



## Three lessons that use emojis

### Lesson 1

#### Thinking about subtexts, tone and ambiguity in literary texts

Tweets and texts are a short form of communication somewhere between talk and writing. They have many of the features of talk:

- There is dialogue between people and they often call for a response.
- They aren't usually highly crafted, with the intention of being kept for future reading and exploration. (This 'here today, gone tomorrow' aspect of talk can be described as talk being 'ephemeral').
- They are often informal and use speech-like language, for instance words like 'hey', 'hi' 'yep' that you don't see in writing, except in dialogue, in novels or playscripts.

Unlike speech, though, they don't have many of the 'paralinguistic' elements that make it possible to interpret the tone of what's being said:

- No facial expressions, like smiling or frowning
- No gestures or other aspects of body language, like nodding your head
- No non-verbal cues, like laughter, pauses or fillers (ums, ers and noises of agreement, or approval).

That sometimes makes tweets and texts difficult to interpret. It's hard to 'read' them and get the tone right.

Emoticons and emojis have come in to fill that gap. They explain the thinking or feeling behind the words, in other words the subtext. 'Wow!' with a happy face emoji, or a sad face emoji mean two very different things.

- Experiment with using emojis to pin down the tone in these text messages in a variety of different ways. Each person should choose an emoji that they think is suitable for each text message. Then in groups talk about what different ones you chose and how they pin down the meaning of the message, and its tone, differently.

*Going to be late again.*

*Another fine mess you've got me into.*

*You've fallen in love with him?*

- How does the use of different emojis shift your reading of the tone of the message?

In literary texts, writers make choices about how far to pin down the tone of what is said. Sometimes they are absolutely clear, using the narrative voice to specify what a character is feeling and what they mean when they say something. But more often than not, the tone of what is said is left ambiguous for the *reader* to interpret. Part of the pleasure is working out what is behind the words, the subtext of what is said.

Here is an example from a literary text, a short story by Ernest Hemingway. Read the extract aloud. It is a short story with very little 'telling' of what the characters might be thinking or feeling. The *sub-text* of each exchange is like the emoji that might explain why the character has said what they have. Thinking about that subtext takes you into what the characters are thinking and feeling and what's behind what they say.

- Individually, choose an emoji that you think will explain the thinking behind each of these exchanges between the man and the woman. In pairs or threes, compare your choices.
- Think about these issues:

*What is revealed about the way the writer has allowed a sub-text to emerge from the dialogue? How clear is it, what is going on? Why do you think the writer didn't spell this out for us? Does the subtext become increasingly clear as you read further on, so that you're all choosing similar emojis? Does your choice of emojis later in your reading make you want to go back and change the ones you chose earlier on?*

- Use your discussion to talk about these statements and decide whether you agree with them or not:
  1. Hemingway's writing might be spare and simple, but nevertheless, he makes it very clear what's going on between the two characters.
  2. The lack of adverbs (e.g. sadly, angrily, bitterly, cheerfully) and the lack of varied verbs (e.g. 'shouted', 'whined') mean that the reader has to work out the subtext for themselves.
  3. It's really unclear what the two characters are thinking and feeling, and that's a weakness in the writing.



The woman brought two glasses of beer and two felt pads. She put the felt pads and the beer glasses on the table and looked at the man and the girl. The girl was looking off at the line of hills. They were white in the sun and the country was brown and dry.

"They look like white elephants," she said.

"I've never seen one," the man drank his beer.

"No, you wouldn't have."

"I might have," the man said. "Just because you say I wouldn't have doesn't prove anything."

The girl looked at the bead curtain. "They've painted something on it," she said.

"What does it say?"

"Anis del Toro. It's a drink."

"Could we try it?"

The man called "Listen" through the curtain. The woman came out from the bar.

"Four reales."

"We want two Anis del Toro."

"With water?"

"Do you want it with water?"

"I don't know," the girl said. "Is it good with water?"

"It's all right." "You want them with water?" asked the woman.

"Yes, with water."

"It tastes like licorice," the girl said and put the glass down.

"That's the way with everything."

"Yes," said the girl. "Everything tastes of licorice. Especially all the things you've waited so long for, like absinthe."

"Oh, cut it out."

"You started it," the girl said. "I was being amused. I was having a fine time."

"Well, let's try and have a fine time."

"All right. I was trying. I said the mountains looked like white elephants. Wasn't that bright?"

"That was bright."

"I wanted to try this new drink. That's all we do, isn't it—look at things and try new drinks?"

"I guess so."

The girl looked across at the hills.

"They're lovely hills," she said. "They don't really look like white elephants. I just meant the coloring of their skin through the trees." "Should we have another drink?"

"All right."

The warm wind blew the bead curtain against the table.

Here's another very different text:

'O! Don't cut my throat, sir,' I pleaded in terror. 'Pray don't do it, sir.'

'Tell us your name! said the man. 'Quick!'

'Pip, sir.'

'Once more,' said the man, staring at me. 'Give it mouth!'

'Pip. Pip, sir!'

'Show us where you live,' said the man. 'Pint out the place!'

I pointed to where our village lay, on the flat-in-shore among the alder-trees and pollards, a mile or more from the church.

The man, after looking at me for a moment, turned me upside-down and emptied my pockets. There was nothing in them but a piece of bread. When the church came to itself – for he was so sudden and strong that he made it go head over heels before me, and I saw the steeple under my feet – when the church came to itself, I say, I was seated on a high tombstone, trembling, while he ate the bread ravenously.

'You young dog,' said the man, licking his lips, 'what fat cheeks you ha' got.'

I believe they were fat, though I was at that time undersized for my years, and not strong.

'Darn Me if I couldn't eat 'em,' said the man, with threatening shake of his head, 'and if I han't half a mind to't!'

I earnestly expressed my hope that he wouldn't, and held tighter to the tombstone on which he had put me; partly, to keep myself upon it; partly, to keep myself from crying.'

- Does this text work in the same way as the first? Is there a stronger sense from the narrative voice of what the characters are thinking and feeling? Is the sub-text is more obvious? If so, why is that the case? What aspects of the writing give that stronger sense?
- Underline any words and phrases that seem to you to act in the same way as an emoji might, explaining the thoughts and feelings of the characters. Explore what the phrases you've underlined have in common. What kinds of techniques has the writer used to convey the mood of the piece and the characters' intentions? E.g. is it to do with use of adverbs, verbs, adjectives, what the writer says after a bit of dialogue, anything else?
- Think about both pieces you have read. Which of these statements would you most agree with:
  1. The sparseness of the dialogue in text 1 leaves it more open to the reader to interpret what's happening under the surface.
  2. The narrator of the second text gives lots of guidance to the reader about underlying thoughts and feelings.
  3. It's hard to understand the point of text 1 but that makes it interesting.
  4. Text 2 is more enjoyable because the characters' behaviour and personality is so clear.
  5. Writers of literary texts have lots of scope to choose whether to pin things down or not, and can choose to be ambiguous or not.
  6. Writers of tweets and texts *need* to pin things down, to avoid ambiguity and misunderstandings.
- Now use these two statements to think about what you've learned about texts and subtexts. Which do you agree with? Try to put into words your thoughts about this.
  - A. Thinking about emojis has been helpful in understanding how subtexts work in literary texts.
  - B. Thinking about emojis hasn't been helpful in understanding how subtexts work in literary texts.

