Gao/VanderLaan 2020) and within cultures (Miller et al. 2021).

Alongside these discourses of emoji as a visual/universal language, we identify two other major discourses; emoji as emotional indicator and emoji as pragmatic indicator. Work on emoji (and emoticons as their predecessors), has focused on the prevalence of facial expression emoji in usage frequency and argued for the role of emoji in indicating emotional state (Boutet et al. 2021; Wagner 2016). Work on the pragmatic function of emoji encompasses emotive force but takes a more expansive view to explore their role in speaker intention (Herring/Dainas 2018; Na'aman et al. 2017).

Even with this nuanced and data-driven linguistic analysis, there was still a prevalent general media narrative that emoji were a “new language.” In a piece for *Wired* titled “The emoji is the birth of a new type of language (no joke)” (2016)³ Clive Thompson argues that “[i]n essence, we’re watching the birth of a new type of language.” In an article for the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) online, titled “How emoji became a whole new digital language” (2015)⁴ Antony Funnell interviewed several people about emoji “translation,” which implicitly places emoji on equal footing with language translation.

These pieces cite linguistics experts, whose commentary indicates to others with linguistic knowledge that emoji are not operating as a fully fledged language, but appear to give support to the argument of the article. In the ABC piece, Funnell quotes Ben Zimmer, who observes that there are “patterns that we’ve seen emerging,”⁵ far short of agreeing emoji are close to being a linguistic system. The *Wired* piece cites our second author, who notes that emoji are “trying to solve one of the big problems of writing online.”⁶ Again this is far short of agreeing that they’re language, just that they are being used alongside text to enrich communication. This operates as a kind of erasure (as per Irvine/Gal 2000) in the emergence of a dominant narrative about emoji.⁷

We were highly aware of these discourses around the middle of the 2010s period, because of media articles like this where we were

3 <https://www.wired.com/2016/04/the-science-of-emoji/> [06 Jan 2026]

4 <https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/futuretense/emoji:-the-emotional-element-of-our-digital-discourse/6431030> [06 Jan 2026]

5 <https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/futuretense/emoji:-the-emotional-element-of-our-digital-discourse/6431030> [06 Jan 2026]

6 <https://www.wired.com/2016/04/the-science-of-emoji/> [06 Jan 2026]

7 Our thanks to Katharina König for her editorial suggestion of this link to Irvine and Gal’s work.

being asked for comment. Our comments would then be used in the service of the author's own erroneous argument that emoji were a new language. We knew that we needed a more systematic approach to rebutting this media discourse, and that we needed to be proactive about producing it.

3 Using LingComm to frame an alternative discourse

To push back against the prevailing discourse, we drew on a toolkit of existing methods and approaches. Our first step was to understand the discourse context in which we were operating, and we have outlined the results of this work in the section above. With this understanding, we realised that we were facing a sticky, compelling language myth. In this section we first outline how we drew on the debunking literature to approach mythbusting and then discuss how metaphor theory helped us to come up with a compelling alternative discourse to deploy.

Debunking is a scientifically informed approach to the best practice in changing people's minds about persistent myths. Lewandowsky et al.'s (2020) *Debunking Handbook* came out of science communication about climate change, with an approach that can be used for any science communication topic. A key feature of this approach is that it is not enough to simply negate the false information. Instead, the best approach involves replacing the myth with something more compelling. It is not necessary to frequently state the myth to challenge it. Restating a myth can have the unintended effect of reinforcing it, or introducing it to people who were previously not exposed. Even very good work challenging the discourse in 2015, such as Neil Cohn's excellent article for the BBC was framed around the potential for emoji to become a new language.⁸ We aim to avoid the myth-based framing at all, or if we do mention it, we try to keep it brief and only after introducing our preferred framing. Attentive readers will note that we made sure to only include our framing of emoji as gesture in the introduction to this article.

We would normally not spend so long discussing the target myth in a piece for public audiences, but for this article we wanted to illustrate that even through our public materials do not spend time dwelling on the myth framing of emoji as language, we do in fact spend a lot of time analysing existing discourses before finding approaches to dismantle them. Media discourse analysis is an important foundational part of the process of developing effective

⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20151012-will-emoji-become-a-new-language> [06 Jan 2026]

forms of LingComm, even if it may not appear overtly in the final public product. Media discourse creates a clearer understanding of prevailing understandings and myths. Only then can a strategy be formed to debunk these myths and consider the best options for how to do this debunking.

Our discourse analysis and familiarity with the debunking literature meant that we knew we needed something equally short and sharp to replace the myth “emoji are language.” The solution came about through an organic confluence of our existing professional work. In 2017 Gretchen was drafting the emoji chapter of *Because Internet*, and shared a very early draft with a nascent but insufficient categorical schema with Lauren for review. On reading the chapter, Lauren made a connection between what Gretchen was trying to achieve and a *Superlinguo* blog post that sketched some unstructured thoughts about the link between emoji and gesture, drawing on Lauren’s own research expertise in the field of Gesture Studies.⁹

With further discussion we realised that the parallel between emoji as our target and gesture as our source was a useful and compelling approach, not only for the book chapter, but as a counter-discourse to the prevailing myth about emoji. We were not the first to suggest an analogy with gesture (Miyake 2007; Na'aman et al. 2017; Schandorf 2013), but we were the first to focus on this line of reasoning exclusively and in detail to expand it into a robust metaphorical analogy. Metaphor is a powerful tool in the LingComm toolkit. The role of metaphor in human cognition means that it is used for extrapolative reasoning (Gentner 2001; Lakoff/Johnson 1980). When we design metaphors in our work, we ensure that they lead to useful reasoning pathways, a feature that makes them particularly effective in educational contexts (Carter/Pitcher 2010). For example, in saying “emoji are gestures” this brief introduction to the metaphor allows people to reason that they aren’t a full language, because people don’t typically think of gestures as a full language on their own.

We know that even well-reasoned metaphors are not perfect representations of the target phenomenon. There are many features of emoji that effectively parallel other linguistic features such as prosody and emotive facial expressions, as so compellingly researched by our colleagues and outlined in Section 2. With this awareness, our priority was a combination of comprehensiveness and elegance, and for this aim, a sustained focus on gesture proved the most communicatively effective way forward. With debunking as our framework,

9 <https://www.superlinguo.com/post/157286223433/what-gesture-can-teach-us-about-emoji> [06 Jan 2026]

and the metaphor of gesture as our replacement for the existing discourse, we were in position to approach reframing the public discourse.

4 Reframing emoji as gesture

Crafting an approach is the first step, the second is executing this as media for consumption. We knew that to have any chance of contributing to the larger public discourse we would need a sustained, multi-channel approach targeting multiple audiences. In this section we step through how we crafted our message, and the observed public impact of this work.

On realising that an extended metaphoric analogy with gesture would provide a framework for the chapter of *Because Internet*, we decided to write up this analysis as an academic article. This would allow us to provide a full account of the utility of this approach, gain peer feedback before the book was published, and provide the academic citational rigor that was important to *Because Internet*, in a level of detail that was not appropriate for the pop genre.¹⁰ This analysis would become Gawne and McCulloch (2019), which looks at the communicative parallels between emoji and gesture, and the way gesture categorisation can be applied to emoji, all drawing on established principles from the field of Gesture Studies. Academic publishing and commercial publishing operate on very different time scales, but we were lucky to be in a position where the academic article was published just in time to be officially cited in *Because Internet*, with both published in the middle of 2019.

Once these primary pieces of work were created, we moved on to secondary implementation to further embed the discourse of emoji as gesture. Lauren wrote an overview piece for *The Conversation*, distilling approximately 10,000 academic words to an 880 word piece with limited technical terminology.¹¹ This forum is specifically for academics to write about their research for general audiences, and was thus an appropriate forum for Lauren to use. While there is a readership on the platform, it also has a secondary use as a source of leads for media. In the two days after publication, Lauren was contacted by over half a dozen media outlets for commentary

¹⁰ Academic publications as outputs of LingComm is also one way that Lauren can receive academic recognition for producing *Lingthusiasm* and other public engagement work.

¹¹ <https://theconversation.com/emoji-arent-ruining-language-theyre-a-natural-substitute-for-gesture-118689> [06 Jan 2026]

on local and national radio.¹² Gretchen did extensive media around the launch of *Because Internet*, with over 100 radio and podcast interviews, many of which included discussion of the chapter on emoji. Gretchen also wrote an article about emoji in August 2019 for *Wired*, where she was a resident columnist.¹³ In collaboration, our episode of *Lingthusiasm* in the launch month for *Because Internet* was framed around the chapter on emoji. We also both shared the research, podcast episode, book publication and other media on our personal blogs and social media channels.¹⁴ We both still occasionally do media interviews about emoji and still draw on the gesture analogy in any such discussion.

For each format we changed the amount of detail that we provided regarding categorisation and properties of emoji, but for each we ensured that the principle concept was conveyed. The academic article provides the most detailed and terminology-rich exploration of the parallels between emoji and gesture. It is also held to the highest level of scholarly scrutiny. In other media we exploit the metaphorical heft of stating that emoji are gesture, or talk about emoji being like gesture, always with an eye on shifting the narrative, knowing that the academic article sits there to provide the depth of reasoning if people want more detail.

Our commitment to debunking extends to how we deploy our preferred discourse. While we tailor our message to each particular audience, there are some features of our approach that we do not change regardless of genre or audience. For example, we do not raise the original myth when we introduce the concept of emoji as gesture. As a standard operating approach, we try to not use the word ‘emoji’ and ‘language’ in the same sentence. We also do not repeat or directly rebut the existing framing if given it as a prompt in media interviews. For example, if someone directly asks “what do you think of the idea that emoji are language,” we will usually start a reply on a similar script “I find it much more useful to think of emoji as gesture” and then point to the way it helps explain why emoji are used alongside words, or some other existing thread from the conversation.

In the seven years since we started to concertedly produce this work, the public narrative around emoji has shifted. We see this

¹² Lauren was on parental leave in this period and was not able to engage with all media requests. *LingComm* is important, but so is the rest of your life.

¹³ <https://www.wired.com/story/why-unicode-keeps-adding-boring-emoji/> [06 Jan 2026]

¹⁴ <https://lingthusiasm.com/post/186386270916/lingthusiasm-episode-34-emoji-are-gesture-because> [06 Jan 2026]

most directly in news media that cites our work, either through direct interviews with us or links to our academic or general media publications.¹⁵ We have also observed media shifts where people discuss emoji and gesture without invoking our work. We are not necessarily concerned by the lack of citation, but see this as a positive shift in the discourse.¹⁶ While we both receive fewer media requests to talk about emoji than we did in 2019 and 2020, when we do they are less likely to be associated with the myth.

Tracking influences on shifts in media discourse is notoriously difficult. As mentioned in the background, there were already more fruitful discourses on the pragmatic function of emoji that were in the academic discourse. It is also likely that a factor in shifting discourse was the inevitable die-down in this enthusiasm as emoji moved from novelty to a common feature of online communication for many.¹⁷ Even with these factors, we found it useful in our own LingComm work to find a sustained and compelling narrative that countered the prevailing media discourse at the time.

5 Conclusion: Using LingComm to Debunk Linguistic Misunderstandings

Central to LingComm is the idea that practitioners can draw on existing methods and approaches in linguistic analysis and science communication to most effectively introduce linguistic concepts to new audiences. In this article we have illustrated how we drew on discourse analysis, debunking and metaphor theory to create a range of content to generate new and productive discourse about emoji and their role in communication.

We frequently use these approaches in our LingComm work (see Gawne/McCulloch 2023 for more detail). In addition to the “emoji are gesture” episode of Lingthusiasm, we have episodes that challenge linguistic myths through a debunking approach, including

¹⁵ Example citing our work: <https://theconversation.com/apples-new-emojis-are-more-ammunition-for-the-online-generation-wars-155974> [06 Jan 2026], example citing Gretchen: <https://www.makeuseof.com/how-emojis-have-changed-the-way-we-communicate/#:~:text=Emojis,%20the%20little%20colorful%20icons%20and> [06 Jan 2026]

¹⁶ <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/technology/emoji-meanings-explained-and-what-emoji-might-land-on-your-phone-next/ar-BB1ljH3R> [06 Jan 2026]

¹⁷ These conversations do come back up from time to time, and having the existing body of citational evidence means we can respond very quickly, such as when Lauren teamed up with her colleague Jess Kruk to write an article for The Conversation about the use of emoji in the British TV programme *Adolescence* in 2025: <https://theconversation.com/adolescence-has-sparked-fears-over-teen-slang-but-emoji-dont-cause-radicalisation-253218>.

Every word is a real word,¹⁸ *How the internet is making English better*,¹⁹ and *Kids these days aren't ruining language*.²⁰ We also use metaphors extensively in our work, including episodes with the verb as a coatrack,²¹ sonority as a mountain,²² and syllables as burgers.²³ In our work to find better ways to communicate about emoji, we drew on both of these approaches in the one project.

Our attempt to challenge existing media discourses about emoji benefitted from our ability to utilise multiple established platforms and professional outlets. We still hope that in making the process of this work transparent we can illustrate there are replicable steps that can be taken to challenge discourses that uphold myths and misconceptions about any area of linguistics.

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18 <https://lingthusiasm.com/post/179193327461/lingthusiasm-episode-25-every-word-is-a-real-word> [06 Jan 2026]

19 <https://lingthusiasm.com/post/182646907836/bonus-24-how-the-internet-is-making-english> [06 Jan 2026]

20 <http://lingthusiasm.com/post/159796192161/lingthusiasm-episode-7-kids-these-days-arent> [06 Jan 2026]

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