

# Say it with a 🐳 : Telling a story in emoji

Erika Kvistad

‘Call me Ishmael,’ begins Herman Melville’s great American novel, *Moby Dick*; or, *the Whale*, which tells the story of a sea-captain’s obsession with hunting and killing an enormous white whale. Or at least, that’s how it starts in the original English version Melville published in 1851. In 2010, a new translation came out, which starts like this:

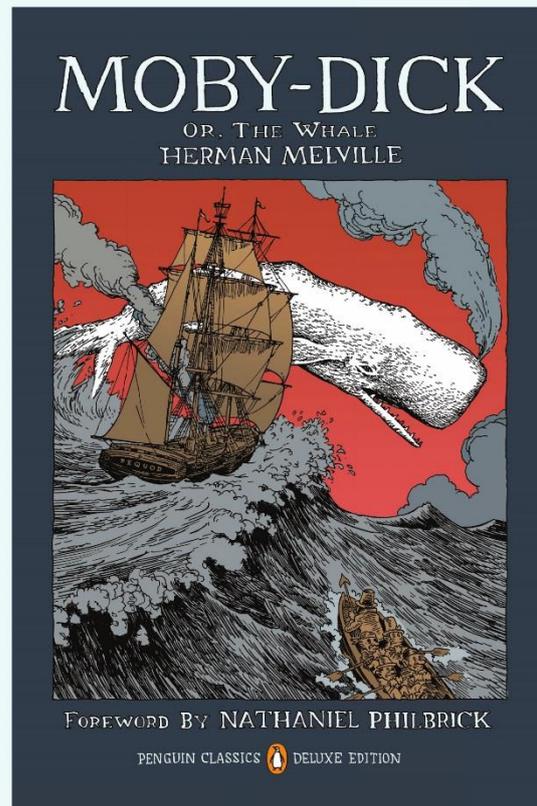


And it goes on like that for about 700 pages (although each line is followed by the same line in English, which, as you’ll soon realise, is probably a good thing). So whose idea was it to translate a classic nineteenth-century sea novel into emoji? And what does this new version – which of course is called *Emoji Dick* – tell us about how digital technology can change the way we write and talk to each other? What can we learn about communication from those tiny cartoon whales?

## A Whale of a Project

Fred Benenson is a data engineer who works for Kickstarter, a crowdfunding site that lets people give money to fund projects they think look fun, worthwhile, or interesting. In 2009, communicating through emojis – the tiny Japanese illustrations that come with your smartphone’s keyboard – was getting more and more popular, although it wasn’t nearly as common as it is today. Benenson wanted to test out what emojis could do. How much can you really say with a limited set of little pictures? Emojis are a good way of getting across quite simple feelings and ideas. It’s easy enough to put together an emoji chain that tells the person you send it to that you’re upset or excited, that you don’t want them to take what you just said too seriously, that you need to stop talking and go to sleep, that you want to meet up soon, or that you love them. But what about using emojis to say:

‘Why upon your first voyage as a passenger, did you yourself feel such a mystical vibration, when first told that you and your ship were now out of sight of land? Why did the old Persians hold the sea holy? Why did the Greeks give it a separate deity, and own brother of Jove? Surely all this is not without meaning. And still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all.’



This is clearly a little more difficult. But this was the project Benenson decided to set out on: he would translate *Moby Dick* into emoji. In the Kickstarter campaign introduction, Benenson explains that he picked *Moby Dick* because he wanted a book that was in the public domain and could be used freely, and something that was really long, to make it more of a challenge. (He also admitted that he just really likes the whale emoji.) In fact, he compared his idea to the main character Captain Ahab’s quest to kill the great white whale: both are huge, almost impossible challenges. And, of course, it was possible that both would turn out not to be such a great idea.

Not that Benenson was planning on doing it all himself. As well as crowd-funding *Emoji Dick* by raising a total of \$3,500 from dozens of backers, he was going to crowd-translate it, too. To do this, Benenson used another fairly new invention: Amazon’s Mechanical Turk site.

Mechanical Turk describes itself as ‘artificial artificial intelligence’. In other words, it’s a site where huge numbers of people come together to work on small routine tasks – the kinds of tasks that would normally be done by computers, but that, for whatever reason, computers can’t actually handle yet. In this case, though, the job was anything but routine. For each of the 6,438 sentences in *Moby Dick*, three

Mechanical Turk workers were hired to come up with an emoji translation, and several other workers were hired to vote on which one they thought was best. *Moby Dick* was the work of one person, but *Emoji Dick* was the work of over 800 people. And while Melville didn't exactly make a fortune from *Moby Dick*, the Mechanical Turk workers did even worse. They were paid five cents per translation, which doesn't seem like a lot for the feat of turning even one sentence of Melville's complicated language into a string of little drawings. And although the individual workers are thanked in the acknowledgements section of *Emoji Dick*, it's not by name, but by the identifying code they use on the site: a translation in itself.

### How to Read a Whale

So is *Emoji Dick* any good?

As a working translation of *Moby Dick*: unfortunately, not very. Even though the text is printed with the original English below it, the emojis are almost impossible to follow. The translation shows up what emojis are least good at: proper nouns (they can't really tell you the difference between the characters Starbuck and Queequeg, or between the ships *Pequod* and *Jeroboam*), sentence structure, and, most importantly, detail. A string of emojis can just about tell you that Ishmael is on board a ship, but it can't tell you if he's on the fore-castle deck or the quarterdeck. It's good at telling you if he's sad or happy, but bad at telling you what he's thinking.

Pretty much the only bit of emoji translation that's easy to understand is the little spouting whale that represents Moby Dick – and even that is really much too cute to stand for the fearsome creature that drives Ahab out of his mind. As a translation, the best thing about it might be that it's quite a good way to discover the story in its original English. While you're trying to puzzle out the meaning of each emoji string, the original text below might end up pulling you into the story.

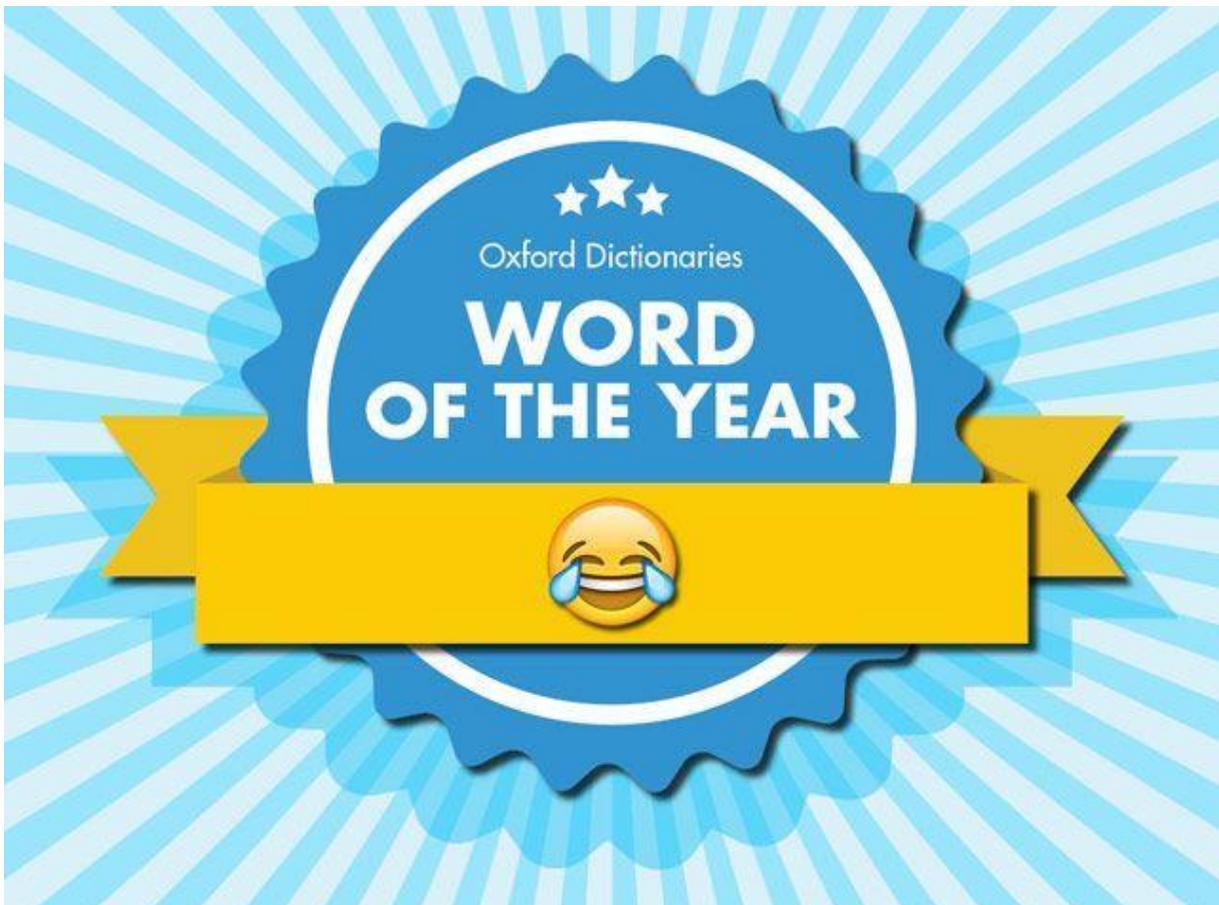
If *Emoji Dick* is a noble failure as a translation, can we learn anything from it? In a way, this is a story about sharing, and about how the internet allows us to get together to do things that in an earlier time would have been impossible. The internet means that you don't have to be an obsessed Captain Ahab in order to complete a huge, weird project. You don't have to give up your life savings or devote every waking hour to it – you just need to get in touch with enough other people who also think it sounds sort of fun. Maybe no one would want to pay \$3,500 for *Emoji Dick* to be written, but as it turned out a lot of people would pay \$5 or \$2. No one would want

to spend years of their life translating every sentence of *Moby Dick* into emojis, but hundreds of people were willing to spend a few minutes of their life on it. Together, they were able to land a whale of a project that would have been impossible for a single person.

But by showing us what emojis can't do (or at least can't do yet), *Emoji Dick* can also point us toward what they can do. In 2015, *Emoji Dick* is still the only novel translated sentence-by-sentence into emojis, and yet emojis themselves are more widely used than ever. Could it be that emojis are just better at telling new stories than at translating old ones?

### The 'Word' of the Year

More and more, we're discovering that emojis can sometimes work like a language. This year, the Oxford English Dictionary picked 😂, the 'Face With Tears of Joy', as its Word of the Year – meaning that they thought it was the word that most clearly represents 'the ethos, mood, and preoccupations of 2015'. Understandably, this was controversial. *Guardian* journalist Hannah Jane Parkinson [criticized the choice](#) both because 'it's not even a word', and because she thinks other emojis are better.





an open lock, a plane home, a hot bath, tears of happiness, and a kiss. The story is tense, scary and moving, and all within Twitter's 140 character limit. They may not be able to tell complicated stories, but sometimes an emoji really is worth a thousand words.

## Tasks

### 1. Comprehension

Read the text, set it aside, and answer the following questions in your own words. When you're done, check your answers against the article and see if you were right.

- a) What is Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* about?
- b) Why did Fred Benenson pick this novel to translate into emojis?
- c) How much money did the Mechanical Turk workers make for each translation?
- d) What reason did the OED give for picking 'Face With Tears of Joy' as their 'Word of the Year' (rather than a different emoji)?
- e) What did journalist Martin Schibbye translate into emojis in the tweet mentioned in the article?

### 2. Discussion

In groups of three, discuss the following questions:

- a) Do you think the OED did the right thing in picking an emoji as their 'Word of the Year'? If so, do you think the right emoji won, or would you have chosen a different one? If you could choose any word as 'Word of the Year', which one would it be?
- b) What do you think it means that crowdfunding has become so popular in recent years? What are the upsides to crowdfunding a project, and could there be any downsides to it?
- c) Debate question: was the *Emoji Dick* project a good idea or a waste of time? Two members of the group should pick a side each (it doesn't need to be what you really believe) and come up with arguments for it. The third member of the group decides who wins the debate.

### 3. Writing

- a) Choose a story, or part of a story, to translate into emojis. The story can be, for instance, something you've read in class or in your spare time, a fairy tale, or the plot of a movie. You can choose to translate a paragraph, a scene, a single moment, or the whole plot. You can also use the occasional word in English if you want to.
- b) Show it to another student and see if they can work out what story you're telling, then explain your translation to them.

#### 4. Find out more

- a) Pick a current or past crowdfunding project to learn more about, and write a short report on it. Your report should answer these questions: What was the project about? Why did the creator(s) choose to crowdfund it? How did it go? What were the risks and the benefits of using crowdfunding in this case?
- b) Go online to read about the controversy around the OED choosing an emoji as their 'Word of the Year'. List the arguments used for and against choosing this emoji as 'Word of the Year'.
- c) *Emoji Dick* is one of many instances of people updating a classic story – either by presenting it in a way that uses new technology, by rewriting it so it takes place in modern times, or both. (To give just two examples, the movie *Clueless* (1995) sets the plot of Jane Austen's 1815 novel *Emma* in a 1990s LA high school, while *The Lizzie Bennett Diaries* (2013) is a webseries that uses vlogs to retell Austen's 1813 novel *Pride and Prejudice*.) Find an example of a classic story that's been updated, and report on it to the rest of the class. How has the story been updated? Do you think the new version works? If you're not familiar with the original story, does the updated version make you curious about it?