How emotive facial expressions affect speech acts: the view from face emojis

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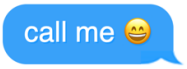
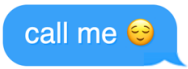
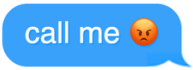
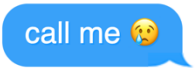
Emojis are a human-made artifact that fills a communicative gap in written digital communication (see, e.g., Gawne & McCulloch 2019, Grosz et al. 2023). Face emojis consistently amount to ~50% of the most frequently used 50 emojis; this plausibly reflects the use of face emojis as digital written counterparts of facial expressions (see, e.g., Maier to appear), which entails that face emojis share properties of facial expressions. Researchers working on facial expressions can thus gain insights from looking at face emojis, and vice versa.

Imperative clauses (e.g. *call me!*) are notoriously underspecified with regards to the speech act that they encode (COMMAND, PERMISSION, etc.), see Kaufmann (2012:169). Face emojis can disambiguate the speech act of an imperative: an informal online survey (49 participants) shows that (1a) and (1b) preferably encode an INVITATION, and not a COMMAND, whereas (1c) is more likely to communicate a COMMAND than an INVITATION; (1d) is most likely to communicate a REQUEST.

(1) a. 

b. 

c. 

d. 

Since face emojis predominantly express emotive meaning (see Grosz et al. 2023), the fact that they disambiguate speech acts entails that emotive devices can play a role in speech-act marking. I propose to analyze face emojis as speech act cues (see Grosz 2014): they do not semantically encode speech act information, but their emotive meanings support some speech acts while blocking others; e.g. the positive valence of (1a-b) is more naturally correlated with the nature of an INIVTATION than with that of a COMMAND, whereas the negative valence of (1c) patterns in the opposite way. We expect that facial expressions may exhibit a similar inference from emotive meaning (see Scherer et al. 2018) to speech-act disambiguation.

References: • Gawne, L. & G. McCulloch (2019). Emoji as Digital Gestures. *Language@Internet* 17.2. • Grosz, P. (2014). Optative markers as communicative cues. *Natural Language Semantics* 22, 89–115. • Grosz, P., G. Greenberg, C. De Leon & E. Kaiser (2023). A semantics of face emoji in discourse. *Linguistics and Philosophy*. • Maier, E. to appear. Emojis as pictures. *Ergo*. • Kaufmann, M. 2012. *Interpreting Imperatives.* Amsterdam: Springer. • Scherer, K., M. Mortillaro, I. Rotondi, I. Sergi & S. Trznadel (2018). Appraisal-driven facial actions as building blocks for emotion inference. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 114(3), 358–379.