An Eye for an I

The Rebus as an Historical Form of Emoji

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This paper adopts a transhistorical approach to the study of the emoji, placing it within a broader historical trajectory by focusing on an earlier form of communication with which it has much in common: the rebus. The rebus is a puzzle or visual pun in which words or syllables within a sentence are replaced by images that serve as homophones for the missing text. Here, I outline the origins of the rebus in the ancient world, its resurgence in the Renaissance and continued growth in the 19th century, as well as the range of contexts in which it was used – from heraldry and book inscriptions to letters and advertisements. I argue that, like the emoji, the rebus requires a certain type of literacy to be correctly interpreted and is a prime example of how we engage with the world primarily through our eyes. It, therefore, highlights the longstanding importance of visuality in languaging.

Keywords: rebus, emoji, visuality, multimodality, transhistorical approach

What's in an Image?

The image on the right (Figure 1) is taken from a recent conversation with one of my close friends on Instagram Direct. It is fairly characteristic of the way that we talk every day on the platform, using emojis — i.e., small digital images or icons — to stand in for words, fill in emotional cues or communicate a message playfully. Although the context is lacking, most people with a certain level of visual literacy would be able to interpret the messages and understand that I had just been away in Ireland, had an enjoyable time (despite the unpleasant flight) and wanted to share a particular photograph with my friend. My friend, in turn, welcomes me home, expresses her feelings about the photograph and adds additional meaning about its content (i.e., the guitar). Successful interpretation of these messages depends on the readers making a connection between the emojis and the words or emotions they represent, and is crucial in constructing and maintaining interpersonal relationships (Elder, 2018).

According to Wortham (2013: 19, cited in Bliss-Carroll, 2016: 14), emojis are an "ever-evolving communal form of cryptography" with a range of pragmatic functions. Lebduska (2017) goes further, stating that emojis are now contributing to a rematerialisation of literacy, especially if we consider that they have branched out from their original context of use into non-digital domains, such as marketing, politics, fashion design and architecture. Their ubiquity in everyday life often means that they are framed as something novel, acting as "a case study in how technology and the human capacity for communication are working fully in tandem today" (Seargeant, 2019: 7). However, emojis are, in fact, part of a far broader historical trajec-
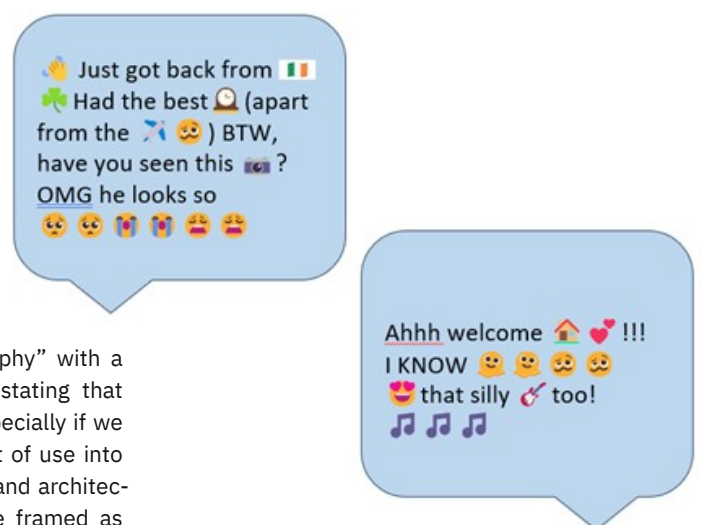

Fig. 1:   A Typical Instagram Exchange Using Emojis. Source: Author's Own Image.

tory of patterned practices and uses, bearing a particular similarity in form and function to the rebus.

The rebus can be defined as a "puzzle or visual pun in which words or syllables within a sentence are replaced by images that serve as homophones for a missing text" (Stark and Crawford, 2015). To correctly solve a rebus, one must ignore the iconic dimension of the image and search for a hidden, homophonic link instead (Cowan, 2010). My introduction to the rebus came during my research on late nineteenth/early twentieth-century bookplates. I grew fascinated by the way that these custom-made symbols of book ownership often employed complex images to represent the owner's name. As I dug deeper into other examples of material culture from the same period, I found a treasure trove of artefacts — from advertisements and greetings cards to postcards and needlework — all relying on the rebus to make meaning. This led me to ponder more on the similarities between the rebus and the emoji and whether we should consider the rebus as a predecessor to this modern form of visual communication.

In this working paper, I seek to share some of these initial thoughts by tracing the origins of the rebus in the ancient world, its resurgence in the Medieval era and continued growth in the nineteenth century, as well as the range of contexts in which it was used. In doing so, I argue that, like the emoji, the rebus requires a certain type of literacy to be correctly interpreted and is a prime example of how we engage with the world primarily through our eyes. It, therefore, highlights the longstanding importance of visuality in languaging. While much work has been carried out on the emoji (Danesi, 2017; Seargent, 2019; Giannoulis and Wilde, 2019; Logi and Zappavigna, 2021; Ge-Stadnyk, 2021, to name but a few examples), to date, there have been very few studies on the rebus (see, Cowan, 2010 and Langbein, 2018 for exceptions). The aim of this paper is, thus, to open up the conversation about this unique historical practice in order to develop more critical reflections around the 'novelty' of the emoji.

Approaching 'New' Media from a Transhistorical Perspective

Placing the emoji in a broader historical trajectory of patterned practices and uses fits with the increasing turn towards transhistorical perspectives in the field of media and communication studies over the past decade (cf. Tagg and Evans, 2020). Transhistorical approaches seek to identify antecedents in communicative histories of individuals and communities that shape a text's creation. In other words, they help tease out the historical origins of 'novel' contemporary practices, showing that they are, in fact, familiar to or reconfigured from past phenomena. Transhistorical approaches are chiefly concerned with three areas of comparison:

1. The affordances and constraints of a particular communicative practice then and now
2. The meaning potentials of a particular communicative practice and how they have changed or stayed the same across time and space
3. The producers and recipients of a particular communicative practice and how they have changed or stayed the same across time and space

Given its interdisciplinarity, transhistorical research brings together a broad range of methodological and theoretical perspectives and can be conducted directly (i.e., through comparative or contrastive analyses) or indirectly (i.e., by applying a concept from one time period to another. Much of my recent work falls into the former category, from exploring drones through the lens of pigeon photography (O'Hagan and Serafinelli, 2022), selfies through Edwardian bookplates (O'Hagan and Spilioti, 2020) and foodstagramming through Edwardian postcards (O'Hagan, 2022), as well as tracing seemingly contemporary food marketing practices to the nineteenth century (O'Hagan, 2021a, 2023). Important work has also been carried out by Wilson (2021) and Gillen (2023) on the parallels between social media and Edwardian postcards, Moreton and Culy (2020) on the use of digital technologies to explore nineteenth-century letter-writing practices and Seargeant (2020) on constructions of political persona in the Tudor and contemporary age. Thus, transhistorical research is a broad and growing area of study with vast creative potential.

When thinking specifically about the rebus, a key concept that can be useful is "semiotic resourcefulness", which was first put forward by Mavers (2007) in her study of a young child's email exchange. Semiotic resourcefulness refers to the way that a person makes the most of the resources available to them according to their immediate communicational purpose, with design possibilities being highly dependent on mode and medium, the literacy practices in which they are located and the social context. This concept is something to keep in mind when thinking about the emoji's history. Being able to correctly interpret these social norms and cultural conventions is integral to correctly interpreting the rebus.

Tracing the Historical Origins of the Rebus

The earliest example of a rebus can be traced to the Mesopotamian kingdom of Sumer around 3300 BCE, when Sumerian scribes developed a novel system for recording taxes and trade transactions using sharpened reeds to write on clay tablets. Initially, pictograms were used to represent items, followed later by logograms in the form of abstract-carved symbols. By 2500 BCE, the Cuneiform script was making use of rebuses to phonetically represent the syllabic sounds of the Sumerian language. A surviving tablet from Jemdet Nasr (Iraq), for example, shows an im-

Fig. 2: Rebus in *Book of Hours* (1500).
Source: Watson, A. 1898. Arthur Watson on Rebus, Antiquary 34, 370.

age of a reed at the top of a list of temple goods. 'Gi' is a homophone, meaning 'reed', but also 'render' or 'repay'. Thus, the scribe cleverly borrowed the sign and introduced it into a new context to stand in for another word (Fischer, 2020).

Egyptian writing systems developed autonomously around 3000 BCE using similar combinations of visual and phonological elements. The tomb of the pharaoh Ramesses II, for example, depicted a falcon-god (RA), a child (MES) and a stalk of papyrus (SU). Chinese and Mesoamerican populations also employed a form of the Rebus Principle later in 1200 BCE. Additionally, examples of the rebus can be found on Greek and Roman coins to indicate the name of a town or individual, such as a rose for Rhodes, a pomegranate for Melos and a seal for Phocaea (Watson, 1898). Reflecting on the early history of the rebus, Watson (1898) describes it as a "curious and ingenious" (372) device, thought up to simplify texts and, thus, ease communication. This bears a striking resemblance to how the emoji is seen today, with creativity, flexibility and simplification as its central characteristics (Seargeant, 2019).

The Rebus in Medieval Europe

In Europe, renewed interest in the rebus came in the twelfth century with the development of heraldry — the science and art of using, displaying and regulating hereditary symbols employed to distinguish individuals. Heraldry is part of a unique semiotic domain with an elaborate system of rules governing coats of arms and their symbols and colours (Vanrigh, 2009). Rebuses became a central part of these coats of arms, used to represent owners' names in a playful manner. Such rebuses can be split into three categories — simple, multiple and complex — based on the number of images used (Heraldica, 1997). An example of a simple rebus is the Spanish kingdoms of Castile and Leon represented by a castle and lion, while a multiple rebus can be found in the coat of arms for the family name Quatremayne, showing four hands (*quatre mains* in French). The coat of arms for the family name Santeuil, on the other hand, displays the head of the Greek mythological monster

Argus; Argus had one-hundred eyes (*cent yeux* in French).

Around the same time, rebuses also began to become a major feature of churches, often embedded into the building's architecture or carved into gravestones. Rebuses even adorn the religious manuscripts of monks, such as a 1500 edition of the *Book of Hours* that bears the following images (Figure 2), which requires a certain degree of sociocultural knowledge to interpret. The first image — a gold coin — was known as *salut*; the bone represents its French word *os*, followed by NS and then an image of Mary praying before Jesus. Combined together, they read "*saluons Maria priant Jesus en croix*" (Hail Maria praying to Jesus on the cross). According to Watson (1898: 373), although such devices served to attract attention for those who struggled to read, they were largely employed as a "pleasant exercise." As he elaborates: "the enjoyment consists in their whimsical association and play on equivoques, where logic is thrown to the winds and irresponsible thought aims at concrete imagery, which in many instances is curious and mystifying." Thus, during this period, we see a clear transition in the function of the rebus: from simplifying communication to promoting playfulness and fun — two clear purposes that the emoji has today.

Renewed Interest in the Rebus

In the late eighteenth century, the rebus experienced a renewed interest across Europe as a result of a growing fascination with ancient hieroglyphics. As a result of enlightenment thinking and colonialist explorations, many people looked towards Ancient Egypt as a model for — and an exotic alternative to — Western culture (Venger, 2022). This 'Egyptomania' became reflected in architecture, the decorative arts and literature. However, it could also be found in the way that the rebus began to penetrate all aspects of daily life in Regency and Victorian Britain.

Rebus puzzles became popular parlour games, began to be used as artists' signatures or publishers' colophons and were even employed to encrypt political messages. As the practice of rebus-solving spread, the puzzles became disseminated through regular features in magazines and newspapers (Langbein, 2018). Rebuses also extended beyond this context, featuring on sewn samplers, dinner plates, tea services, greetings cards, postcards and advertisements (Figure 3). In her article on the nineteenth-century rebus, Langbein (2018) reflects on its discardability, noting that the rebus's intrigue lies in solving the puzzle and interpreting its message. Once this is done, the reader moves onto another communicative interaction and the previous one is swiftly forgotten. In this way, it is not difficult to see parallels with the emoji that thrives in synchronous fast-paced communication and messages of great importance quickly become 'yesterday's news'. The extension of the rebus into other domains and genres also anticipates the emoji's move in a similar direction, emphasising

Fig. 3: A Selection of Late 18th and 19th Century Rebuses.
Source: Wikimedia Commons.

buses and transform the "collection of apparently unrelated images into a semantically cohesive, linear unit" (Cowan, 2010: 217). In this case, failure to recognise the creative play and interpret relative associations would lead to contested book ownership — a risk that most owners were not prepared to take. In Ashbee's case, he also adds a self-portrait to the rebus, further strengthening his claim of ownership in case the rebus is not successfully decoded. Although a different context, similar 'face-threatening acts' can be found in the use of emojis on social media where unsuccessful interpretation can lead to communication breakdown and damage relationships between interlocutors (Tigwell, 2016).

not only its mainstream popularity, but also how people develop new forms of literacy to interpret them, accepting them as features of everyday life whose meanings are now culturally embedded.

The Rebus in the Edwardian Bookplate

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the rebus also found an important place in the genre of bookplates — custom-designed labels used to express book ownership. While bookplates have their origins in the sixteenth century, they grew in popularity in the Victorian era, enabling upper- and middle-class individuals to mark their books with their family coat of arms. Artists were commissioned to produce these armorial designs, which cost anything between £2,000 and £5,000 in modern money (O'Hagan, 2021b). However, by the end of the century, these bookplates became increasingly pictorial in design as owners looked for new, creative ways to reflect their ancestry.

While North Lee (1979) claims that the use of rebuses in bookplates was never a particularly widespread practice, in my large-scale study of Edwardian book inscriptions (2021b), I found a broad range of examples, suggesting that it was extremely popular in the early twentieth century. Figure 4 shows a selection of such examples, including bookplates by Ursula Whyte (depicted by a white polar bear), Dorothy Archer (depicted by a bowman), Stanhope Shelton (depicted by a shell on a ton barrel) and H.S. Ashbee (depicted by an ash and a bee). Of note, however, is the fact that the majority of owners still accompany their rebus with their actual name in written form, thereby demonstrating the concentrated effort placed on readers to determine the hidden textual messages underneath re-

Fig. 4: A Selection of Edwardian Rebus Bookplates.
Source: Author's own images.

By the Edwardian era, the bookplate had become democratised thanks to stationers and booksellers who began to offer in-house artist services at a cheaper price, which attracted working-class and lower-middle-class customers. The democratisation of the bookplate came with a problem, however. More concerned with making a profit than checking the legitimacy of an individual's claim to a coat of arms, stationers often willingly created 'fake armorial' bookplates for customers. A case in point is Maude Goff (Figure 5), a domestic servant from Cambridgeshire. Goff requested a red squirrel rebus on her bookplate, used to represent her surname (Goff meaning 'red' in Welsh) and not a typical heraldic symbol. This red squirrel was also blended with other 'fake' heraldic aspects, such as a square shield (not permitted for women's use) and symbols, tinctures and motto taken from Lieutenant-Colonel Lionel Trevor Goff (no relation). Thus, on the surface, the bookplate looks authentic, but it is only through insider knowledge that a reader is not only able to interpret the meaning of the rebus, but also recognise it as an illegitimate symbol of heraldry, thereby marking the coat of arms as fake. While the problem of 'fake' emojis is not something encountered on social media, recent research by Weissman (2023) has found links between emoji meaning, commitment and lying, suggesting that the 'stability' and agreement in meaning of an emoji is related directly to the relationship between writer and reader.

Conclusion

Still in its early phases, perhaps this research currently opens up more questions than it can answer at the moment. Nonetheless, it has put forward the idea that we should use the rebus to reappraise the novelty of the emoji. Both the rebus and the emoji use images to express ideas or emotions, are highly creative and playful, facilitate communication, yet also can be open to misinterpretations because they require some effort to interpret. Likewise, both can be viewed as discardable, only meaningful for a short period of time until they are 'solved', and both have extended beyond their original context into other realms, such as advertising and architecture. Essentially, they both emphasise how the use of language is deeply mediated by the visual modality, and this visuality is essential to how we communicate with one another.

Moving forward, there are some key things to consider. First, *is the rebus a more complex form of communication than the emoji?* After all, it relies on an understanding of homophones to make meaning. While emojis can also be used in this way, they are more often employed to represent emotions. However, emojis have moved on considerably from just the use of faces, now incorporating a wide range of objects, many of which have acquired unique meanings that go beyond the item they originally stood in for (e.g. 🍑, 🍆, 🥥). Thus, they also pose similar challenges for those who come into contact with them. We can also

think about *has the emoji had a similar cultural impact as the rebus?* It may be too early to tell, but it is swiftly becoming a cultural phenomenon, with its use now widespread in society. Emojis have been found to unlock business opportunities (e.g. Disney's As Told By Emoji series, Domino's 🍕 text), are increasingly employed as an alternative to the Likert scale in surveys and even serve as inspiration for pop musicals (e.g. *Emojiland*). There is even now a World Emoji Day (17 July).

Such widespread use, however, also leads to the question *are the rebus and emoji accessible to all?* Their reliance on a certain type of literacy to interpret can be challenging, for example, while cultural and linguistic differences in meaning across countries must also be taken into consideration. Additionally, in the case of the emoji, concerns around representation and diversity have also arisen in recent years. And finally, we must ask *what is the future of the emoji?* The rebus has now been around for over 3000 years, but will the emoji have a similar longevity? Will it experience a decline or will its use continue to spread into other contexts? Do emojis need to be introduced to the school curriculum to help children navigate the digital world more competently? Whatever the outcome, it is clear that we need to start reappraising emojis through the lens of rebuses, recognising their foundations in earlier historical conventions of meaning-making and the way they sit at an interesting communicative niche between language and visuality.

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