

The Poetic Language of Emojis: A Methodology for Teaching Poetry

El lenguaje poético de los emojis: una metodología para enseñar poesía

El llenguatge poètic dels emojis: una metodologia per ensenyar poesia

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Abstract

This article explores the challenge of engaging students with poetry in a digital age, where traditional literary analysis often feels disconnected from students' everyday communication practices. To address this, the study introduces an innovative methodology that integrates traditional poetic analysis with emoji-based interpretations, bridging the gap between poetry and digital communication. Focusing on Poemojis by Dante Tercero and a translation exercise of Gabriela Mistral's poetry into emojis, students explore the polysemic nature of emojis and their ability to convey complex poetic imagery. This approach makes poetry more relatable and accessible while fostering a deeper understanding of core themes such as love, loss, and temporality. Through a reflective autoethnographic lens, this article also examines the effectiveness of this methodology in the classroom, offering a replicable model for educators. Ultimately, the study contributes to the revitalization of poetry education, showing how digital media can enrich literary analysis and engage contemporary students more effectively.

Keywords: Emojis, poetry education, poetic language, digital communication

Resumen

Este artículo explora nuevas formas de acercar la poesía a los estudiantes en una era digital, donde el análisis literario tradicional puede parecer distante frente a sus prácticas cotidianas de comunicación. Para enfrentar este desafío, se propone una metodología innovadora que combina el análisis poético tradicional con interpretaciones basadas en emojis, estableciendo un puente entre la poesía y las comunicaciones digitales. A través de Poemojis de Dante Tercero y ejercicios de traducción de la poesía de Gabriela Mistral a emojis, los estudiantes exploran el carácter polisémico de estos símbolos y su capacidad para transmitir imágenes poéticas complejas. Este enfoque no solo hace la poesía más cercana y accesible, sino que también fomenta una comprensión más profunda de temas universales como el amor, la pérdida y el paso del tiempo. Desde una perspectiva autoetnográfica, el artículo evalúa la efectividad de esta metodología en el aula y ofrece un modelo replicable para otros educadores. En última instancia, esta propuesta busca revitalizar la enseñanza de la

poesía, demostrando cómo los medios digitales pueden enriquecer el análisis literario y conectar de manera más efectiva con los estudiantes de hoy.

Palabras clave: Emojis, enseñanza de la poesía, lenguaje poético, comunicación digital

Resum

Aquest article explora el repte de connectar els estudiants amb la poesia en una era digital, en la qual l'anàlisi literària tradicional sovint sembla desconnectada de les pràctiques comunicatives quotidianes dels estudiants. Per abordar aquesta qüestió, l'estudi presenta una metodologia innovadora que integra l'anàlisi poètica tradicional amb interpretacions basades en emojis, creant un pont entre la poesia i la comunicació digital. Centrant-se en els Poemojis de Dante Tercero i un exercici de traducció de la poesia de Gabriela Mistral a emojis, els estudiants exploren la naturalesa polisèmica dels emojis i la seua capacitat per transmetre imatges poètiques complexes. Aquest enfocament fa que la poesia siga més propera i accessible, alhora que fomenta una comprensió més profunda de temes essencials com l'amor, la pèrdua i la temporalitat. Des d'una perspectiva autoetnogràfica reflexiva, aquest article també analitza l'efectivitat d'aquesta metodologia a l'aula, oferint un model replicable per als docents. En última instància, l'estudi contribueix a la revitalització de l'ensenyament de la poesia, demostrant com els mitjans digitals poden enriquir l'anàlisi literària i involucrar els estudiants contemporanis de manera més efectiva.

Paraules clau: Emojis, ensenyament de la poesia, llenguatge poètic, comunicació digital

1. Introduction

Poetry, with its rich tradition in the history of literature and culture, has established itself as a fundamental medium for evoking emotions and stimulating the imagination (Abrams, 2012; Eagleton, 2007; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Rosenblatt, 1978). However, in contemporary educational contexts, the teaching of poetry presents a persistent challenge, as students often struggle to engage with its complexity, finding it abstract and disconnected from their everyday lives (Akbar & Wahas, 2020; Blake & Snapper, 2022). According to Edwin Creely (2019), revitalizing poetry education requires an experiential approach that connects with students' everyday experiences, integrating poetry across disciplines and encouraging creative participation. Yet, despite these pedagogical insights, there remains a significant gap in the literature addressing how digital tools, particularly visual symbols like emojis, can bridge the divide between traditional poetic analysis and the digital communication practices prevalent among students today. This article aims to fill that gap by proposing a methodology that incorporates emoji-based interpretation into

poetry education, arguing that emojis can serve as both analytical tools and creative mediums, making poetry more accessible to a digitally fluent generation.

In contemporary education, the rise of digital pedagogy offers new avenues for engaging students in ways that align with their everyday digital experiences. Digital pedagogy, as defined by Selwyn (2016), goes beyond the mere use of technology in the classroom; it aims to foster critical engagement and active learning through digital tools that resonate with students' habitual modes of communication. This approach emphasizes the importance of connecting traditional academic content with digital literacies, making learning more relevant and accessible to contemporary students (Howell, 2012; Beetham & Sharpe, 2013). In this context, the use of emojis in the teaching of poetry reflects students' digital fluency and opens new possibilities for interpreting literary texts through familiar, yet symbolically rich, visual forms. This shift towards integrating digital tools in poetry education invites a reevaluation of how meaning is constructed in a multimodal landscape, where language interacts dynamically with visual and gestural elements. Gunther Kress's theory of multimodality (2009) is particularly valuable in this regard, as it explains how meaning is constructed across multiple modes—language, image, and gesture—each contributing uniquely to the communicative process. When applied to emojis, this framework clarifies how these symbols function not merely as decorative elements but as integral components of meaning-making. Emojis, much like words or gestures, add layers of emotional or metaphorical resonance, enriching and sometimes subverting traditional poetic forms.

Building on this, I propose an innovative methodology for teaching poetry that incorporates emojis as a means to help students read and engage with poetic texts. Emoji poetry is an emerging genre of poetry composed primarily of emojis—pictograms representing objects, emotions, and concepts in digital communication. Emojis sometimes function alongside written text, while at other times they replace it entirely, contributing both to the structure and meaning of the poem. This approach reflects the principles of expanded poetry, which, despite its engagement with various artistic mediums, remains fundamentally rooted in poetry. Since the neo-avant-garde movements of the 1960s, expanded poetry has sought to challenge traditional boundaries between artistic mediums and genres (Martínez, 2023).

Emoji poetry continues these explorations by merging the symbolic potential of digital communication with conventional poetic structures. Drawing from traditions such as visual and expanded poetry, emoji poetry positions emojis as a standalone language, with *opsis*—the visual dimension—taking precedence






over the verbal.¹ This close integration of text and image parallels the dynamics of picturebooks, as analyzed by Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott (2000). In picturebooks, visual and verbal modes are interdependent, jointly contributing to the construction of meaning. Nikolajeva and Scott highlight that images do not merely illustrate the text but often expand or contradict it, challenging readers to reinterpret the relationship between word and image. Similarly, in emoji poetry, visual symbols interact with text in ways that extend, reinforce, or complicate the verbal message, providing students with a multimodal experience that allows them to explore how meaning is generated across different communication channels. In particular, the visual arrangement and sequencing of emojis generate meaning, placing the reader's interpretation of these symbols at the heart of the poetic experience.

For instance, notable examples of emoji in literature include *Emoji Dick; or, 🐻* (2010), a reinterpretation of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* entirely through emojis. Another relevant example is *Book from the Ground: From Point to Point* (2013) by Chinese artist Xu Bing, which, although not limited to emojis, uses universally understood symbols, icons, and logos to create a wordless narrative, telling the story of an ordinary day in the life of an office worker. In this article, I will focus on analyzing *Poemojis* by Dante Tercero (2016), a poetry book that combines emojis with text and uses them as standalone elements. Through *Poemojis*, I will explore how this work challenges traditional reading practices and invites readers to engage with a new form of poetic interpretation rooted in digital symbolism.

As I said before, emoji poetry draws on experimental traditions such as concrete poetry, which emphasizes the visual arrangement of text, and visual poetry, where typographical elements and images play a central role in meaning-making (Drucker, 1996). Poets like Eugen Gomringer and Augusto de Campos explored how words could function both visually and semantically, integrating ideograms and spatial configurations

¹ Opsis is a concept introduced by Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) to refer to the visual aspect of a literary or dramatic work, derived from the ancient Greek term for spectacle. In Frye's analysis of poetry, opsis represents the visual component, including both the imagery created through language and the visual arrangement of the text on the page, in contrast to melos (the musical or auditory elements) and lexis (the verbal or linguistic dimension).

into their work. Calligrams and ideographic practices in poetry are key predecessors to the way emoji poetry blends text and image, tracing a lineage from Apollinaire's calligrammes to the ideographic experiments of Ezra Pound's *Cantos*. Expanded poetry, exemplified by Nicanor Parra, transcends the boundaries of the printed page by incorporating elements of public intervention and mixed media (Martínez, 2024). Similarly, Cecilia Vicuña's work extends this practice by merging performance, visual art, and writing, highlighting the dynamic relationship between text and its physical and social context (Vergara, 2022).

Building on these experimental traditions, my teaching approach aims to make poetry more accessible to contemporary students—who often find it difficult to engage with (Creely, 2019; Lock & Zainal, 2020)—but also fosters their creative and analytical development (Akçali et al., 2023), both skills highly valued in today's world (World Economic Forum, 2023). In this way, the teaching of poetry becomes highly relevant for interdisciplinary training across all university careers (Bintz & Monobe, 2018). Far from being mere simplistic symbols, emojis have evolved into complex components of modern communication (Li & Yang, 2018), offering a rich pedagogical resource for engaging with poetry. Their widespread usage, particularly among Generation Z students (Statista, 2023), reveals a nuanced language that parallels the multifaceted nature of poetic expression. Like poetic devices, emojis carry layers of meaning and cultural connotations, allowing for diverse interpretations. For example, a heart emoji  can convey a wide range of emotions, from love to pain, depending on its context—much like how poets use language to evoke varied emotional responses. Herring & Dainas (2018) point out that heart emojis    are often interpreted not only as tone markers, but also as actions or mentions, adding depth and flexibility to their use in digital communication. Similarly, the poo emoji , though originating as a benign and even playful symbol in Japan, carries layers of meaning depending on its cultural context and usage. As Magnus (2018) notes, it is often used to express dissatisfaction or irony, yet its interpretation remains flexible and can shift based on user interaction. Additionally, Makhachashvili et al. (2020) highlight that the perception and meaning of emojis are influenced by users' age, professional background, and language proficiency, which suggests that educators must consider these cultural and contextual variations when integrating emojis into poetry education. This interpretative richness makes emojis useful tools for accessing and critically engaging with poetry, as they provide diverse semiotic layers for students to navigate, much like traditional poetic devices.

However, while both emojis and poetic devices allow for nuanced meanings, they operate within distinct semiotic frameworks. Metaphors, as described by Lakoff & Johnson (1980), are foundational to human

cognition, allowing us to understand one concept in terms of another. This linguistic innovation creates new connections by juxtaposing seemingly unrelated ideas, generating fresh meanings and reshaping how we interpret the world. In contrast, emojis function more as visual supplements, relying on pre-existing cultural and emotional associations to convey meaning (Miller et al., 2021). While metaphors open unexpected interpretive possibilities by bridging conceptual gaps, emojis operate within a more established set of visual codes, where meaning is constructed through their interaction with text, context, and the reader's prior knowledge. Hasyim et al. (2020) also emphasize that emojis often signal intent and mood more directly, complementing written language in ways that enhance communicative clarity, rather than creating new conceptual blends like metaphors. Chen et al. (2020) further highlight how emojis function within specific cultural and gendered contexts, shaping how users interpret meaning based on preconceptions about these symbols. This distinction is crucial: while emojis can enhance literary analysis by engaging students with visual language, their interpretive potential lies in their interplay with other modes of communication, rather than in the metaphorical innovation typically found in traditional poetic devices.

By including emojis in poetry education, we bridge an apparent gap between contemporary digital language and traditional literary form. This approach challenges students to delve into the subtleties of both emojis and poetry, understanding how each can be used to communicate complex ideas and emotions. Far from simplifying poetry, this methodology invites students to explore and appreciate the intricate ways in which meaning is constructed and conveyed. It encourages them to see emojis as a

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modern parallel to poetic devices, fostering a deeper engagement with and understanding of poetic texts.

To introduce this methodology, I incorporated *Poemojis* (2016) by Dante Tercero into my "Literature and Humanities" course. This book merges traditional poetic elements with emojis, offering a hybrid form of expression that combines textual and visual language. Tercero's work includes both poems composed entirely of emojis and others that integrate text with emojis, challenging students to interpret meaning across different modes. By analyzing *Poemojis*, students explored

how emojis, like poetic devices, convey emotional and cultural significance. While not directly analogous

to metaphors, emojis provide a symbolic depth that invites careful analysis and interpretation, expanding their engagement with the text.

In the second phase of the course, I introduced the poetry of Gabriela Mistral, a Chilean Nobel Prize-winning writer, and tasked students with translating her poems into emojis. This exercise encouraged a closer reading of her work, as students had to focus on vocabulary, sound, and the construction of verses and stanzas to effectively represent Mistral's imagery and emotions through emojis. The challenge of translating her complex poetic language into visual symbols pushed them to think critically about both the interpretive possibilities and the limitations of emojis, offering new ways to engage with poetic form and meaning.

This article serves a dual purpose. First, it aims to investigate how integrating emojis into the teaching of poetry can significantly bolster student comprehension and promote profound learning experiences. This exploration is crucial in understanding the potential of emojis as tools for literary analysis, moving beyond their conventional usage in everyday digital communication. Second, through the lens of autoethnography (Ellis et al., 2011; Chang, 2021), this study rigorously examines and reflects upon the efficacy of this methodology.

Ultimately, the integration of emojis in poetry education does more than just add a modern twist to the curriculum; it invites students and educators alike to reconsider and reevaluate the evolving nature of language and communication in the digital era. This approach is not merely about the adaptation of new tools but is an exploration of how these tools can reshape our understanding and appreciation of literary texts. By presenting this method, I aim to make a significant contribution to the field of literary pedagogy, offering a practical yet innovative approach to teaching poetry. This methodology is designed to inspire students to embrace new forms of expression and enhance their critical thinking skills, which are indispensable for their academic and professional growth.

2. Theoretical Framework

Teaching poetry has long posed a challenge in the educational field, as it requires the understanding and appreciation of complex literary elements such as metaphor, imagery, rhythm, and sound (Eagleton, 2007). Metaphors, as Lakoff & Johnson (1980) explain, are fundamental mechanisms of thought, shaping both language and how we perceive the world. In poetry, metaphors deepen meaning by connecting seemingly unrelated ideas, inviting readers to explore new layers of interpretation. Poetic imagery, as Octavio Paz (1998) suggests, brings together contrasting realities, enabling multiple meanings to coexist

within a single image. These complexities encourage students to move beyond literal interpretations and foster deeper connections to poetry's symbolic and emotional dimensions. Rhythm and sound also play a crucial role, guiding readers toward a more immersive understanding of the poem's emotional and aesthetic power (Eagleton, 2007).

The rise of emojis in digital communication provides educators with a unique opportunity to connect traditional literary forms with contemporary modes of expression. Originating in Japan in the late 1990s, emojis are pictorial symbols that convey emotions, ideas, and concepts in a compact visual format (Marko, 2022). Unlike their predecessors, emoticons—composed of keyboard characters—emojis are fully formed graphic symbols with predefined meanings that rely on societal norms and context (Magnus, 2018). Emoticons, such as :) or :P, are more limited in scope, functioning primarily to represent facial expressions using typographical symbols, while emojis present a broader range of imagery, including objects, animals, and abstract concepts 🚗🍷👤. Marcel Danesi (2016) describes emojis as a hybrid of visual and textual elements, akin to ancient writing systems that combined images with phonetic symbols. Though seemingly simple, emojis rely heavily on cultural and social contexts for their meaning. While metaphors in poetry often generate new, unexpected connections between ideas, emojis typically draw on pre-existing cultural associations. Despite this, they can still add emotional depth by evoking familiar symbols (Bai et al., 2019; Miller et al., 2021). Incorporating emojis into poetry education offers students a familiar and accessible way to engage with symbolism and imagery. As semiotic devices, emojis function as both icons and symbols, and though their meanings may be more fixed compared to metaphors, they still rely on context to convey deeper significance. Both forms encourage diverse interpretations, allowing students to explore the intersection of modern visual language with traditional poetic devices.

For example, the combination of the frog face 🐸 and the hot beverage emoji ☕ has become widely recognized as part of the “But That’s None of My Business” meme, often used to convey a sarcastic or dismissive tone. The frog face, originally representing a simple animal, takes on a layered meaning when paired with the hot beverage emoji, which typically symbolizes coffee or tea. Together, they form a subtle commentary, evoking the image of someone casually observing a situation while refraining from direct involvement. This pairing exemplifies how emojis, much like poetic images, can combine elements to create non-literal meanings, dependent on cultural context for interpretation (López & Cap, 2017). In this sense, Gadamer’s concept of the “symbol” becomes relevant: emojis act as bridges between the visible and the invisible, linking tangible symbols with abstract or unspoken ideas. Like metaphors in poetry, they offer interpretive possibilities that transcend their immediate representation, relying on the interaction between the symbol and its context to generate deeper meaning.

Rita Felski critiques the traditional hermeneutics of suspicion, a traditional interpretative approach that encourages readers to distrust surface meanings, seeking hidden or subversive interpretations beneath the text. Instead of this distanced, critical reading, Felski advocates for an approach that recognizes readers' personal connections and emotional responses to texts. This perspective aligns with the use of emojis in poetry, as they provide an immediate, intuitive way for students to connect their digital literacy with traditional poetic forms. By incorporating emojis, students can engage more directly with poetry, integrating their everyday communication practices into literary analysis. Similarly, Peter J. Rabinowitz and Corinne Bancroft (2014) argue for educational models that build on students' pre-existing knowledge, introducing technical terminology as needed. Emojis, as familiar digital symbols, provide an accessible entry point for engaging with complex literary concepts, expanding students' interpretative skills through a medium they already understand.

By integrating emojis into poetry education, educators can tap into students' digital fluency, encouraging them to navigate the layered meanings of both visual and textual modes of communication. This approach not only connects literary tradition with the participatory culture of modern communication practices but also leverages students' pre-existing competencies, drawing on their familiarity with digital symbols to enhance their confidence in literary interpretation. Furthermore, it highlights the need to develop innovative methodologies that harness modern technologies to engage a digitally native student body across various subjects (Carlson et al., 2013; Makhachashvili et al., 2020). Similar to the use of creative writing as a response strategy, as explored by Emert and Hall (2015), incorporating emojis into poetry education could potentially encourage students to engage actively and reflectively with texts. Both approaches emphasize creative expression and personal interpretation, allowing students to develop deeper, more nuanced understandings of literary works. As Joan Retallack and Juliana Spahr (2007) suggest, education must remain connected to the "historical-contemporary intersection" that shapes our world, ensuring that poetry continues to serve as a compound experience of self, language, and experimentation.

3. Methodology

The approach of teaching poetry using emojis was implemented in my "Literature and Humanities" course at Universidad Adolfo Ibáñez during the second semester of 2023. The class included 22 students from diverse fields like engineering, law, and journalism, many of whom were encountering lyrical poetry in depth for the first time. To bridge the gap between their digital fluency and the complexity of poetry, the course introduced students to emoji-based poetic interpretation and later traditional poetry. We began

by analyzing *Poemojis* (2016), allowing students to engage with poetic concepts like imagery and emotion through familiar visual symbols before transitioning to traditional poetry by Gabriela Mistral.

The process unfolded in two key sessions: the first focused on exploring *Poemojis*, helping students understand how digital symbols can function within a poetic framework; the second involved translating Mistral's poetry into emojis, pushing students to engage with the interpretative challenges of representing traditional poetic themes visually.

3.1 Session on *Poemojis*

The first session focused on the introduction of *Poemojis* (2016). The choice of this book as teaching material was based on two factors: 1) its original use of emojis for writing poems, and 2) its literary relevance and its impact in the field of contemporary poetry in Mexico, not without controversies due to its non-traditional approach to poetry, which sparked debates about its legitimacy within the literary community (*El Informador*, 2016). The session was structured as follows:

1. Introduction to poemojis: I began with a brief presentation of *Poemojis* and its author, highlighting the innovation and controversy surrounding this work. Students expressed their initial impressions and expectations about poetry.
2. Reading and translating poemojis: I distributed select poems from the collection, asking students to read and interpret them, focusing on how emojis operated as part of the poetic structure. Students were encouraged to translate these emoji poems into Spanish, not as direct word-for-word equivalents, but by interpreting the emojis based on their cultural and emotional associations. This exercise prompted discussions about the interpretive flexibility of emojis, as students realized that the same emoji could evoke different meanings depending on the context.
3. Analysis and discussion: After translating the emoji poems, the class engaged in a deeper analysis of how emojis function in *Poemojis*. We explored how these visual symbols operate within the semiotic field, paralleling the work of traditional poetic devices like metaphor and imagery. The discussions emphasized how emojis, like metaphors, rely on the interaction between cultural connotations and individual experiences to generate meaning. Students also reflected on how their interpretations of the poems varied depending on their personal associations with the emojis, highlighting the subjective nature of both poetry and digital communication.
4. Comparison with traditional poetry: To link this exercise with more conventional forms of poetry, we introduced a poem by Gabriela Mistral and discussed how the techniques used to interpret




emojis could enhance their approach to traditional poetic analysis. We compared how visual symbols and metaphors create layered meanings in both emoji-based and text-based poetry, focusing on how the arrangement of symbols in *Poemojis* mirrors the function of line breaks, rhythm, and imagery in traditional poems.

3.2 Session on Translating Gabriela Mistral's Poems into *Poemojis*

In the second session, students translated selected poems by Gabriela Mistral into emojis. The process was structured as follows:

1. Selection of poetic images: Students were tasked with identifying key images within each poem that resonated strongly with them or that they considered essential to the poem's overall meaning and structure. This exercise encouraged students to think critically about how specific poetic images work together to provide a sense of unity within the poem, guiding its emotional tone and thematic direction. By focusing on these central images, students not only explored the symbolic weight each carried but also considered how these images interacted to create a cohesive narrative or emotional arc. This process deepened their understanding of how poets use imagery to tie together different parts of a poem, helping students reflect on how these images function as anchors that give the poem coherence and depth.
2. Interpretative discussion: Through collaborative dialogue, we debated the possible meanings and resonances of these images. This not only increased their understanding of poetry but also allowed them to see how different people can interpret the same words in diverse ways. The discussions often centered around how different emojis could evoke various emotional responses depending on their context or combination. Furthermore, they explored how the aesthetics of emojis—their colors, shapes, and even perceived cultural meanings—could influence interpretation. The students noted how a simple emoji like a smile 😊 could be interpreted as warm or sarcastic depending on its juxtaposition with other symbols, challenging traditional communication by compensating for the absence of physical gestures, facial expressions, and vocal intonations. In the digital realm, these symbols must carry the weight of emotional and contextual meaning without the accompanying bodily cues. This led to discussions on how digital communication relies on the interaction between multiple semiotic modes (visual, textual, and emotional) to convey meaning. These conversations helped the students understand that, much like poetic language, the interpretation of emojis is not fixed; rather, it opens up a space for multiple readings. In this

way, students recognized how digital symbols, like poetic devices, create a space for creative interpretation, encouraging them to navigate the complexities of modern multimodal discourse.

3. Translation into poemoji: Students, working individually or in small groups, selected emojis that they felt best represented the core elements of Mistral's poem, including its rhythm, tone, and symbolic undertones. This step was highly interactive and frequently led to deeper discussions about the expressive capacities and limitations of emojis. For example, when interpreting Mistral's poem "Éxtasis," students debated the most fitting visual representation for the concept of "ecstasy." Some students opted for the pill emoji , invoking a modern association with altered states of mind, while others gravitated toward the religious dimension of the poem by choosing the cross  or praying hands . This divergence of interpretations sparked a conversation about the ways cultural and contextual nuances shape the meanings of emojis, and the potential for misinterpretation when translating complex emotional and symbolic content into a more simplified visual language. Through these discussions, students realized that while emojis provide a playful and accessible medium, their inherent simplicity can sometimes obscure the deeper layers of meaning present in traditional poetic forms. The tension between the modern, secular interpretation of "ecstasy" and the poem's original spiritual context underscored the difficulties of maintaining the emotional, thematic, and rhythmic integrity of the work. This exercise highlighted the challenge of adapting a medium like poetry, rich with sound, metaphor, and rhythm, to a format where meaning is conveyed primarily through visual symbols, encouraging students to think critically about the complexities of interpretation and translation across different modes of communication.
4. Sharing and comparing translations: Each student or group presented their translation and explained their choices. Comparing the different emoji translations, it became evident the diversity of interpretations and how each set of emojis reflected a unique understanding of the original poem.
5. Collective reflection: Finally, we reflected on the experience, discussing how the activity had allowed them to interact with poetry in a new way and how emojis could serve both as a bridge and a barrier in communicating complex ideas.

This hands-on approach to translating poetry into emojis resulted in active student participation in literary analysis and allowed them not only to interpret poetry in a more personal and creative way but also to

understand how contemporary modes of communication can interact with and transform the literary experience.

To document and analyze the teaching and learning experience, I employed the methodology of classroom autoethnography. This research approach, anchored in the personal experience of the educator, allows a deep immersion in pedagogical practices from a reflective and critical perspective. With the help of a field notebook, I meticulously recorded my reflections and observations made during interaction with students.

These records included:

1. Initial reactions: I observed and noted the immediate responses of students when first confronted with poemojis, noting both their curiosity and their hesitations.
2. Final impressions: At the end of the session, I collected the opinions of students on the activity, highlighting how their perceptions of poetry and their confidence in interpreting it might have changed.
3. Interpretations and meanings: I documented how students assigned meanings to emojis within the poems, paying attention to the variety of interpretations and the process of negotiating meanings.
4. Reactions to poetry: I recorded how students reacted to the idea that poetry does not offer definitive answers but opens a space for exploring language and thought.

Anonymity was essential to ensure an open and bias-free discussion space, allowing students to express themselves without reservations. This educator-centered approach emerged from a desire to continually improve my own teaching strategies, seeking to generate greater interest and engagement from students. In my teaching experience, poemojis can serve as catalysts in understanding complex poetic concepts and to foster a more open and reflective approach towards the interpretation of poetry.

4. Poemoji Examples

In this section, I will present examples from the *Poemojis* analysis and the subsequent translation of Gabriela Mistral's poems using emojis, drawing from my class notes and adopting an autoethnographic methodology. For future studies, this could be complemented by other methodologies, such as surveys to capture students' self-assessments of their learning experience.

The first poemoji we analyzed from Dante Tercero’s book presents a hybrid of text and emoji (Fig. 1) that aligns with Peirce’s semiotic theory of iconic signs. Unlike Saussure’s model of arbitrary signifiers, where the connection between signifier and signified is conventional, emojis like the skull 🦴 and eye 👁 are closer to iconic signs, bearing a resemblance to the concepts they represent: death and vision. These emojis, however, remain open-ended signifiers, whose meaning can shift depending on cultural and personal context.



Figure 1. “🦴 will come / and will have your 👁”. Poem from *Poemojis*, by Dante Tercero

The first task invited students to translate the emojis into different possible interpretations. Most immediately recognized the verse as “Death will come and will have your eyes,” though none knew its connection to a poem by Cesare Pavese. Some students explored alternative translations, utilizing synonyms and metaphors:

- 🦴 for skull, the end, extinction, fatality, immortality, barbarism.
- 👁 for gaze, sight, life, perception, thought, culture.

Through these exercises, students reflected on how the interpretation of these emojis can shift dramatically based on cultural context and personal associations. This helped underscore that, even with modern symbols like emojis, the same complexities and multiplicities of meaning inherent in poetry remain present. The exercise encouraged students to embrace the idea that literary analysis often involves multiple, non-fixed interpretations, fostering a critical openness towards semiotic ambiguity.

Focusing on the metaphorical flexibility of emojis, students explored how both literal and abstract meanings coexist. For instance, 🏴‍☠️ was understood as a direct symbol of death, but also evoked broader themes like the end of civilization or cultural extinction. Similarly, 👁️👁️ was interpreted not just as eyes, but as symbols of insight, awareness, and human connection. This plurality of meanings resonated with the inherent polysemy of poetry, where layers of meaning unfold in different contexts. The minimalist design of emojis invites readers to actively engage with their connotations, much like haiku or concrete poetry, where simplicity forces a more profound exploration of meaning.

This process of translating emojis into words aligns closely with the challenges posed by translation theory, particularly the tension between literal and dynamic equivalence, as discussed by Eugene Nida and Charles Russell Taber (1969). Students faced the challenge of balancing between providing a direct, word-for-word translation (literal equivalence) and capturing the emotional and cultural weight of the original symbols (dynamic equivalence). The 🏴‍☠️, for example, could be translated literally as “death,” but its metaphorical connotations could range from “barbarism” to “finality.” The decision to translate an emoji based on its symbolic or emotional impact mirrors the translator’s dilemma of choosing between a literal or more interpretative approach.

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For instance, 🏴‍☠️ was understood as a direct symbol of death, but also evoked broader themes like the end of civilization or cultural extinction.

Furthermore, this activity highlighted Hans Vermeer’s skopos theory (2012), which emphasizes that the purpose of the translation should guide the translator’s choices. Students had to decide the role each emoji played within the poem—whether to prioritize its literal function or its emotional resonance. The exploration of meaning thus became a complex interplay between text and image, reflecting both the challenges and opportunities inherent in literary translation.



Figure 2. “No ☁️⚡️. / Not 🍂 yet. / There are 💎 ✉️ the 🔥, / 💣 of ✨ ✉️ / our 🗨️, / 👟👟”. Poem from Poemojis by Dante Tercero

In the second example (Fig. 2), the poemoji relied almost entirely on visual symbols, demanding greater interpretive work from students. Gadamer’s concept of hermeneutics as a dialogical process of understanding became relevant here, as students entered into a conversation with the text, interpreting emojis based on their own cultural and historical context. Among the translations, I selected three, and translated from Spanish into English to illustrate the variability of interpretations:

“It doesn’t rain anymore, There’s no autumn yet,
There are diamonds over the fire,
Flashes of bombs over Our tongues,
Now let’s run.”

“Don’t cry anymore,
Don’t go yet,
There are treasures in this love,
Of explosions and flashes.
Our kisses
Will make us live.”

“No more tears,
The end of summer is near,
Sparks of joy light up,

The dance of fire in our words,
Let's go, let's celebrate now."

The last verse of the poemoji, represented by the repetition of these emojis 🏃, posed an interesting interpretive challenge. Some students saw the shoes as symbols of “living”—the motion of running, vitality, and movement. Others translated it as “celebrate,” imagining dynamic motion like dancing, capturing the celebratory essence of life. This multiplicity of interpretations highlighted the subjectivity inherent in the poetic experience. Indeed, this exercise reveals interesting parallels with translation theory, particularly the tension between literal and dynamic equivalence. Students were engaged in the challenge of conveying the essence of a poetic image, much like how translators must choose between conveying the literal meaning or capturing the overall emotional resonance of a text. Similarly, students had to consider the “purpose” of each emoji in conveying a specific nuance or emotional tone, demonstrating the interpretative flexibility inherent in both poetry and translation.



Figure 3. Poem from *Poemojis*, by Dante Tercero

In the final example (Fig. 3), the poemoji consisted solely of emojis 🌧️😄🍃💀❌👊👁️🌀, posing a greater interpretive challenge. Emojis demand a symbolic interpretation, where meaning is inseparable from human and cultural experience. This approach mirrors visual hermeneutics, where interpretation goes beyond mere semantics to embrace pragmatics and phenomenology.

The varied interpretations of the poemoji reflected this festive encounter of meanings, where each emoji becomes a field of symbolic play:

“A cloudy sky
Amazed by the breeze
Of death that appears and whispers
all is well.”

“I cry
Thinking you’re gone
Maybe I died in your thoughts
And you’re fine listening to the void.”

“Over a mantle of uncertainty,
a puzzled face,
finds death, inevitable and silent, marked by a cross, the end of the journey,
the leaf falls,
witnessing the cycle that ends,
and the snail advances, in calm, towards life.”

This activity allowed students to engage with visual hermeneutics, participating in the creation of meaning rather than simply decoding symbols. They became active co-creators in a community of interpretation, exploring how their lived experiences informed their engagement with the poetic text.



Figure 4. Example of a translation of *El fantasma* into poemoji by students.

In the case of Mistral’s poems, we took *El fantasma* (‘The Ghost’) from *Tala* as an example. The students were divided into five groups, each tasked with interpreting the poem and rendering it visually through emojis. This exercise moved beyond a mere engagement with words, evolving into a deeper exploration of Mistral’s central themes: memory, estrangement, and loss. In “El fantasma”, the ghostly figure symbolizes a profound longing for a return to a place or state that is no longer accessible. Rather than being a literal ghost, this spectral presence operates as a metaphor for dislocation and alienation, reflecting a speaker who inhabits the liminal space between past and present, presence and absence.

As the students translated the poem into emojis, a debate emerged about the gendered nature of the emoji used to represent the lyrical voice in the poem. Some students chose a female emoji 🧚, associating it with Mistral’s identity as a female poet, while others attempted to find a way to translate the speaker into a more neutral or ambiguous figure, reflecting what they consider the ghostly and undefined nature of the poetic subject. This interpretation led some to understand the poem as not inherently marked by gender, prompting a discussion about whether this ambiguity could be maintained. The debate encouraged deeper reflection on how the speaker’s identity—whether in terms of gender or presence—

might be suggested or deliberately left ambiguous, and how the poem seems to address or engage an implied listener or audience. This reflection deepened their engagement with both the visual and textual dimensions of the poem, revealing how even subtle emoji choices could influence interpretations of voice and identity.

In one of the final emoji translations (Fig. 4), the students effectively captured these themes, particularly the motif of estrangement. The frequent use of doors 🚪 highlighted the thresholds the speaker is unable to cross, representing both physical and emotional barriers. Similarly, the lock emoji 🔒 symbolized the speaker's isolation and disconnection from her former identity, while the repeated wide-eye emojis 👁 underscored the tension between visibility and invisibility, echoing the speaker's desire to be seen but remaining misunderstood.

Interestingly, the group interpretations diverged on how to represent the title. While one group employed the ghost emoji 👻, others felt that its playful nature did not suit the somber tone of the poem. Alternative symbols like the fog emoji 🌫 were chosen to convey the ethereal and elusive qualities of the speaker, while others used the waning crescent moon 🌘 to suggest the fading presence of the ghostly figure. Some groups even considered the door emoji 🚪 as a symbolic stand-in for the title, emphasizing the recurring theme of barriers and thresholds.

The students' varied choices raised key interpretative challenges, particularly around the representation of the speaker's identity and the emotional tone of the text. Each emoji carried cultural and personal associations, influencing how the poem was rendered. For instance, in the verse "En país que no es mi país, en ciudad que ninguno mienta, junto a casa que no es mi casa", students reflected on Mistral's life spent abroad in various countries. Some students chose to juxtapose the Chilean CL and Mexican flags MX, acknowledging Mistral's significant time spent in Mexico as part of her diplomatic career. Others highlighted her connection to Argentina AR, where *Tala* was published in Buenos Aires. This awareness of Mistral's geographical movement enriched the discussion, allowing the students to explore the personal dimensions of national identity and belonging in her work. Additionally, several international students used the flags of their own countries, expressing a personal connection to the poem. They remarked how Mistral's reflections on displacement resonated deeply with them, reinforcing how the text's themes transcended geographic boundaries and allowed for intimate, individual interpretations.

Other students, approaching the poem from a more existential perspective, opted for abstract symbols like the labyrinth 🌀 and empty space 🌀 to represent the philosophical struggle of identity and dislocation.

This diversity of interpretations illustrated how emojis—like poetry—invite multiple readings, encouraging the students to engage with the poem’s emotional and symbolic depth from both personal and collective angles.

Reflecting on the final poemoji translations, the students recognized both the potential and limitations of using emojis to translate complex poetic texts. While emojis offer an accessible and visual way to reinterpret poetry, they also simplify certain layers of meaning. However, this exercise led to deeper discussions on Mistral’s exploration of identity, memory, and displacement, offering students fresh insights into her work. In translating *El fantasma*, the students were not merely substituting words with images; they were engaging in a creative process of deconstruction and reconstruction, where each emoji functioned as a vessel of meaning, rich with cultural and personal significance.

Ultimately, this approach encouraged students to think critically about how to preserve the essence of Mistral’s poetry while making it resonate with a modern audience. The translation process required them to explore the thematic elements of love, loss, and the spectral presence of the past that Mistral evokes. The emojis served as a visual and immediate medium for conveying the poem’s emotional and symbolic layers, prompting the students to reflect on how contemporary forms of communication intersect with traditional literary analysis.

The collaborative nature of this activity also underscored a key aspect of literary interpretation. Students engaged in dialogue, debated various meanings, and worked together to reach consensus, reflecting the communal and interpretative nature of language. Their emoji choices, documented in my field notes, revealed an awareness of the polysemic and flexible nature of digital symbols. By embracing this openness, the students co-created a visual interpretation that transcended the limitations of emoji language, offering a novel, yet meaningful, engagement with Mistral’s work.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the integration of emojis as innovative tools in the teaching of poetry, with a focus on *Poemojis* by Dante Tercero. Throughout the course, I noticed that the use of emojis fostered greater engagement with and understanding of poetic texts, as students found this approach both accessible and reflective of their daily communication practices. By translating poems into emojis, they navigated complex poetic themes more personally and creatively, deepening their connection to the texts and expanding their interpretative skills. This process highlighted the potential of emoji poetry as a bridge between digital fluency and literary analysis.

This methodology demonstrates the potential of incorporating contemporary digital tools into classical literature studies and suggests a meaningful shift in literary pedagogy. By embracing visual and digital elements, educators can enrich the learning experience and align more closely with the communicative habits of today's students. One of the key strengths of using emojis in poetry education is their ability to highlight the polysemic nature of both emojis and poetic language. Rather than being a limitation, the subjective interpretation of emojis parallels the multiplicity of meanings inherent in poetry, celebrating the diversity of individual engagement with texts. This approach underscores the dynamic and evolving nature of literary interpretation, offering new ways to experience and analyze poetry.

Future research could further investigate the impact of this methodology by incorporating qualitative approaches that document students' interpretations and emotional responses to poetry when mediated through emojis. Such research would provide deeper insight into how these tools shape literary engagement. Additionally, exploring the use of emojis across various literary genres and educational contexts could offer valuable perspectives on the versatility of this approach. Investigating other digital communication forms, such as memes or short videos, might also reveal new possibilities for bridging traditional literary forms with modern modes of expression, creating further synergies between literature and digital culture.

Ultimately, the integration of emojis in poetry education represents a forward-thinking pedagogical approach, making literary analysis more accessible, relatable, and relevant to contemporary students. It invites educators and students alike to reconsider the evolving nature of language and communication, offering a new lens through which to explore the intersections between literature and digital media. By embracing the inherent multiplicity of emojis, this method reflects the complexity and richness of poetic expression, positioning emoji poetry as a valuable addition to literary education in the digital age. As digital communication continues to transform, methodologies like these will play a crucial role in bridging the gap between traditional literary forms and the dynamic, multimodal nature of contemporary language.

6. References

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