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The Semiotics of Emoji and Digital Stickers

Lukas R.A. Wilde / Klaus Sachs-Hombach

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Lukas R.A. Wilde / Klaus Sachs-Hombach

Introduction to the Semiotics of Emoji and Digital Stickers

Every day, billions of emoji are sent via mobile devices and chat programs, messengers, and emails. The worldwide emoji standardization – established in 2010 by the California-based Unicode Consortium – was aimed at overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers through a new digital form of pictograms and ideograms. Certainly, much has been written on the various linguistic functions of emoji ever since (cf. the contributions in GIANNOULIS/WILDE 2020). They intensify, neutralize, or soften the content of linguistic messages and serve as markers of interpersonal relationships and social contexts. To Luke Stark and Kate Crawford (2015: 1), emoji can thus be thought of as »signifiers of affective meaning« doing »»emojional« labor« (STARK/CRAWFORD 2015: 4) within economies of attention and affect. Vyvyan Evans (2017) conceptualized constantly changing »emoji codes« – in contrast to an overarching »emoji language« – in order to emphasize that their meaning can only ever be determined in relation to specific cultural circles and according to different social, gender, or age groups. Marcel Danesi (2019) likewise argued that emoji use corresponds to an episodic and in fact narrative logic. A further technical development is represented by digital stickers, which are offered by various messaging services as further »translations« of individual emoji into unique pictorial expressions (cf. WILDE 2021). Going beyond notions of static codes or fixed grammars, this special issue of *IMAGE* approaches emoji and digital stickers from the perspective of everyday communication and mediation. It is based on the panel »Emoji and Digital Stickers: Affective Labor and Lifeworld Mediation« held during the 15th World Congress of Semiotics (IASS/AIS), »Semiotics in the Lifeworld«, at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (Greece) on August 31, 2022. Apart from some of the presenters, additional contributors have been sought to represent better at least a part of current approaches to emoji research at the intersection of semiotics, linguistics, and media studies. Emoji seem especially suited to such a multi-disciplinary approach: As (partly) pictogrammatic signs, they can be investigated as a (special, quite peculiar) forms of pictoriality just as well as an innovation within digital writing modifying and enhancing our linguistic means of expressions.

The addition of pictorial signs to written texts in order to represent emotions has a long history (cf. for the following WILDE 2020). The first digital emoticon can be traced back to the computer scientist Scott E. Fahlman, who, in 1982, used the character combinations :-) and :-(for the first time in a digital discussion forum at Carnegie Mellon University. The employed term »emoticon« is composed of the words »emotion« and »icon« and describes the pictorial representation of facial expressions using regular ASCII characters. ASCII (American Standard Code for Information Interchange) is the (Western) character standard for digital text in instant messaging (IM) services, chats, emails, social networking services (SNS), SMS text messages, and blogs, through which emoticons soon became more widespread. Emoticons have also been in frequent use in Japan since about 1986, where they are called *kaomoji* (顔文字, literally: ›face characters‹). Exactly when it became possible in Japan to ›translate‹ individually designed digital character images into prefabricated pixel graphics is difficult to determine today. Many of the intervening technical gadgets, innovations, and also dead ends are documented sparingly, and the large number of competing suppliers, devices, and standards already by the end of the 1990s makes the exact history nearly impossible to reconstruct. For a long time, the Japanese telecommunications company NTT Docomo and developer Shigetaka Kurita were thought to have invented emoji in 1998. Then, it was discovered that the market competitor SoftBank had evidently developed a set of 90 emoji one or two years earlier already (cf. BURGE 2019). What is certain: It took until 2006 that Google submitted an official application to the Unicode Consortium in California (Unicode Inc.) to standardize emoji internationally. On 6 February 2009, the Consortium defined for the first time a set of 674 emoji for global use in Unicode Standard 6. One year later, this emoji set was made available to software developers worldwide, so that it could soon be ›re-imported‹ into Japan. The repertoire of emoji motifs has been constantly expanding ever since. So far, no emoji has ever been removed from the set. The admission procedures for new candidates are relatively complex and involve a range of political negotiations (cf. BERARD 2018). It is also no secret that a large proportion of the decision-makers and programmers in the Consortium are white males and that currently, nine of the thirteen institutional members with full voting rights are major US corporations such as Adobe, Apple, Facebook, Google, IBM, Microsoft, and Netflix, which thus end up making the decisions affecting our global communication standards (cf. UNICODE CONSORTIUM 2023).

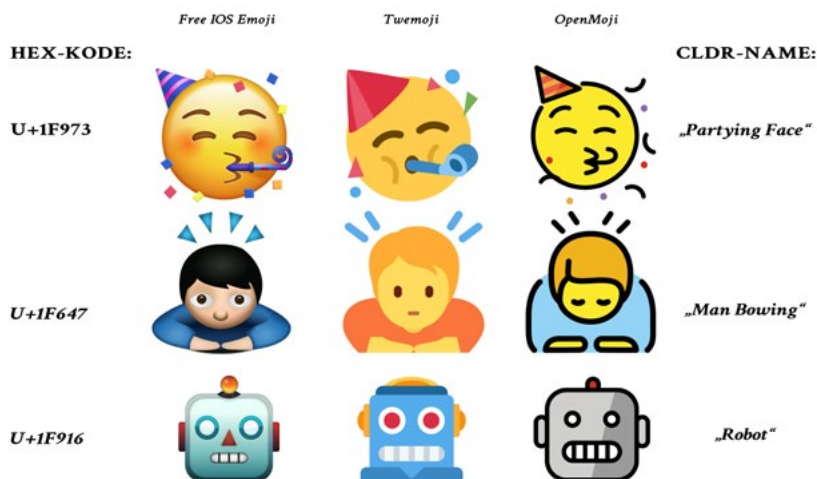


Figure 1: Different glyphs for three emoji offered by iOS Emoji, Twemoji, and OpenMoji

Most emoji researchers now hold the view that the revolutionary aspect of the small pictorial symbols lies less in their design or meaning than in their technical standardization (cf. ABEL 2020). These processes are based on a combination of two different encoding methods: on the one hand, an internal hexadecimal code with a unique CLDR (Common Locale Data Repository) name, and on the other a so-called ›glyph‹, a ready-made graphical representation that results from reading out that CLDR name. Only the level of hex code and CLDR name is uniformly defined by Unicode, while the actual designs of the individual glyphs depend on the respective platforms. WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, etc. accordingly ›interpret‹ the Unicode description in widely divergent ways (cf. fig. 1). The glyphs designed by Apple are currently considered the de facto standard. The website emojipedia.org collects and lists the different variants (glyphs) of each emoji. Because of this medial double coding between hex code/CLDR name and glyph, many established picture-theoretical assumptions seem to be reversed in an interesting way. From art historical discussions we know that pictures can never be fully expressed in analogous sentences or linguistically encodable information. Instead, each work of art is unique and, as an aesthetic perceptual phenomenon, always more than just the type of object it represents. Prototypical photographs or paintings are thus in principle ›untranslatable‹ into other depictions or sign systems without being transformed into different images or different signs. For emoji, by contrast, it is clear that the actual identity of an emoji character consists of the Unicode number and the descriptive CLDR name, for example ›burrito‹ for U+1F32F. This text is then ›translated into an image‹,

or rather interpreted by different platforms and operating systems. The glyphs we see thus represent a language-independent interpretation of concepts, which can be rendered in various visual variants.

A further technical development is represented by digital stickers which are specific to individual messengers and platforms. Interestingly, the stickers in the Telegram messenger app (and many others like Signal) could be regarded as advanced translations of emoji or, in crude terms, as ›second-order emoji‹ (cf. fig. 2). Instead of the existing glyphs, high-resolution (and increasingly animated) graphics, which can likewise be uploaded and downloaded in sets, can thus be inserted into messages.

HEX-KODE:		Silver Age Batman	Simba	Shakespeare	Velociraptor	CLDR-NAME:
U+1F622						„Crying Face“
U+1F628						„Fearful Face“
U+1F618						„Face Blowing a Kiss“

Figure 2: Telegram sticker sets for three existing core emoji

In the preview mode on Android or Apple, which is used to inform users in the background about messages they have received, the stickers are in fact always ›translated back‹ into the emoji to which they are linked. One can therefore speak of a repertoire of facial expressions and gestures itself being ›pictographed‹, i. e. transformed into clearly distinguishable, repeatable units. Interestingly, in many cases, we do not have any linguistic terms that we can use to differentiate these just as finely (cf. WILDE 2020). Although Unicode descriptions exist for these poses and facial expressions, do we really know the difference between a ›squinting face with tongue‹ and a ›winking face with tongue‹ or a ›grinning squinting face‹? Emoji seem here to form a distinctly structured repertoire of technically stabilized depictions of emotions that we are able to recognize in every conceivable variation. Gala Rebane (2021: 47-49) addressed these communicative affordances, perhaps not surprisingly, with recourse to Jean Baudrillard’s concept of simulacra: When TikTok users challenge each other to create ›emoji faces‹ through highly exaggerated selfie photographs, emoji do not refer back to any actual emotion (or their facial expressions) anymore but

generate a medial reality *sui generis* that has become the point of reference for digital natives. The following six contributions represent different approaches to conceptualizing and analyzing the use of emoji and digital stickers. First, Michael Beißwenger and Steffen Pappert address emoji from a pragmalinguistic perspective. They start out from the two most prevalent, although contradictory assumptions about emoji in popular newspaper articles, namely a) the worry that emoji could be capable of making language obsolete as a means of interpersonal communication (= ›end of cultivated written language‹), as well as b) that the use of emoji threatens the function and expressive power of written communication (= ›language decline‹). Against these assumptions, Beißwenger and Pappert – drawing on authentic examples of private WhatsApp communication from a linguistic corpus – show that emoji within written everyday communication do not make language ›poorer‹. Instead, emoji can take on important functions for securing understanding and shaping interpersonal relationships, the authors point out.

While Beißwenger and Pappert approach the use of emoji from the perspective of linguistics, the following contribution by Deborah Enzmann takes an alternative approach by conceptualizing emoji (or, rather, communication through emoji) with recourse to Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics. Introducing a novel semiotic model (developed within her dissertation ENZMANN 2023), she draws especially on Peirce's ›universal‹ categories of ›firstness‹, ›secondness‹, and ›thirdness‹, tracing important and perhaps unexpected connections to cognitive semiotics and comic book theory. Applying this model to a range of examples from her ›Textmoji‹ case study, Enzmann especially addresses how the recognition of a digital face differs across the degrees of abstraction to be found between earlier emoticons such as :-)) and the contemporary Unicode emoji. Her article thus advocates a more detailed look not only at the linguistic functions of emoji but at their formal-aesthetic properties that can strongly influence the interpretation of digital faces, for instance by regulating intensity and affect.

A third, again contrasting semiotic understanding is then presented by Andrea Ferretti who conceptualizes the emoji code in the tradition of European post-saussurean structuralism. The author reflects especially on the encyclopedic skills that the use and comprehension of emoji require, arguing that – despite their apparent iconicity – they can only be understood through the filter of linguistic, cultural, and socio-pragmatic coordinates. Ferretti especially objects to the commonplace notion that emoji substitute the ›paralinguistic clues‹ of face-to-face communication, such as prosody, gestures, interpersonal space management, and facial expressions. »To recover something from the lost spontaneity of face-to-face communication, emojis could be used to represent how the body reacts beyond the screen, not how it would have reacted if it had been face-to-face« (FERRETTI 2023, this issue). The emoji code, in other words,

should be seen to signify a new paralinguistics, native and specific of digital communication.

While these first three contributions offer different perspectives on emoji in a broader sense, the second half of the present special issue focuses on more specific contexts and cases. First, Christina Margrit Siever investigates how emoji are employed to express the opposite of what they often seem typical for: not for any carefree or playful decoration of messages, but rather for the expression of sincere mourning. Her case study, based on a corpus of 8,351 Twitter tweets, investigates the use of emoji to commemorate so-called ›angel babies‹ (German: ›Sternenkinder‹), i.e., children who die (shortly) before, during, or after birth. Are there specific emoji for digital mourning and to what extent can they be interpreted in religious or spiritual terms (angels, praying hands, or candles) – or merely signal a specific kind of mediated empathy? Siever distinguishes several functions and meanings that emoji can take on in these contexts, especially with respect to (partial) redundancy or complementarity within the multimodal expressions in general.

From emoji proper, we then turn to the even newer forms of digital expressions addressed above, digital stickers: Michaela Oberwinkler proposes a closer look at various functions of these stickers within communication through the Japanese messenger LINE, based on 764 cases of authentic data provided by Japanese university students. Despite the notion that such stickers could be seen as emoji that are merely larger in size, Oberwinkler shows that they are actually more expressive and fulfill various additional functions, perhaps even performing distinct ›speech acts‹ on their own. Despite these indications, the author warns against generalizations, pointing to many peculiar gender differences as well as to cultural issues that are strongly connected to specifically Japanese habits of communicating.

In the concluding contribution to this special issue, Marcel Lemmes finally traces many ways that media studies can contribute to our understanding of emoji/sticker use. He analyzes digital pictograms on the live streaming platform Twitch and the community chat platform Discord, investigating especially the affordances, constraints, and ›social protocols‹ connected to these specific interfaces and communities. Integrating a cultural semiotics, a situational semiotics, and an intersemiotic analysis of Twitch- and Discord-emoji, Lemmes argues that their potential lies especially in fostering affective and communal interactions within the online communities in which they are interpreted, negotiated, and continuously modified.

We hope that these six contributions to the blooming field of emoji research demonstrate the rich potential a broadly semiotic approach – spanning across or putting into dialogue text-linguistic, picture-theoretical, as well as media-theoretical methods and concepts – can bring to our understanding of digital,

affective communication. We would like to thank all our contributors for their efforts in making this special issue possible in such a short span of time since the 15th World Congress of Semiotics, and we hope you will find the subsequent six articles as stimulating and inspiring as we did.

Tübingen & Trondheim, August 2023

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Michael Beißwenger / Steffen Pappert

Language Decline due to Emojis?


How Graphicons Contribute to Digital Communication Culture: A Pragma-Linguistic Approach¹⁾

Abstract

Over the past decade and driven by the prevalence of messaging apps, images have become an integral part of digital personal communication. This article addresses the emoji phenomenon from a pragmatolinguistic perspective. Starting from examples from journalistic media describing emojis as a potential ›threat‹ for language and linguistic competences, we address two aspects of scepticism towards emojis in relation to the (German) language: (i) the question of whether emojis are capable of making language obsolete as a means of interpersonal communication (= ›end of cultivated written language‹) and whether they have the potential to replace language in the form of a pictorial symbol language which is considered less expressive; (ii) whether the high-frequency use of emojis in some domains of linguistic activity threatens the function and expressive power of written communication (= ›language decline‹, which impairs the expressive capacity of our language). Based on authentic examples of private WhatsApp communication from a linguistic corpus, we show that the use of emojis in written everyday communication does not make language ›poorer‹. Quite contrary to the fears expressed in the public discourse, emojis take on important functions for securing understanding and shaping relationships and, thus, have to be considered a multi-modal device which support the organisation of interpersonal communication in the digital world.

1 The present article is largely based on research published in German as BEISSWENGER/PAPPERT 2020C.

1. Introduction

We had become accustomed to a lot of things: the orthographically incorrect tangles of characters in short messages and emails, the brackets, dots and commas that were clustered together at the end of sentences, looking like faces laid on their sides. But then they went one step further. At the beginning of the century, we were suddenly confronted with a heap of shit with a face (💩) on German mobile phones and computers. [...] They are called emojis and have long become a part of everyday communication for many – whether they are in text messages or in snippets of dialogues in services such as WhatsApp. [...] Are you still spelling out words or are you already using symbols? In the meantime, linguists have also been sitting up and taking notice – and feel torn. Some believe that Emojis have the potential to become the new world language, while others fear the end of cultivated written language.  (MAIER-BORST 2015: n.pag.)^[2]

The deep suspicion towards digital writing habits, expressed here in the above quotation from a German magazine in a slightly exaggerated form, is not representative; however, it throws a spotlight on points of criticism taken up by journalists, which are repeatedly discussed when digital communication is associated with ›language decay‹ or similar mischiefs with regard to linguistic competences. In this respect, it is exemplary for a whole series of contributions in newspapers, radio, and television, which are driven by the »concerns about the pernicious influence of new media on writing culture in general and on the writing skills of young people in particular« (STORRER 2014: 171). In connection with the subject of emojis, which is the focus of this article, two aspects are of particular interest. On the one hand – and this will come as no surprise given the title of our article – Maier-Borst explicitly refers to the high-frequency use of emojis, which he is openly sceptical about. On the other hand, he is building a bridge between public and (linguistic) academic discourse (cf. DÜRSCHIED/BROMMER 2009: 11-13) about digital culture, while he clearly assumes that the latter is divided into two camps. Even if one obtains a somewhat more differentiated picture: after reading the text in its entirety, the impression remains of two fundamental positions, differing greatly in their judgements.

As in the case of many other contributions from public discourse on the subject of ›internet language criticism‹ (cf. DÜRSCHIED 2020: 328), Maier-Borst is less concerned with language criticism in the narrower sense, but more with addressing the question (which is becoming increasingly evident) whether and to what extent emojis are capable of displacing or replacing the German language

2 Quotations from German sources – newspaper articles such as the quotation from Meier-Borst here, or academic contributions as in the following text – are presented in translations in this article. The German original can be retrieved by the references.

and limiting its expressive power – or whether emojis can rather function as an almost universal language. Without going into this discourse in more detail here (cf. DÜRSCHIED 2020), the following headlines from other journalistic texts will at least hint at the signs under which reading incentives are being set:

- »Emojis: Is our Writing Degenerating into Colourful Little Pictures? The Emojisation of the World – Love it or Hate it« (RIEGLER 2015: n. pag.);
- »Are Emojis Grinning our Language Away? Laughing, Kissing and Winking Smileys Dominate our Everyday Communication – and Cause Anxiety: Are Emojis Threatening to Stultify our Language?« (KENTER 2017: n. pag.);
- »The Return of the Hieroglyphics« (RAUCHHAUPT 2017: n. pag.);
- »Modern Hieroglyphics: Do you Speak Emoji, the World’s Fastest Growing Language?« (WEBER 2017: n. pag.);
- »Symbols of Progress: Emojis, the Best Language in the World ;-)« (LOBO 2017: n. pag.);
- »No Language is Growing as Fast than Emojis« (SIELING 2018: n. pag.);

From this chronological sequence we can see that the assessments of emoji use are tending towards the positive, albeit under questionable premises. Nevertheless, the two poles that seem to be discussed in the public domain are becoming clear: language decline here, universal language/replacement of language there. However, both fail to recognise the actual potential that emojis (can) create in digital communication – precisely when written language is used as the dominant means of expression.

The scepticism towards emojis in journalistic and public discourse provides good enough reason to deal with emojis in the context of applied linguistics. Since new forms of communication and the practices that emerge from them (cf. BEISSWENGER 2016; 2020) usually generate public interest, sometimes even incomprehension, it is the task of linguistics to describe and explain those phenomena (cf. ARENDT/KIESENDAHL 2013). This means reacting to the criticism by »self-appointed experts« (LANTHALER et al. 2003: 3), who are in many cases lay linguists, and taking seriously the questions of a »linguistically concerned public« (STORRER 2013: 331). We also need to especially consider »the specificity of new communication forms together with their purposes« (KIESENDAHL 2019: 462), and to embed the apparent developments scientifically by providing well-founded evaluation standards. This is the aim of the following contribution: Based on an analysis of the use of emojis – or graphicons as they have been termed by Dainas and Herring (2021: 113) – in concrete interaction contexts, we will deal with two central aspects of scepticism towards emojis in relation to the (German) language from the perspective of linguistic pragmatics:

- i. First, the question of whether emojis are capable of making language obsolete as a means of interpersonal communication (= ›end of cultivated written language‹, cf. MAIER-BORST 2015) and whether they have the potential to replace language in the form of a pictorial symbol language which is considered less expressive.
- ii. Second, whether the high-frequency use of emojis in some domains of linguistic activity threatens the function and expressive power of written communication (= ›language decline‹, which impairs the expressive capacity of language).

We shall look into both these aspects in the following sections, empirically informed and discussed from a pragmalinguistic perspective. Our argumentation is based on authentic examples of private WhatsApp communication taken from the MoCoDa2 corpus (Mobile Communication Database)^[3], which makes donated and pseudonymised WhatsApp conversations available as a resource for research and teaching since 2017 (cf. BEISSWENGER et al. 2019). Thus, in the following section 2, we show that, in view of the semiotic qualities and combinatorial possibilities of emojis, there is no need to fear that our natural language will be replaced (= discussion of aspect (i) above). In section 3, we show that the use of emojis in written everyday communication does not make language ›poorer‹ but, quite contrary to the fears expressed in the public discourse, takes on important functions for securing understanding and shaping relationships in written communication (= addressing aspect (ii) above).

2. »Are emojis grinning away our language?« Why emojis can only partially replace words, expressions, and texts

In this section, we will first examine the ›prophecies‹ expressed in the headlines above that emojis could either replace language or at least have the potential to become a universal language. In order to function independently of language as a resource for expressing propositions and for the realisation of sentence- and text-equivalent utterances, emojis would have to be able to replace linguistic expressions of varying complexity, from the word and phrase level to the sentence and text level; in addition, they would need to be able to be interpreted in an unequivocal manner, independent of the linguistic context. We will use two short examples to explain why emojis do not have the necessary semiotic and

3 See <https://db.mocoda2.de/c/home> [accessed June 31, 2023].

combinatorial potential to achieve this (for more details, cf. BEISSWENGER/PAPPERT 2020b).

2.1 Emojis as sentence constituents

In WhatsApp conversations, there is evidence that emojis are being used to replace linguistic expressions of varying complexity – words, parts of words or even phrases – with images. Schlobinski and Watanabe (2003: 30) speak in this regard of the »reference function«, Dürscheid and Frick (2016: 105) of the »representation function«. The fact that emojis can take the place of individual substructures within a syntactical structure does not mean, however, that emojis have the potential to build syntactical structures on their own and independently from linguistic context. Example 1 shows two postings from a WhatsApp conversation in the corpus. In posting #28, the structure »Marie Helin sveta and I are selling« suggests a structural closure in the form of an expression that can be interpreted as an accusative object – i.e. a nominal phrase or an object clause. Instead, in the corresponding position, there is the emoji 🍌, and there are no other units eligible for structural closure. Accordingly, 🍌 can be interpreted as a figurative reference to an object or class of objects that would otherwise be characterised in the same position by means of a linguistic expression.

Veronica

Und Sonntag alle zum Flohmarkt kommen Marie Helin sveta und ich verkaufen 🍌

And on Sunday everybody come to the flea market Marie Helin sveta and me are selling 🍌

#28 21:36

Veronica

Also 🍌🍌 Not 🍌

I mean 🍌🍌 not 🍌

#29 21:36

Example 1^[4]: <https://db.mocodaz.de/#/view/jDIkG>

So far, so good. The fact that the 🍌 in the context here can be interpreted as a pictorial realisation of a syntactic complement required by the verb does not necessarily mean, however, that the emoji has the potential to form a noun or a nominal phrase. The emoji 🍌 can take on this role in the given context because

4 The corpus snippets are presented together with English translations (given in Italics) in this and the following examples. The URL reference given for each of the examples can be used to access the snippet in its original conversational context represented in the MoCoDaz corpus.

it is specified by the syntactic context alone; which objects or object classes can be considered as intended referents is narrowly circumscribed by the semantic structure. Taking into account the semantic associations suggested by the emoji sign, it is then up to the addressees themselves to decide what the form 🍔 should actually stand for in the given context: for the category ›hot dog‹, for the category ›(hot) sausage(s) in bread‹ or possibly more generally for ›sandwiches‹ or ›food‹.

In her follow-up post #29, Veronica makes it clear that she chose the emoji form 🍔 in Posting #28 by mistake: she follows up with a repair of the part of the utterance from #28 that she perceives as deficient with the expression »I mean 👠👙 not 🍔« in which she clarifies that Marie, Helin, and herself are not selling »🍔«, but instead »👠👙«. Here, too, the chosen emoji forms open up scope for what could be meant by them: ›bikinis and high heels‹, ›swimwear and shoes‹, ›women’s clothing‹ or possibly just ›clothing‹ in general. In principle, even a reading constituting »👠👙« as a reference to individual objects (= a certain bikini and a certain lady’s shoe) would be possible.

This simple example illustrates at least three things:

- a. that emojis can be embedded in a syntactic structure as an alternative, non-linguistic realisation of a referring expression or verbal element if the linguistic context supports or suggests such an interpretation;
- b. that in such cases emojis contribute to the construction of propositions similar to linguistically realised parts of sentences, and
- c. that the interpretation of specific emojis already opens up a scope, which is sometimes gladly used for this purpose (cf. DÜRSCHIED/MELETIS 2019: 103f.).

We would still need to clarify why the authors of WhatsApp postings choose emojis instead of verbal expressions in such cases. In our opinion, this has something to do with the fact that by choosing an emoji instead of a linguistic expression, the addressees of the message should be made to understand that you have made an effort and been creative in the design of your message – something you only do for people you value: »[...] like face emojis, [they] have practical usefulness in everyday life, as they enable a user to act out emotion work that preserves and enhances social relationships« (RIORDAN 2017: 563). The conscious substitution of a part of a syntactical structure by an emoji is linked to how we work on relationships; we can say, therefore, that this is socially motivated.

2.2 Emojis as carriers of propositions and actions

It has been shown on various occasions in the literature that emojis are not only used to visualise individual objects or actions, but also (to) »act as a substitute for complex propositions« (SIEBENHAAR 2018: 758) and »can, in individual cases take over entire communication actions, such as a narrative, in which several propositions are in a sequence« (SIEBENHAAR 2018: 760; cf. also HERRING/DAINAS 2017; GE/HERRING 2018). Of course, there are examples which at first glance seem to support such an assumption (cf. SIEBENHAAR 2018). At second glance, however, it quickly becomes clear that the understanding of pure emoji sequences depends on very specific preconditions or structures (cf. BEISSWENGER/PAPPERT 2020b). Basically, it can be assumed that communication based solely on emojis can only function in specific contexts and on the basis of specific background knowledge (cf. example 2). As already shown for the level of sentences (example 1), without textual anchoring, the spectrum of possible readings of an emoji sign remains relatively open and vague; when combined with other emojis and due to the lack of morpho-syntactic features, the spectrum is even broader (cf. DÜRSCHIED/SIEVER 2017: 263).

In the light of this background, emoji occurrences are closely related to the given linguistic and situational context: If their contribution to the construction of propositions is not specified through syntactic embedding, as in example 1, the intended interpretation must be specified through linguistic and sequential cues and through a shared knowledge background of the producer and addressee(s) of the respective message (cf. DAINAS/HERRING 2021). The latter is clearly illustrated in example 2:

Jana

Hey:* halt dir den 4.1. Frei 😊👗

Hey:* save the date: 4th of January 😊👗

#1 18:31

Annika

A's klar! 💕💕

'course! 💕💕

#2 19:57

Fr 25 Dec 2015

Jana

Top 👍👍👍

Awesome 👍👍👍

#3 18:52

Example 2: <https://db.mocodaz.de/#/view/bLYZt>

In example 2, we read about a date for two girlfriends planning to buy a dress for their graduation ball. The planning is the result of a previous spoken conversation, so that the present situational context and, therefore, the meaning of the emojis can be effortlessly understood by the partners;⁵ however, the analysis of this sequence is faced with other challenges. By posting #1 »Hey:* save the date: 4th of January«, two linguistic actions – a greeting and a request – are supplemented by an emoticon or an emoji: (i) The greeting is completed by the ›kiss‹-representing emoticon <:*>, or, in an iconic reading, a third action is added, namely a (greeting) kiss. (ii) The purpose of the smiling emoji that follows the request, on the other hand, is to soften the threat of the addressee's negative face, who is restricted in her freedom of action by the directive act »save the date: 4th of January« (on ›face work‹ with emojis, cf. in detail BEISSWENGER/PAPPERT 2019b; 2022). (iii) The ›dress‹ emoji at the end of the post can be interpreted as a non-linguistic realisation of an independent action that justifies why Annika should mark the date in her calendar: it is clear from their previous conversation that the two friends want to go shopping together for a dress for the graduation ball. (iii) The emoji is intended less as an image of a concretely envisaged dress specimen for a graduation ball; and neither is it a symbol for the genre ›graduation ball-dress‹. Rather, it represents the whole event arranged to ›go shopping for the graduation ball dress‹. Annika's approving reply in #2 (›'course« for ›of course«) is accompanied by a double heart emoji and the image of a wallet, which are interrelated. The wallet, as a substituting visualisation that takes up the dress again (but with a variation of the chosen image reference), refers to the upcoming shopping trip and thus ensures thematic continuity by activating situational knowledge about the frame ›shopping‹ whereas the envisaged shopping trip is given a positive evaluation by the double-heart symbol.

Up to this point, the contribution of emojis to the thematic and sequential organisation of the interaction reproduced in example 2 could be deduced on the basis of the metadata for the excerpt taken from MoCoDa2 as well as everyday experience and common knowledge. For the final posting #3, on the other hand, this is only valid to a limited extent. The ›thumb‹ emoji 👍 enhances the utterance »Great« with a visualisation of a corresponding gesture (cf. BEISSWENGER/PAPPERT 2019a: 104-111); together, the verbal utterance and the emoji signal approval and probably anticipation, too. The combination of the ›blow wind‹ emoji 🌬️, which could be interpreted metaphorically as a symbol for ›hurry up‹, and the ›express train‹ emoji 🚄 can – if you like – be roughly interpreted as a ›fast-moving train‹; however, what it actually means in this given situation remains incomprehensible to outsiders.

5 The setting up of a date to buy a dress has been made available by one of the two persons involved in the dialogue and stored as textual metadata for this sequence in the corpus.

Considering the assumption discussed at the beginning of the paper – that emojis might have the potential to replace complex linguistic expressions – the examples show two things in particular:

- a. Under certain circumstances, it is possible to communicate (only) by using emojis, and the issues expressed through them can also be of a complex nature.
- b. The interpretation of emojis or emoji combinations is highly context-bound and can only be developed on the basis of shared background or context knowledge and existing linguistic cues (for more details, cf. BEISSWENGER/PAPPERT 2020b).

3. »Is our writing degenerating into colourful little pictures?« Why emojis do not impair but add to understanding in written conversations

The second question emerging from the public language-critical discourse on the topic of emojis refers to the fear that the highly frequent use of emojis (at least in some areas) is threatening the function and expressive power of written communication. From the point of view of applied linguistics, the need for clarification of the impact of graphicons on written language emerging from this concern can be seen as an assignment that we need to complete. The fact that new developments are often initially met with scepticism is not unusual in linguistic history; the concern about an impending ›decay‹ of linguistic expression is typically a sign of the language users becoming aware of linguistic change (cf. KELLER 2003: 23).

Emojis are not linguistic characters: like letters, they can be integrated as segments into written utterances via the keyboard; however, unlike letters, which are combined with other written characters according to graphotactic rules to form meaningful linguistic units – word forms, sentences, utterances – emojis, as pictorial signs, are immediately perceptible (»wahrnehmungsnahe Zeichen«, »signs close to perception«, SACHS-HOMBACH 2003: 74), processed holistically, and allow immediate associations of meaning, or even force these associations due to their visual salience.

The fact that they can be flexibly integrated into written utterances thanks to their segmentality legitimises to study them as units in the context of linguistic change: since they can be combined with linguistic units as elements of written utterances, from a pragmatolinguistic perspective, they contribute to the achievement of communicative goals and intentions. The fact that emojis are used with high frequency in certain domains (e.g. private WhatsApp conversations) makes

them all the more interesting for pragmalinguistic studies: Semiotic devices that are used with high frequency must fulfil important functions. Pragmalinguistic proof that emojis do not hinder written language, but rather support it in its essential communicative functions, could contribute to clarifying the relationship of emojis to written language, which can be used as a constructive counter to the concern about a ›language decline‹ through emojis.

In Beißwenger and Pappert (2019a: 33–90; 2020a) we have developed a descriptive framework for the linguistic analysis of the specificity of emojis in digital communication. That approach is pragmatically grounded. The basic question which the descriptive framework provides an answer to and develops a series of differentiations for is: »What contribution do emojis make to the organisation of communicative understanding in written conversations?« We consider the specificity of ›doing things with emojis‹ as a disposition of factors on five different levels of description:

- i. the technological environment on the basis of which emojis can develop their specific potential as pragmatic resources (cf. MEREDITH 2017; ANDROUTSOPOULOS 2023).
- ii. the semiotic qualities that result from the pictorial nature of emojis and which can be activated in specific (and different) ways when used in a given conversational context.
- iii. the pragmatic potentials that result from the semiotic qualities (ii) under the given technological conditions (i) and which form the foundation for emojis to perform certain functions in digital communication. This potential underlies every emoji use and is played out every time an emoji is used.
- iv. the pragmatic functions that emojis fulfil in concrete use and which can be described in their relationship to the linguistic and sequential context in performing actions and shaping interaction.
- v. the practices into which the pragmatic functions can be differentiated depending on the context and which can be understood as characteristic constellations of material resources (= semiotic qualities and the potentials they open up) and the requirements of a given communicative situation.

Figure 1 illustrates the interplay of these various factors. For the functional analysis of emojis, we will only be considering the top level of representation – the

level of functions and practices – in the present paper.⁶¹ Here, specific uses of emojis are considered and provided with a functional description against the background of the situational and sequential context in which they are embedded. This is either documented in the chat history or can be inferred or interpreted on the basis of metadata on the situational context of the conversation.

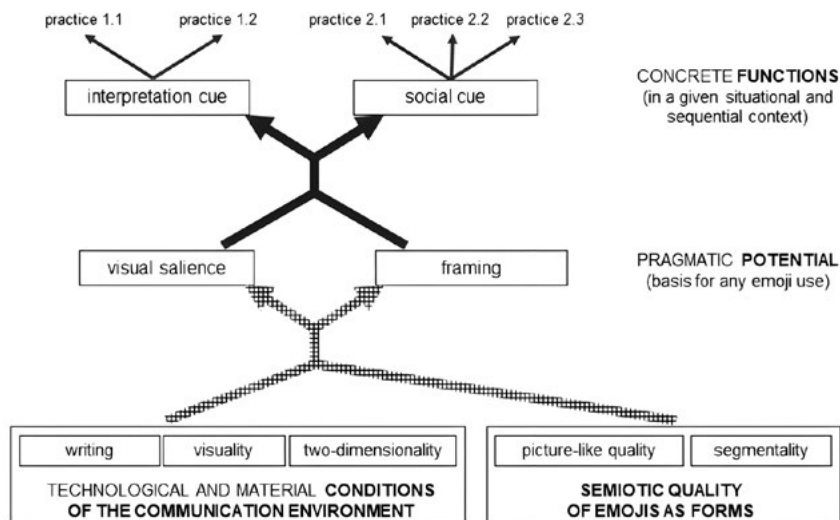


Figure 1: Pragmatic potentials and function of emojis (with regard to WhatsApp communication).

In the following, we would like to use the analysis of an excerpt from a WhatsApp conversation to show how the functions of emojis can be described according to this model. We focus on levels (iv) and (v), and we distinguish between two central functional areas regarding the use of emojis:

1. *Interpretation cues:* by using emojis in this function, the context is constituted for the addressees. This context forms the background and the conditions in which the producer of a contribution to the ongoing conversation would like their utterance to be interpreted; or in which the attitude of the producer towards a particular topic can be reconstructed without this being explicitly verbalised. A linguistic utterance is extended by interpretation cues if the producer is not certain that the addressees are able to recognise the intentions and goals underlying a linguistic act on

6 A detailed representation of the description framework can be found in BEISSWENGER/PAPPERT 2019a and in a more compact form in BEISSWENGER/PAPPERT 2020a.

the basis of the chosen linguistic form in the given context. The non-explicit nature of the linguistic utterance can be pragmatically justified, i.e. consciously chosen.

Interpretation cues are thus used to guide the addressee's interpretation. They either create inconsistencies that signalling that what is expressed literally is not what is meant and that the addressee(s) should search for another interpretation of the utterance that is consistent with the given cue and the sequential context (Practice 1.1: calculated inconsistency as a guide to search for what is meant), or they reveal the producer's attitude towards the content of the utterance that they consider important for interpretation (Practice 1.2: non-redundant marking of attitudes as a presentation of interiority).

2. *Social cues:* As visual means, emojis can serve as social cues to make (linguistic) utterances vivid, pleasing, and socially acceptable. These practices have in common that the user of an emoji expresses the fact that they consider the relationship with their addressee(s) valuable, worth preserving and protecting. In contrast to the practices described in (1), practices of emojis as social cues do not contribute to the interpretation of the utterance at the level of propositions or illocutions. Neither do emojis as social cues signal their user's attitudes towards what they have uttered. They facilitate relationships: the utterance is ›put into the picture‹, i.e. propositions or parts of them are transformed into the visual mode – either in addition to their linguistic realisation or as an alternative to it – in order to indicate that one has made an effort to make the utterance appealing to the addressees and to support their reception. In these uses, emojis function as illustrations (practice 2.1: calculated redundancy as ›putting the linguistic utterance into the picture‹) or as alternative (pictorial) realisations of propositions or partial propositions (practice 2.2: acting without language); see, for example, the emoji uses described in examples 1 and 2.

Emojis as social cues also become relevant when the relationship with the partner is in danger of being disturbed by the potential effects of individual actions. In such cases, emojis function as pictorial ›social cement‹ that producers add to risky (= face-threatening) utterances as a precautionary measure to indicate that despite the possibly undesirable implications of the utterance, they respect the wishes of the addressees and are intent on maintaining a good relationship and mutual respect. In such uses, emojis are a means of acting politely and serve to mitigate potential

face threats (practice 2.3: mitigation as a means of socially acceptable organisation of linguistic action).

In the following, we will apply our description framework to the analysis of an extract from a WhatsApp sequence. The data example from the MoCo-Daz corpus reproduced in example 3 is about Bernd complaining to his girlfriend Heike about the behaviour of a member of his student work group, in which they were supposed to create a PowerPoint presentation together.

Bernd

Heiko hat einfach wieder irgendwas du dem foliensatz gelöscht. 😡

Heiko deleted something from the slides again. 😡

#9 09:58

Bernd

Aus

From

#10 09:58

Bernd

Und ich mache mir die Mühe. 😞

Why did I even bother. 😞

#11 09:59

Heike

...

#12 10:21

Heike

Das würde ich so nicht akzeptieren. Wenn das deine Folien sind, füge sie wieder ein!

I wouldn't accept that! If you made those slides, put them back in again!

#13 10:21

Bernd

Ich habe ihm gesagt dass es scheiße ist und ihm ist es egal 😡😡

I told him it was shit and he doesn't care 😡😡

#14 10:23

Example 3: <https://db.mocodaz.de/#/view/WyEaW>

In example 3, Bernd produces a series of interpretation cues presented via emojis (= practice 1.2) in a highly creative way. First, in posting #9, he announces that his

fellow student Heiko has made deletions in a set of slides they are supposed to create collectively without prior agreement. The facts that he is presenting verbally are supplemented by the emoji which represents Bernd's frustration and negative emotions. In #11, Bernd then expresses his anger concerning Heiko's behaviour in the exclamative mode (cf. HOFFMANN 2016: 566-567). The emotional evaluation of the facts previously presented in #9 is thus also realised verbally in #11.

However, the emoji added in #11 does not illustrate the emotional evaluation, but enriches it with additional information: The emoji, which shows a closed zip instead of a mouth, can be interpreted as a figurative reference to the fact that Bernd has to force himself not to express his annoyance with Heiko much more explicitly (by swearing or cursing). The use of the emoji here is in a transitional area to practice 2.2 >acting without language<; it could also be understood as a pictorial rather than linguistic realisation of a proposition (paraphrased perhaps as >I better not say anything about that now<), which is mirrored and ratified to a certain extent sequentially by Heike in #12 by means of the ellipsis points (>Words fail me<). By using the two emojis in posting #14, Bernd visually expresses his anger towards his fellow student's ignorant behaviour, i.e. he marks and intensifies his attitude towards the subject presented (= practice 1.2). To do this, he uses an emoji that shows a facial expression associated with negative emotion, with the mouth area covered by a banner which also contains a meaningless sequence of letters and special characters (>&S!#%<) reminiscent of the strings sometimes used in comics as symbols for swearing and cursing.

Accordingly, the emoji can be interpreted as a symbolic expression of what Bernd does not want to express explicitly in language – namely a series of complaints aimed at the inconsistent work of the partner he is working with in the group. The second emoji form used by Bernd is purely iconic in its representation and depicts something that does not typically occur in daily life: an exploding head. Since it is highly unlikely that Bernd's head did really explode before the production of his posting, this emoji serves him well as a visual metaphor and therefore as an expression in a figurative sense. For the addressees, the emoji in this context can be interpreted as an indexical sign for Bernd's emotional state (tension to the point of bursting), i.e. the attitude that is already clear in the first emoji is further dramatised (= practice 1.2). Because the addressees are – of course – aware that heads rarely explode, especially when their owners can still participate in chats afterwards, its use here has shown a not inconsiderable degree of originality.

With regard to the fear that the highly frequent use of emojis could threaten the expressive power of written language and contribute to a loss of the means of differentiated communication, two things can be deduced from the example:

- i. In written conversations, emojis take on important tasks in securing understanding and improving relationships.

- ii. They are thus seen and used as a means of ensuring the interpretability of utterances in a way that is both expedient and original under the conditions of a socially close interaction situation in physical distance, without access to means of corporeality. Simultaneously, they serve to show the partner that the relationship is valued. From this pragmalinguistic perspective, emojis do not work against verbal communication, but in fact improve it, adding to the already available inventory of communicative means.

4. Conclusion: Language decline through emojis?

The fact that emojis are currently attracting a great deal of attention in the public language-critical discussion on the influence of digital communication on written language is linked to the fact that they enjoy a high degree of popularity as one of the latest innovations in the field of net-specific means of expression and design – together with other graphicons like ›stickers‹ and GIFs. The prominence they enjoy in journalistic treatment of the topic of language in social media may also be due to their semiotic quality as pictorial signs: due to their visual salience, emojis stand out, especially in contrast to – and embedded into stretches of – written language. The fact that emojis can be flexibly and segmentally combined with letters and words in the production of user postings in WhatsApp conversations, but also on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and other digital platforms, makes the need for clarification about their relationship to language, a topic frequently discussed in the public domain, understandable.

A pragmalinguistic perspective, as we have tried to show in sections 2 and 3, can help clarify the status of emojis in relation to written language:

- i. Although emojis can be used instead of words and phrases, and in individual cases can also represent non-linguistic propositions or be used for the realisation of actions (section 2), a linguistic or at least situational context is typically required so that the addressees of the relevant utterances can interpret what is intended by the author and ensure smooth communication. Thus, there is currently no reason to worry that emojis will replace language; on the contrary, it is only through linguistic context that emojis can be used as a creative means of expression without causing communication-disrupting ambiguities.
- ii. Conversely, emojis are used to disambiguate interpretations for utterances or to enrich linguistically encoded information with additional information (section 3): They provide pictorial interpretation clues or

visualise the author's attitude towards a verbally expressed issue. At the same time, they take on important tasks in shaping social ties in digital conversation: without having to explicitly address the relationship, emojis visually signal appreciation towards the addressees of the utterance by illustrating and decorating what is said and making the utterance pleasing and appealing in its visual appearance. Written language in the digital medium is thus not restricted in its expressive possibilities, but rather supported and strengthened in its performance as a carrier of social meaning in interpersonal social interaction.

Of course, the described functions of emojis do not apply to all contexts of written communication: in a scientific article, in a written term paper, in a letter of application, an accident report or in an editorial in the daily newspaper, their appearance – if not in the form of quotations – would rightly be perceived as a violation of the norm. This can be attributed to the fact that edited, written texts of the aforementioned types are composed and designed to be processed and understood by the addressees detached from the situational context of their production and without being intended as contributions to an ongoing conversation with sequential organisation where the participants can immediately switch from a reader's to a producer's role to ask for clarifications if needed.

In digital communication, especially when used for private, spontaneous conversations, emojis represent a further development of the semiotic inventory and thus the material resources of social interactional practices; they are used as units that support the securing of understanding and comprehension. Without being verbal, they can be seen as an extension of the means of expression of interaction-oriented writing which – sensu Storrer (2018) – is aimed towards the production of written contributions to an ongoing conversation and is not – like products of text-oriented writing – composed to serve as a means for communication which takes place under (temporal, spatial or social) distance conditions. Thus, the use of emojis as elements of socio-communicative practices can be seen as a recent symptom of the expansion of the semiotic ›toolkit‹ and of emerging multimodal practices of ›how to do things with language (in digital environments)‹.

Emojis can thus be described as the semiotic means of social media par excellence by combining technological innovation (= resources within the social software used) with purposes and practices directed towards the organisation of social life. The latter contribute to the adaptation of written language as a means for digital communication which – following Storrer (2014) – can be described in the broader context of language change. Therefore, ›doing things with emojis‹ does not cause a language decline, but rather ensures that written language can

serve as a means of communication that is (still and further on) usable, suitable, and flexible enough for communicating in the digital world.

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Deborah Enzmann

Analyzing Emojis Semiotically: Towards a Multi-Dimensional, Theoretical Model Inspired by Charles S. Peirce

Abstract

Emojis have become an essential part of the communicative sign repertoires of billions of people. Their use has increased rapidly in recent years. The variability of meanings, the context-sensitive, polyfunctional, and ambiguous character of the signs is fascinating. The inconsistency of their many meanings, however, is a recurring topic in academic discourse. Research on the functions of emojis has mainly come from the field of linguistics, trying to structure and classify these signs from the respected perspectives. But what do sign processes using emojis look like? What influences do the formal, especially pictorial aspects have on the effect and the meaning of these signs? What is the relation between form and content? And how are ›abstraction‹ and ›identification‹ connected to each other? In the present article, the sign process with emojis will be explained based on Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics. Using messages from the ›Textmoji‹ case study and proposing a semiotic model, it will be shown what a sign process with emojis looks like. The focus will be on the intentions of users to employ these signs. Charles S. Peirce's semiotics is applied to specific messages from the case study through a novel model based on his theory of signs. In a concluding step, the present article will demonstrate how recognition of a face takes place across different degrees of abstraction, drawing especially on comic book theory and cognitive semiotics.

Introduction

Digital communication, and with it the colorful world of digital signs, has changed our everyday communication in recent years. For this reason, it is important to analyze these communicative interactions semiotically. In my recent dissertation, published in German (ENZMANN 2023), I examine emojis from a historical, design, and semiotic perspective with a focus on the intentions of the sign users. The present article gives a little insight into the semiotic part of my work. It includes the development of a semiotic model based on the theory of Charles Sanders Peirce. The case study ›Textmoji‹ shows what the user wants to convey using emojis and explains sign meanings that would not be accessible on the basis of a reconstruction – in the sense of an interpretation by an outside person. The combination of a case study with a semiotic model allows instead to show how a sign process with emojis could be conceptualized and visualized graphically within a semiotic model.

Terminology

So far, there is no consistent terminology for the classification of various sorts of emojis across existing research. Terms like ›smiley‹, ›emoji‹, ›emoticon‹, ›kawaicon‹, and many more are used in different ways. For this reason, I propose a definition below for the use of the terms that differs from the usual usage. In the following, a distinction is made between ›ASCII-‹, ›graphic‹, and ›AR-emojis‹. ›ASCII-emojis‹¹ are composed of the keyboard set. Subforms are ›ASCII-emoticons‹ and ›ASCII-pictomojis‹. ASCII-emoticons can also be differentiated between vertical and horizontal emoticons. The last ones are also often called ›kaomojis‹ in the relevant literature. Graphic emojis are picture signs that are inserted into the text. They have spread globally mainly due to their inclusion in Unicode in 2010. Characteristics of emojis until 2017 were that they were mainly used in text messages, consequently together with writing. More recent developments allow the use of ›AR-emojis‹, which are used as videos in connection with a voice message or as stickers. One form of AR-emojis is comprised by individually designed avatars, sometimes called ›AR-emoticons‹. According to this definition, emoticons are digital signs that represent emotional states through facial expressions. ASCII-, graphic and AR-emojis can thus all be addressed as emoticons (cf. fig. 1).

1 It is important to emphasize that ASCII-emojis do not only consist of the ASCII-code but can be composed with different encoding systems from different character sets (cf. ENZMANN 2023: 76f.).

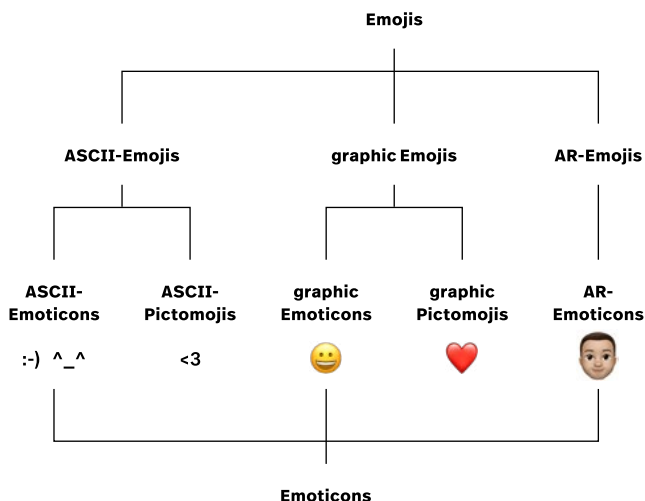


Figure 1: Structuring of the terms (cf. Enzmann 2023: 11)

The semiotics of Charles S. Peirce

Charles S. Peirce’s semiotics is especially suitable for analyzing and categorizing these sign processes further. In contrast to other approaches, Peirce was not only concerned with linguistic signs but with all kinds of signs and sign systems. In order to study emojis, a multidimensional and interdisciplinary approach is helpful because emojis are, in the first instance, images that are mainly used as signs in text-based messages. Emoji communication is thus rather novel – and multimodal. Accordingly, this phenomenon needs to be studied with an all-encompassing theory as provided by Peirce’s semiotics; its foundation lies in Peirce’s philosophy of universal categories. His approach is still relevant today, but unfortunately, it is often rendered in a highly reduced form or presented in such complex diagrams that the application to specific case studies is pushed into the background. It is my concern to make Peirce’s semiotics more accessible by means of a model based on his theory of signs and to apply it to specific text messages containing emojis in a practical manner. In the following, I will briefly explain the relevant areas of Peirce’s theory on which the subsequent semiotic model shall be based.^[2]

2 For a more detailed explanation of the conception and application of this semiotic model, see *Emojisierung: Eine historische und semiotische Studie zu Emojis* (ENZMANN 2023). In the present article, only specific aspects

Peirce has proposed one of the most complex interpretations and expositions of what a ›sign‹ is and how it works (cf. FRIEDRICH/SCHWEPENHÄUSER 2010: 30). In his work, he created many different definitions. All of these have in common, however, that a ›sign‹ is understood as a triadic relation (cf. NÖTH 2000: 62), which can be represented by a semiotic triangle (cf. fig. 2):

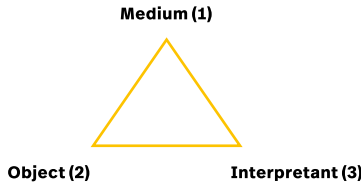


Figure 2: The semiotic triangle (cf. Enzmann 2023: 115; also Eco 1977: 30)

The triadic sign relation is the precondition for the formation of any sign process and cannot be reduced to a dyadic or monadic relation. According to this, a ›Medium‹ (M)^[3] relates to an ›Object‹ (O) and it is interpreted by the ›Interpretant‹ (I); all three elements are defining each other through these respective relations. This triad is understood through different terms in various semiotic traditions, some of which differ considerably.^[4] Peirce subdivides the three references into further trichotomies, denoting sub-types of sign classes. This is usually presented in the form of a table (cf. NÖTH 2000: 66):

CATEGORIES	SIGN REFERENCES		
	Medium (M)	Object (O)	Interpretant (I)
FIRSTNESS	1.1 Qualisign	2.1 Icon	3.1 Rheme
SECONDNESS	1.2 Sinsign	2.2 Index	3.2 Dicsign
THIRDNESS	1.3 Legisign	2.3 Symbol	3.3 Argument

Figure 3: The triadic relation within the types of sign classes (cf. Enzmann 2023: 116; also Peirce 2000b: 48; Nöth 2000: 66; Walther 1974: 56)

	M	O	I
1	1.1	2.1	3.1
2	1.2	2.2	3.2
3	1.3	2.3	3.3

Figure 4: A reduced representation of figure 3 (cf. Enzmann 2023: 116)

The numbering system is adopted from semiotician Max Bense (and many others later, cf. WALTHER 1974: 56). The table can then be further reduced to a mere

relevant to the exemplary analysis are mentioned. To understand the complexity of the model and its application in more detail, the original reading would be necessary.

- 3 Peirce sometimes called the means ›representamen‹ or simply ›sign (in itself)‹. However, he thought that the word ›medium‹ could replace the term sign since the sign stands as an intermediary between an object and an interpretant (cf. NÖTH 2000: 467). In this paper, the term ›medium‹ is used in a similar way. This seems to make sense in that it refers to an aid or a tool that - like a sign - has been designed to achieve a certain goal.
- 4 In the subsequent article, the terms in figure 2 will be used. Note especially that the one who interprets the sign is called the ›interpreter‹ (not the ›interpretant-).

numeric notation as in figure 4. This table serves as the basis for generating ten classes of signs.

Peirce's ten classes of signs

The respective nine constituents are then not complete signs by themselves. Only the combination of one sign type each from the other sign reference results in a sign. Ten well-established sign classes can then be derived from the table. The conceptualization of the classes follows the subsequent combination rule: Any first can only be combined with another first, any second with either a first or a second, and any third with either a third, a second, or a first (cf. SCHÖNRICH 1999: 28). This results in the following ten semiotically valid sign classes (ibid.: 27; cf. WALTHER 1974: 78f.):

- | | | |
|-----|--------------------------------|-------------------|
| 1. | ›Rhematic Ionic Qualisigns‹ | (1.1 / 2.1 / 3.1) |
| 2. | ›Rhematic Iconic Sinsigns‹ | (1.2 / 2.1 / 3.1) |
| 3. | ›Rhematic Iconic Legisigns‹ | (1.3 / 2.1 / 3.1) |
| 4. | ›Rhematic Indexical Sinsigns‹ | (1.2 / 2.2 / 3.1) |
| 5. | ›Rhematic Indexical Legisigns‹ | (1.3 / 2.2 / 3.1) |
| 6. | ›Rhematic Symbolic Legisigns‹ | (1.3 / 2.3 / 3.1) |
| 7. | ›Dicent Indexical Sinsigns‹ | (1.2 / 2.2 / 3.2) |
| 8. | ›Dicent Indexical Legisigns‹ | (1.3 / 2.2 / 3.2) |
| 9. | ›Dicent Symbolic Legisigns‹ | (1.3 / 2.3 / 3.2) |
| 10. | ›Argument Symbolic Legisigns‹ | (1.3 / 2.3 / 3.3) |

From 1) to 10) the ›semioticity‹ (or ›representational capacity‹) increases respectively according to Elisabeth Walther (1974: 79).^[5]

The universal categories

The basis of Peirce's theory of signs is the universal categories addressed as ›firstness‹, ›secondness‹, and ›thirdness‹. To Peirce, they amount to a theory of experience, a phenomenology. He understands a phenomenon to be anything that is present to the mind in some way at a specific point in time (cf. PEIRCE 1983: 40). He then differentiates three types of phenomenological elements that are, however, not absolutely distinguishable from each other. Firstness is characterized by possibilities; secondness by actual facts; and thirdness by the concluding achievement of thought (cf. ENZMANN 2023: 112-115). These three

5 Peirce used a different ordering system of sign classes (cf. PEIRCE 1983: 133). Since, in the following, the semioticity of emojis will be examined, however, the ordering system according to the Stuttgart Institute will be used.

universal categories not only form the foundation of Peirce’s semiotics but also shape it structurally. As can be seen from the numeric notation, the sign types and the sign relations are only assigned relative to these categories (cf. fig. 3-4). The medium belongs to the firstness, the sign types of it are again divided into firstness, secondness, and thirdness. The same is true for the object reference, which stands for secondness, and the interpretant reference, which stands for thirdness. The three universal categories thus act doubly on sign references. Initially, the sign-references (medium, object, and interpretant) are divided into firstness, secondness, and thirdness; then, their respective sign types are divided into categories once again.

In addition to the foundational triad and its internal trichotomies, Peirce distinguished between two objects and three interpretants (cf. PEIRCE 2000b: 50). In the following diagram, again based on Peirce, such a subdivision is shown as a second level (cf. fig. 5):

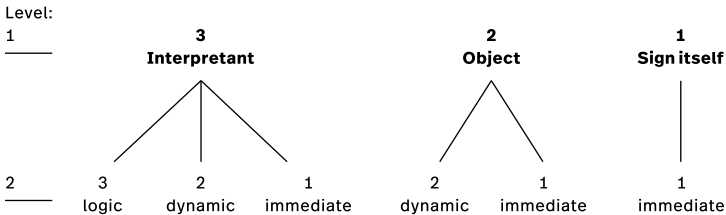


Figure 5: The integration of the sign relata according to Peirce (cf. Peirce 2000b: 50)

All three sign references include an immediate level (cf. fig. 5). In addition, the object and interpretant references include a dynamic level and the interpretant reference includes a logic level. It can be seen that the interpretant reference is triadic, the object reference is dyadic, and the medium reference is monadic.

A semiotic model of analysis based on Peirce

This further subdivision can once again be organized into additional trichotomies, which adds to the complexity and granularity of Peirce’s theory. This prompts to represent the initially presented table in three dimensions – in the form of a cube model (cf. fig. 6):

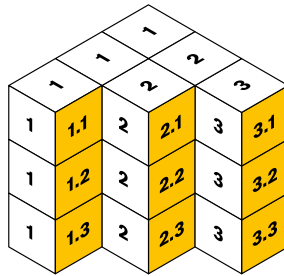


Figure 6: The semiotic cube model (cf. Enzmann 2023: 126).

If the sign references are separated, it is evident that the medium is monadic, the object is dyadic, and the interpretant is triadic (cf. fig. 7). The medium contains an immediate aspect, the object contains an immediate and a dynamic aspect, and the interpretant contains an immediate, a dynamic, and a logical – also called final – aspect (cf. PEIRCE 2000b: 51).

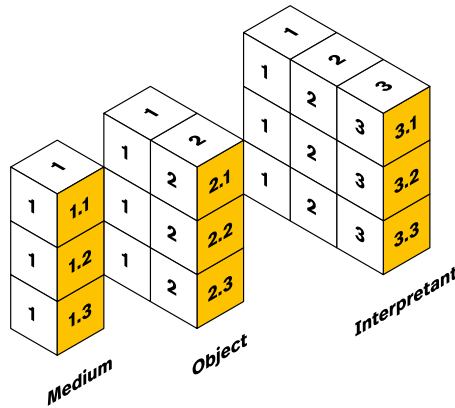


Figure 7: The sign references are separated (cf. Enzmann 2023: 129)

The immediate object and the immediate interpretant depend on the representation of the medium. This can be seen in the model because the immediate is on the same level as the medium (cf. fig. 8):

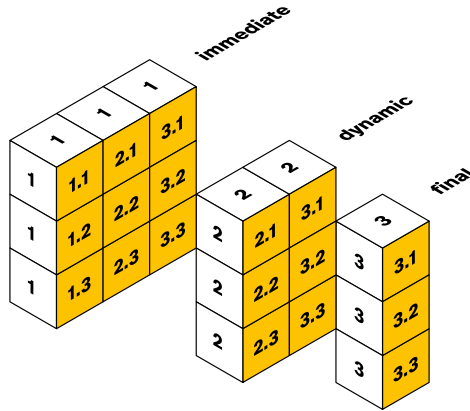


Figure 8: The immediate, dynamic, and final level separated (cf. Enzmann 2023: 129)

The universal categories thus function not only from left to right and from back to front, but also from top to bottom (cf. fig. 9).

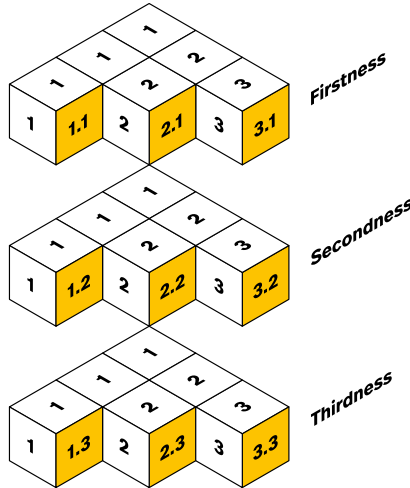


Figure 9: The categories of firstness, secondness, and thirdness are separated from top to bottom (cf. Enzmann 2023: 129)

This model clarifies the fundamental validity of the categories in Peirce's semiotics. The yellow areas result in the table shown at the beginning (cf. fig. 4). The ten classes of signs can be represented by the cube model (cf. ENZMANN 2023:

130). It should thus be pointed out that the complexity of a sign increases the more complex the diagram becomes.^{6]}

In the following section, I would like to demonstrate how the cube model helps to visualize and analyze any actual sign process. To examine the sign process that takes place with emojis, the following section analyzes the intended use of emojis. I am going to present my case study ›Textmoji‹^{7]} and address some important aspects regarding the classification of emojis into sign classes. In a further step, the formal and aesthetic characteristics of emojis and their influence on the sign process are addressed.

Case study ›Textmoji‹

To investigate what is actually conveyed with emojis and how a respective sign process works accordingly, I am going to rely on messages from my case study in relation to the semiotic model introduced before. The case study is a qualitative analysis in which users were asked to explain the background of their message and the emojis employed. All black speech bubbles contain the respective original message of the sender while the yellow thought bubbles contain the interpretations (or ›translations‹) of the respective emojis created as part of the study.

The following figures 10 and 11 are two messages selected from the study that have a similar context but use emojis quite differently. First, the context and the message are presented. Then, the participating emojis are semiotically analyzed. The context of N5 is as follows: Sender (A5) and receiver (B5) are planning to meet up later in the week. They discover during their exchange that their appointments overlap inconveniently. Because of this, B5 reschedules and informs A5 that the meeting can take place next Thursday. In response, A5 writes the following message to B5:

6 In my actual thesis, I introduce and discuss more classes of signs, based on the analyses of my case studies (cf. ENZMANN 2023: 131-135; 166-171).

7 A kind of ›meta-level‹ to the emojis was created, where their alleged meaning is paraphrased. This serves to crystallize the intentions of the sender. Despite my attempt to ›translate‹ the emojis in this way, I am not claiming that the textual interpretation of the signs can actually replace the emojis; the paraphrases have an explanatory function and are meant to explain the intention of the user when using an emoji. All messages are taken from original dialogues, meaning they were not explicitly created for the study. They were instead explained or ›translated‹ by the actual authors of the respective messages. The original messages in German are reproduced in authentic form, preserving errors, dialectal elements, and colloquial expressions. In addition to indicating the age of the sender, labels such as ›W‹ for female and ›M‹ for male, and abbreviations such as ›ÜT‹ for translation, ›A‹ for sender, ›B‹ for receiver, and ›T‹ for emoji(s) from the case study supplement the examples. For the analysis, 10 messages were selected and qualitatively semiotically analyzed. The messages and analyses presented in this article are only a small part of a larger study. The English translations do not originate from the respective users and it cannot be guaranteed that the authors would translate the messages in the same way. They were instead created by myself specifically for this article.

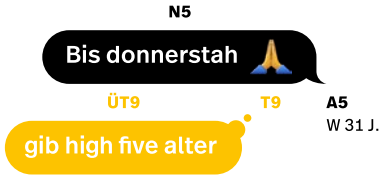


Figure 10: Message N5, from ›Textmoji‹ (cf. Enzmann 2023: 157)

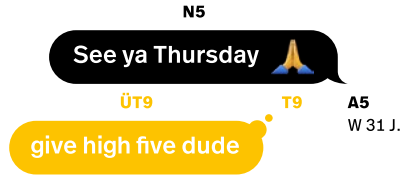


Figure 11: English translation of N5

N5 contains the emoji ›Folded Hands‹ (T9). If the sign is interpreted in the way the name suggests, it would be an icon because it is an image of the gesture ›folded hands‹. An icon refers to its object based on characteristics it has in common with the object. It should be noted that T9 is used differently across cultures. The pictured gesture means ›please‹ or ›thank you‹ in Japanese contexts. In addition, the gesture is used in Thailand as a traditional greeting – also called ›wai‹. The same sign, however, is also commonly used for praying hands or for a ›high-five‹. A5 used T9 indeed as a ›high-five‹ here, as is clear from ÜT9. A high five primarily signals a success. If the sign is interpreted accordingly, it refers to its object ›success‹ merely symbolically because ›success‹ shares no features with folded hands. The sign must instead be learned to understand it accordingly. In the case of N5, it represents the successful scheduling of the joint appointment.

Peirce distinguishes between rhema, dicent, and argument in interpretant reference. While a rhema is used for an isolated term like ›Folded Hands‹, a dicent is used for a propositional statement. Interpreted as something positive in the context of the message above (in the sense that the meeting on Thursday is successfully scheduled), it conveys a piece of information and provides a kind of judgment. Thus, T9 can be analyzed as a Dicent Symbolic Legisigns (1.3/2.3/3.2). This class of sign could accordingly be represented with the cube model as follows:

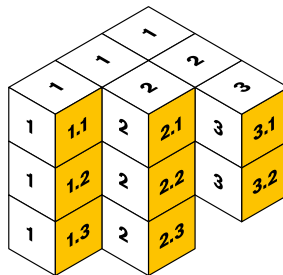


Figure 12: Dicent Symbolic Legisign (1.3/2.3/3.2) (cf. Enzmann 2023: 139)

The context to the dialogue of the following message (N₂, fig. 13/14) is: The sender and the recipient had agreed to meet each other soon. The recipient now cannot attend the planned meeting and suggests to the sender an alternative date in the subsequent week. The sender (A₂) then writes the following reply to the receiver:

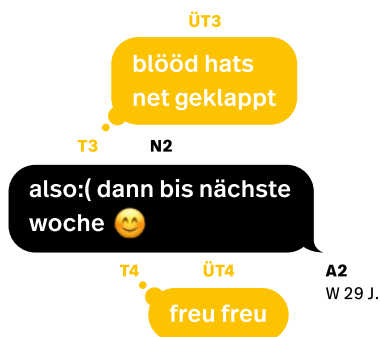


Figure 13: Message N₂ from ›Textmoji‹ (cf. Enzmann 2023:148)



Figure 14: English translation of N₂⁸

The message contains an ASCII- (T₃) and a graphic emoticon (T₄). »So« with the ASCII-emoticon (T₃) refers to the meeting that did not happen and the graphic emoticon (T₄) refers to the upcoming meeting. Both emoticons represent a facial expression, which both act as a kind of personal comment on the preceding statement. The sender (A₂) explained to me (in additionally provided information) the reason for using the almost obsolete ASCII-emoticon: its shape makes it seem less negative to A₂ than its graphic counterpart, especially when combined with the graphic emoji (T₄), which A₂ uses as reinforcement. According to A₂, it expresses ›joy/excitement about the upcoming meeting‹.

The functions of the two emoticons are in some respects the same. Both signs express the emotion of the sender to a given situation. What would that look like in Peirce's sense? The reference to an object is made iconically in T₃ and T₄ by recognizing a negative and a positive facial expression. T₃ and T₄ resemble their objects (facial expressions) in some ways. Once the facial expression is recognized, it is in turn associated with A₂'s emotional state intended to be conveyed. In the case of T₃, this is the ›disappointment‹ (about the meeting that did

8 Unfortunately, some linguistic expressions are lost in the translation process. The receiver used ›freu freu‹, which is here translated as ›yeeeee‹. The translation is not entirely satisfactory, however, because ›freu‹ is the inflective of the noun ›Freude‹, which stands for a positive emotion and can be translated as ›Joy‹, but ›Joy‹ is not used in a similar way as a verb as ›Freude‹ is. The user wanted to use the graphic emoticon to express his happiness about the upcoming meeting, so he translated the emoji as ›freu freu‹. ›yeeeee‹ can thus only approximate this, with the difference that the word is not a designation of an emotion.

not take place). Facial expressions are thus in some way related to the assumed mental life of the sender, namely emotions or states of mind. A feeling can, after all, be seen as the cause of a corresponding facial expression in a face-to-face (FTF) situation. In such a case, a facial expression can thus arise through causality and is, therefore, to be read as a kind of symptom: The medium (facial expression) is thereby connected to its object (emotion). It is influenced by it in the sense that facial expressions are expressions of emotions; a facial expression in an FTF situation can function for an interpreter as a cue or trace of some assumed emotion. An emoticon, however, is always deliberately chosen and used. When an emoji is employed to convey a certain emotional state, the sign acts as a deliberate cue to the sender's intended emotional state to be conveyed. While the facial expression might represent the true, original, or genuine index, the emoji would be a degenerate index of an emotional state with an included icon. It does not matter whether A₂ really feels that state, because an emoticon cannot be causal. Emoticons are always used consciously.

It could be objected that the use of facial expressions and gestures is also culturally rooted and accordingly subject to certain conventions. Ludwig Nagl, for instance, stated that the symbolic aspect of such signs is philosophically interesting even when we do not have a convention ›constructed‹ in the same way as in a verbal language (cf. NAGL 1992: 49f.). Whether emotions precede culture or are its product is of course a long, controversial discourse in emotion research (cf. PLAMPER 2012: 116-128). From a semiotic perspective, we could settle for the following: In order to know that a smile is linked to an emotion and is accordingly related to, for example, satisfaction or joy (something satisfying or something joyful), we have learned with the help of a fully developed, thoroughly structured symbolic language and through social interactions what a smile can do or mean (cf. NAGL 1992: 45). Peirce describes this through the distinction between a genuine and a degenerate index. Thus, degenerate indices refer to their objects indirectly via the detour of symbolic signs (cf. NÖTH 2000: 187). Genuine indices, on the other hand, refer directly to their object and, according to Peirce, stand in an existential relation with their object (cf. NÖTH 2000: 186). According to Nagl, indices and icons can accordingly only be thought of as embedded in the symbolic structure of language (cf. NAGL 1992: 45). It must be noted that Peirce describes interpretation from the point of view of the interpreter. It is not necessary that a smile must be linked to any positive emotion. When an emoji is used to convey a particular emotional state, the sign acts as a cue to the intended emotional state of the user to be conveyed. While the facial expression might constitute a true, original, or genuine index, the emoticon is merely a degenerate index of a feeling – with an included icon.

In summary, all of this means that an emoticon is in fact an index because it stands for an actual event in the mind of an interpreter, in this case for the

emotional state of the sender that is allegedly intended to be conveyed. Since emoticons are always used consciously, however, and are not causally related to their objects, τ_3 and τ_4 can be classified as sub-indices/hyposesemes (which would also include a finger pointing towards an object, or a signpost).

Regarding interpretant reference: while both signs (τ_3 & τ_4) are rhemas (3.1) in themselves (considered without the context of the message), in that τ_3 can convey something negative (disappointment or sadness) and τ_4 can convey something positive (joy or satisfaction), the actual meaning of the signs is revealed only through their use in context. τ_3 , as mentioned above, is then interpreted as \langle disappointment that the meeting did not take place \rangle . Thus, it conveys information and makes a judgment indicating that \langle A2 is disappointed; not having the meeting is negative for A2 \rangle . A similar situation applies to τ_4 . The sign is interpreted as follows: \langle A2 is looking forward to the upcoming meeting; the fact that a meeting is taking place is positive \rangle . Both emoticons thus convey information about A2's state of mind related to the meeting.

While the interpretant reference of τ_3 and τ_4 is a rheme when considered without context, it actually becomes a dicent through that context. Accordingly, the two emoticons can be called Dicent Indexical Sinsigns (1.2/2.2/3.2). This class of sign could be represented with the cube model as follows:

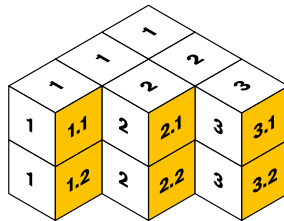


Figure 15: Dicent Indexical Sinsign (1.2/2.2/3.2) (cf. Enzmann 2023: 139)

The case study – in combination with the semiotic cube model – allows us to crystallize the alleged intentions of emoji users and to consider the communication process that occurs surrounding any given emoji. The analysis extends Peirce's formal and abstract theoretical construct toward applied sign use.^{9]} But the influence of different qualitative characteristics on the interpretation of the signs, such as the use of an ASCII-emoticon in contrast to a graphic emoticon in a

9 In my book, I consider applying further subdivisions (cf. ENZMANN 2023: 131-139, 166-171). The consideration of the subclasses makes it possible to examine aspects of the sign process that represent important factors for communication and interpersonal relationships. Subclasses illustrate the multi-layered nature and complexity of any sign process and provide additional differentiation through the classification of signs into more complex sign classes.

message, remains still somewhat unclear. To analyze this, further research from cognitive semiotics and comic book theory will be consulted.

The recognition of a cognitive type

To investigate the formal aspects of emojis, the analysis of N₂ is suitable, because the message contains a graphic and an ASCII emoticon. According to the sender (A₂), formal properties of the emoticons regulate the intensity of the respective sign. First of all, the emerging process is reflected when A₂ selects T₃: At the beginning, there is the dynamic object – the sender's emotion intended to be conveyed; in the case of T₃, A₂'s disappointment. Based on this, A₂ selects an emoticon (T₃) that is capable of referring to the dynamic object through its immediate object. Consequently, in the case of emoji, the medium represents an object through its appearance, the immediate object, which refers to the real – dynamic – object: it appears to be capable (for the sender A₂) to refer to the emotion intended to be conveyed through formal properties of the medium. A₂ interpreted the formal aspects of T₃ and T₄ as regulators to intensify and weaken the respective statements, respectively. According to A₂, the shape of the ASCII emoticon (T₃) attenuates the intensity of the sign, while the graphic emoticon (T₄) has a more intense effect. Accordingly, once again, the formal-aesthetic attributes of emoticons are crucial criteria of selection for A₂. But what is the basis for such a selection? How is it possible that the formal properties of emojis (the medium) can have an impact on the intensity of the meaning of the signs? How are we able to recognize a face in the most rudimentary forms – a bracket and a simple colon? Borrowing from cognitive semiotics, perception is defined as follows according to Lukas R.A. Wilde: A sensory stimulus is related to a repertoire of known types and categorized as one of its elements (cf. WILDE 2018: 95f.). In this context more specifically, sensory or perceptual types, which include visual ones, are matched with a <cognitive type>. This enables the production of an <image object> in the mind that confirms to the type according to certain criteria of perceptual relevance. According to Börries Blanke (2003: 47-70) and Wilde, recognizing relevant cognitive types takes place even before additional cultural encodings or connotations come into play (cf. WILDE 2020: 17/186f.). Subsequently, in order to be able to interpret something pictorially, it must first be recognized or perceived (categorized) within a medium.

To recognize a facial expression, for example, we make use of these cognitive types just as well. These are not directly linked to the meaning of the signs but are inherent in the form of the sign. According to Wilde, once a face is recognized, a relevant cognitive type must be available that enables us to decode all signs confirming to the same type to a certain degree (cf. WILDE 2020: 182). If an

interpreter is aware that an ASCII combination can represent a laughing facial expression rotated by 90°, the interpreter is able to recognize other facial expressions conceived in the same way. According to Wilde, the difference in looking at a word and a pictorial sign is then mainly that, in the latter, we cannot help but recognize a represented object (cf. WILDE 2019). Although what is recognized in the picture may not be the meaning or content of the sign, recognizing the cognitive type enables us to further guess such communicative meanings of the picture sign. In the case of an unknown word, it is difficult or outright impossible to guess such meanings. Consequently, according to Wilde, ›pre-attentive intelligibility‹ is often present in image recognition (cf. WILDE 2018: 94). A large part of the recognition takes place without conscious attention.

The process of image recognition is further explained by Blanke and Wilde through the term ›categorization threshold‹ (cf. BLANKE 2003: 91-106; WILDE 2018: 94-112). In order to recognize an image, the medium must be above the ›iconic categorization threshold‹ of a type. Crucial in the categorization (crossing the iconic threshold) is thus the recognition of relevant cognitive types on which we rely when we recognize real-world objects just as images. Given an image, at least one salient feature must be recognized that corresponds to a salient feature of the type. The iconic categorization threshold can thus be crossed to varying degrees, as we see from the difference between a photo of a face and an emoji: both cross the iconic categorization threshold for the type ›face‹ – but to different extents. This can be illustrated with emojis using Scott McCloud’s model for abstractions in comic books (cf. MCCLOUD 2001: 57; figure 15).

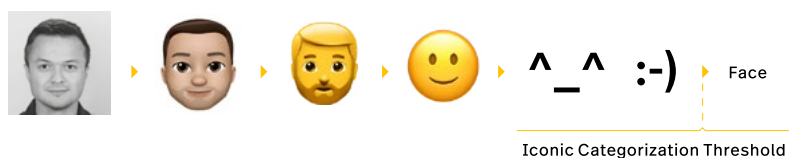


Figure 16: Gradual abstractions from photographs (cf. Enzmann 2023: 184; see also McCloud 2001: 57)

The photo on the left of figure 16 exceeds the iconic categorization threshold by a very wide margin, while the ASCII emoticons only just exceed the threshold. The word ›face‹ is certainly below the iconic categorization threshold. Even further below the categorization threshold, according to McCloud (2001: 57), would be the description of a face, such as ›two eyes, a nose, and a mouth‹. Thus, a so-called ›degree of iconicity‹ can be determined. It depends on three different criteria according to Blanke (2003: 96) and Wilde (2018: 101). The first is the quantity of iconic aspects. For example, the photo contains a lot of iconic aspects. The more detail a representation contains, the more likely it is that the iconic

categorization threshold will be exceeded. The second criterion is the relevance of these iconic characteristics. What is typical for a type, however, can vary culturally. For example, in Japanese culture, it is common for interlocutors to focus more on the other person's eyes to infer their feelings, as facial expressions are traditionally used with restraint in Japan (cf. YUKI et al. 2007: 303-310). Because of this, a wide variety of horizontal ASCII emoticons for the eyes emerged. This shows that eyes are relevant for representing emotions in Japan, while in other countries, the mouth is more relevant for representing emotions. The third criterion is the cognitive accessibility of the iconic type (cf. BLANKE 2003: 95). It requires experience or prior knowledge. By knowing the rule that punctuation marks can represent facial expressions rotated ninety degrees in vertical ASCII emoticons, it is possible to also decrypt previously illegible signs.

In consideration of the cube model, it is not quite clear which relevance criteria belong to the medium and which to the object reference – and which role the interpreter plays. On the one hand, this may be due to the different use of the semiotic terms. On the other hand, it may be because of differences in the underlying semiotic theories. However, a careful differentiation is necessary in order to find out which criteria are related to which relations in which way. This will be considered in the following on the basis of the proposed semiotic model. In order to ›locate‹ the cognitive type in the cube model, it is helpful to add the term of the repertoire, since – according to Blanke (2003: 95) – the accessibility of the cognitive type is relative to the structure of the repertoire. The Stuttgart School uses the term ›repertoire‹ to designate the medium's reference (cf. WALTHER 1974: 50f.). Repertoires can address different sensory perceptions, as language, for instance, can be perceived acoustically and visually (cf. WALTHER 1974: 51). In its firstness, the medium reference consists of possibilities (qualisigns) that are realized as sinsigns on the level of secondness and can belong to a law or a rule on the level of thirdness. ›Repertoire‹ consequently addresses the fact that qualisigns are realized as sinsigns, such as tones, colors, or forms, which correspond to the types of a certain sign repertoire as legisigns. According to Gerhard Schönrich, legisigns describe culturally established routines that control cognition already in the medium reference (cf. SCHÖNRICH 1990: 345). A legisign is comparable to a rule or a law and is consequently equivalent to a cognitive type.

In the constitution of cognitive types, a distinction can be made between different sensory types, such as visual or auditory (cf. BLANKE 2003: 36). The cognitive type, however, comprises all sensory knowledge associated with a certain class of phenomena (cf. BLANKE 2003: 36). It is not in itself bound to any particular realization or appearance. It is an idea (thirdness), such as that of vanilla, the realization of which (secondness) may be a scent or a pictorial representation of vanilla. Thereby, all realizations correspond to the same cognitive type vanilla and while the word ›vanilla‹ may be far removed from any immediate sensory

experience, it is still a cultural ›shorthand‹ to everything that experience might entail.

Thus, it can be assumed that due to the existence of sign repertoires – which in the case of emojis are constituted by visual types – relative cognitive types can be determined. Based on these types, the medium is associated with reality, with an object that exists in reality or in the imagination, and is interpreted as an image or a sign of it. Consequently, a medium (qualisigns realized in a sign) contains a relevant cognitive type (legisign), which in turn refers iconically, indexically, or symbolically to an object in a sign process by the interpretant. The degree of iconicity can be determined when a sign is interpreted iconically in relation to an object. Thus, the relevance criteria in recognizing iconic types are not to be located in the medium itself, but in the relation of the latter to its object. The degree of iconic relevance is to be located in the object relation and the meaning of the sign in the object and interpretant relation. Consequently, it is absurd to disregard the object and interpretant reference in a formal consideration of a sign, because the representations depend on what and how they represent and what effect they thereby evoke. Colors, shapes, and details can be used as reinforcements and influence the interpretation of the signs. Thus, the formal-aesthetic properties of an emoji can influence the effect of the characters, for example, by regulating intensity. This is why it is so important to study emojis from a formal and aesthetic perspective in the future.

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Andrea Ferretti

What do Emojis Stand for?

Notes for a Semiotic View on the Digital Relationship
between Written and Spoken Communication Practices

Abstract

The integration of digital messaging applications into the most diverse practices of everyday life drives a rethinking of the relationship between bodies, orality, and writing within human communication. Communicative cues such as tone of voice, gestures, facial expressions, etc. find in emojis a way of translating themselves through a new kind of informal writing. Under this lens, some significant aspects of the merging of emojis and alphabetic writing can be investigated. This article reflects on the semiotic features of this translation and on the encyclopedic skills that the use and comprehension of emojis require. Special emphasis is placed on the linguistically mediated nature of emojis meaning. Despite their apparent grounding and iconicity, they can only be explained through the filter of linguistic, cultural, and socio-pragmatic coordinates. In short, the paper provides an understanding of emojis as a semiotic code, which contributes to characterizing digital communication. The semiotic code of emojis creates a space for collective reflection and creativity surrounding the expression of emotions, mutual social evaluation, social relationships, etc. Despite the fragmentation and the exploitative dynamics typical of digital environments, the use of this semiotic code will be depicted as an ongoing collective game, concerned with the replacement of individual bodies, even in the most mundane and informal communicative exchanges.

0. A linguistic-semiotic framework for the analysis of communication practices: between praxis and codes

In this paper, emojis semantics is analyzed in the context of a broader conception of human communication, linked to the tradition of European post-saussurean structuralism. The aim of this contribution is to illustrate the role of emojis in everyday communication, addressing their leading function in the transition from orality to writing in everyday communication made possible by new digital media technologies. However, before addressing these issues, it is necessary to clarify some theoretical notions and the relationships between a specific code such as emojis on the one hand and the linguistic-cultural context in which they are embedded on the other. The core of the explanation to the problem of the meaning of emojis lies in the integrated understanding of this code with the other cultural codes (especially the linguistic one) that are simultaneously at work in social communication.

The term ›code‹ is used as a semiotic extension of the way Saussure used the term *langue*, as a system of signs, about language. First of all, for Saussure (cf. 2011), the *langue* is not a nomenclature, i.e. it is not the rigid pairing of two already given entities through which one expresses the other. *Langue*'s units are not simply material signals and psychic or material objects univocally connected to them. On the contrary, the possibility of stipulating explicit nomenclatures lies in the existence of a much more complex and articulate code such as the *langue*. The *langue* is a dual system of relations, within which both the values of signifying and signified units emerge by difference. Signifiers and meanings, as semiotically determined and intersubjectively comprehensible, do not pre-exist the relationships within the system but are derived from it. For this reason, it can be said with Hjelmslev (1953) that language ›carves out‹ i.e. makes relevant and articulates not only the phonic substance of expression but also the experiential substance of content.

This interplay of relationships between entities, both on the vertical (signifier/signified) and horizontal (signified/signified; signifier/signified) planes, is said to be ›radically arbitrary‹ in that it derives neither from the logical structure of reality nor from the immediate relationship between the human perceptual apparatus and things. On the contrary, within the bio-physiological constraints of the human species, signifiers and signifieds are mutually determined and limited in each other according to a process of sedimentation that coincides with the history of various human cultures and vary across different languages. The synchronic sign ›values‹ at this level do not emerge through an explicit act of individual will, but are the result of a gradual, collective, i.e., diachronic, process. All the various mechanisms of ›bio-cognitive motivation‹ (image-schemata, basic metaphors, embodiment, etc.) in the formation of meanings or of ›iconicity‹

in the relations between signifiers and signifieds must be understood within this broader arbitrary cultural-historical process.

The intersubjective validity of signs, i.e., the value of signifieds and signifiers, relies on presenting itself to users as a set of ›norms‹ that successfully direct communicative practices and the attainment of practical ends. Languages are born with social organization for social organization's purpose (cf. VOLOSINOV 1973:12). As explained by Saussure (2011: 78), the foundation of the arbitrary system of language is found in ›time‹ (i.e., traditional-institutional continuity) and the ›speaking mass‹ (i.e., the implicit consensus of the speakers). Language is what constitutes and permeates the entire social organization: from this, it originates and in this, it derives its validity. The langue studied by Saussure then is the set of principles of order that govern the relations between its signs in their different contexts of use and for different practical purposes. Just as there is no single purpose for the use of linguistic signs, no single communicative practice, no single social stand, and no single way of evaluating them in communicative exchange (speaking a language is not just describing its units in the activity of writing a vocabulary or a grammatic handbook), so a code is not a single system of relations, whereby the same signs and their components enter into different relations according to different contexts of use and are always available to enter into new ones. Different practical orientations generate different principles of order according to which signs arrange each other.

This Saussurian approach to the problem of the semiotic code or system overcomes the old distinction between ›semantics‹ and ›pragmatics‹, as well as that between ›linguistic‹ and ›cultural‹, between ›sign‹ and ›praxis‹. This overcoming is well exemplified by the concept of ›encyclopedia‹ developed by Umberto Eco (1975: 99-100). There is no code as a simple system of univocal correspondences that is later integrated into individual communicative contexts by the inferential decisions of individual speakers. On the contrary, different communicative practices, as linguistically constituted, orient from within the different planes of the language system and determine different relational configurations from which speakers derive the appropriate norms of different forms of communication. The language system, Saussure's langue, is the most complex semiotic system because verbal languages shape and structure the entire socio-cultural world: there is no social practice or relationship that is not constituted without the mediation of language (cf. VOLOSINOV 1973: 14). This is why language has the property of ›omniformativity‹ (DE MAURO 1982: 134): its pervasiveness in the organization of the human world, combined with its capacity to have itself as content, does not allow us to indicate with certainty what language cannot strive to say. Like any other social practice, the use of other semiotic codes is also organized and interpreted through the mediation of language.

This priority role of language in social life distinguishes it from the rest of the codes, leading Roland Barthes (1968: 11) to declare semiotics itself an internal part of linguistics. This position is the starting point of the paper: emojis, considered as a code (a pragmatically oriented and multidimensional sign system) do not have language as their content, but are a content of language, i.e., they are explained and interpreted through the more general linguistic-cultural competence of speakers. To use and understand emojis, we employ the whole of our linguistic knowledge; to study them, we establish in the language a meta-level that has emojis as its object, whereas the opposite is unthinkable.

In written digital communication, while the alphabetic code is an expression of the linguistic code, the emoji code is a pictographic expression of some facial emotions, some bodily gestures, and objects, but it is so only through the mediation of language and its encyclopedic semantics. The mediation of language in the use and understanding of emojis is not a subjective issue, relating to the time the individual writer spends in their use in single communicative instances, but an objective feature of the relationship between semiotic codes and between them and our general social experience. As it imposes itself in the common pre-understanding of experience, so does the language impose itself in the interpretation of emojis. The emoji code receives from language its plasticity and its characteristic as a sign code crossed by different possibilities of use.

If emojis can function as an additional writing system, complementary to the alphabetic one, and allow further levels of meaning, this is not due to their iconic relationship to perception, but, on the contrary, to their being tools for elaborating already linguistically oriented reflections on the role of the body in communicative interaction. First of all, it is necessary to understand their general function in communicative practices: from this, it will be possible to describe their semantic possibilities.

1. Writing our bodies on the screen: Functional identity between emojis and paralinguistic clues

If we think about chatting, using apps like WhatsApp, Telegram, or Messenger, emojis are used mainly to represent in writing the paralinguistic clues that are so characteristic of spoken face-to-face communication. By the term ›paralinguistic clues‹, I mean everything from prosody to gestures, interpersonal space management, and facial expressions.¹⁾ All these elements have an important

1 In the present paper, the use of the term ›paralinguistic clues‹ will be extended to the group of signs, characterized by various levels of cultural conventionality, that semiotics has grouped into the following three sub-sets: a) ›paralanguage in the narrow sense‹ (i.e. prosody, intonation, etc.), b) ›kinesis‹ (i.e. the set of bodily dimensions, more or less intentional, of communication) and c) ›proxemics‹ (i.e. the management of space

function in shaping the content of messages, expressing the emotive tone of an overall conversation, the evaluative intention about the subject of discourse, and the meaning of the relationship between speakers. Often, it is precisely through these paralinguistic clues that we give a hint of which »language game« (WITTGENSTEIN 1953: 5) we are playing.

The communicative functions that have relied on paralinguistic clues prior to the advent of emojis are particularly evident in daily communications, related to the needs, contingent tasks, and immediate necessities of daily life. Today, this very kind of exchange is multiplied and displaced more and more in digital writing. For this functional analogy, chats tend to reproduce the typical structures of speech, giving rise to a particular style of writing. This reproduction of orality within practices of writing (a peculiar form of »secondary orality«^[2]) is evident not only in lexical and syntactic structures but also in the reproduction of what we have called paralinguistic clues. Indeed, the use of emojis highlights the shift from a culture in which the written word retained a connection with more public and formal purposes (linked to large audiences of mixed receivers), to one in which it spills over into the construction of the more private, affective, and mundane sphere of small groups.

However, from a semiotic point of view, the paralinguistic clues typical of face-to-face communication are difficult phenomena to categorize. As Umberto Eco (1975: 19-21) explains, they are situated across the »lower semiotic threshold«: they can thus be either signifiers, interpretable and usable according to cultural codes, or unintentional reactions to stimuli triggering bodily responses, i.e. unreflective effects caused in the bodies and minds of communication partners. These can be interpreted by receivers not as »signs«, but as »signals«, standing with their meaning in a relationship similar to that with which smoke stands with fire. Keeping this in mind, the problem I would like to discuss is the

between speakers and the extralinguistic context). For a detailed exposition of these categories, see POYATOS 2002. In a more extended analytical study, each of these non-verbal dimensions of communication and their reciprocal connections should be related to the use of emojis in a given culture. In this article, however, these three subsystems of non-linguistic communication are considered collectively to discuss the theoretical »nodes« relevant to a hypothetical empirical study. Furthermore, it is important to point out that these non-linguistic and non-verbal semiotic domains are only investigated here insofar as they are structurally connected and made functional to the communicative use of verbal language (this does not negate the fact that considering their semiotic potential, the same relationships could be reversed, as it happens in the communicative practices of deaf communities).

- 2 As a general cultural feature and working hypothesis, I refer to the understanding of »secondary orality« by Walter Ong in *Orality and Literacy* (2002: 132-134). To the forms of secondary orality generated by radio and television, it is necessary to add the forms of written orality through the emergence of digital media. This further changes the media logics and the cultural-linguistic relationships between speech and writing. In Italy, the characteristics of this new »digitized Italian« or »graphic speech« have been the subject of interest among linguists and sociolinguists. For a review, cf. Antonelli (2009) and Cerruti (2013). For a more general overview of the problems posed to semiotics and communication theory by the relationship between writing and orality, cf. Gensini (2002: 107-121).

following: how do emojis, with their strange remediation of paralinguistic clues, contribute to shaping how we write in our daily digital communications?

It is important to remember right at the outset that emojis are not something completely new. Vyvyan Evans (2017) shows how emojis need to be interpreted as a mere new step in a long history of punctuation marks.³ This is a history that follows the development of different technological media for written communication and the different uses of writing that these technologies made possible. Indeed, even in the more formal uses afforded by printing, it was necessary to introduce a system of signs to signify different types of pauses, prosodies, or to mark the presence of the spoken word (direct speech), etc.:

Emoji is to textspeak what non-verbal cues are to spoken interaction. The primary function of Emoji is not to usurp language, but to provide the non-verbal cues essential to effective communication that are otherwise missing from textspeak. Emoji [...] fulfills exactly the same functions that non-verbal cues do in face-to-face linguistic interaction (EVANS 2017: Calibre pos. 10.210).

Thus, Evans asserts a functional identity between emojis and paralinguistic clues. Emojis, however, are a broader code than punctuation marks when they generate paralinguistic clues; their success can be explained by the extension of digital writing into areas of interpersonal communication practiced orally and/or face-to-face before the advent of digital media. The closer writing approximates the countless forms of informal everyday communication, the more it needs complex semiotic codes to translate its paralinguistic clues. Following the identification of functions asserted by Evans, my purpose in the following will be to question how these functions are exercised by emojis, seen as a complex and multifaceted semiotic code that refers only in a linguistically and culturally mediated sense to the sphere of paralinguistic clues. This approach also allows us to show how the emoji code produces a peculiar type of semiotic creativity. Finally, it allows us to trace along which conceptual lines some important differences between face-to-face and digitally chat-mediated communication emerge.

2. Emojis as a system of signs

As has often been noted in the available literature, emojis aren't a plain, immediate, or natural universal language. On the contrary, they are a system of signifiers that could have certain meanings/signifies only within communicative

3 »The function of punctuation in writing systems, including white spaces between words, is a reflex of some of the functions of paralinguistic cues. For instance, the colon and semi-colon indicate how units of text are related semantically and can even change the meaning in the process. In this, they provide an analogous function to prosodic features in speech such as decelerations of different types, and pauses of different lengths, showing how units of speech are related« (EVANS 2017: Calibre pos. 11.16).

practices of the different communities that use them. Reason for that can not only be found in cultural differences through which emojis can be interpreted in various ways but, much more foundational than that, within their semiotic traits. It is clear that emojis are not simply iconic reproductions of the paralinguistic elements that accompany speech. If we just consider their visual, two-dimensional modality, the limitations of their iconicity become evident: an emoji can't mean anything just because they look like something else that has some meaning in face-to-face communication. Emojis are thus not a nomenclature for which each signifier corresponds to an unambiguous or self-evident meaning. On the contrary, they are an arbitrary system of signs,⁴ open to the most diverse possibilities of cultural uses, i.e., not bound to stimulus-response causal patterns, but open to the interpretive dimension proper to semiotics. The static uniformity of the repertoire of emojis does not imply the uniqueness of their meanings, but, on the contrary, causes them to vary across the linguistic and cultural diversity of the communities (and micro-communities) that use them (up to and including jargon conventions limited to a single chat group). Only when they are considered in relation to one of the actual communities using them, identifiable according to the most diverse linguistic, cultural, and social coordinates, can emojis mean something to someone. The norms governing the use of emojis can thus be imagined as several concentric circles centered around the individual. From the broadest, most general, and indeterminate circle that simply includes the users of a certain cultural area, to narrower ones concerning linguistic and/or national communities, up to highly determined local conventions that may only be valid within small circles of interest groups, friends, or relatives. In particular, the innermost circles may be variously intertwined and overlapping, while being motivated by the norms that are valid in the larger circles.

On the more general level of cultural competence, consider, for example, some emojis that could seem easily understandable, like smiles and laughter: 😊; 😄; 😁; 😂; 😅. The construction of a paradigm or »associative relation« (SAUSSURE 2011: 129) based on their degree of intensity would seem obvious, as would the differential traits of their signifiers (based on the position of the mouth, eyes, the presence/absence of tears, and the general spatial orientation) and thus their correspondent »denotative« content (HJELMSLEV 1953: 114). This, however, does not tell us anything about the possibilities of their usage and thus about their actual signified in specific communication practices. In our linguistic and cultural

4 Following the teaching of Tullio De Mauro (1965; 1982), Saussurean »radical arbitrariness« is considered here an essential characteristic of any sign system. In this theoretical framework, the iconic elements that can connect the signifier to certain physical-perceptual aspects of the signified are not considered to be characteristics opposed to arbitrariness itself. On the contrary, iconicity is one of the resources that sign systems can use to structure themselves according to culturally specific pathways and pre-themes. The opposite of arbitrariness is not iconicity, but necessity, in the sense of a natural imposition, not resulting from a collective or socio-historical process.

competence, there are encodings of different types of smiles and laughter, and they differ not only with regard to a greater or lesser intensity. Such complexities drive the determination of the semantic relationships within the emoji code off – and thus also the meanings of individual emoji. For example, just think about the cultural differences between ›laughing with your interlocutor‹ and ›laughing at your interlocutor‹. Yet, for both these types of laughter, relying only on the iconic/formal characteristics of signifiers, one could use all these emojis indifferently.

Furthermore, emojis, like every system of signs, are combinable with each other, forming larger syntagms. These syntagms could be structured using ›grammatical rules‹⁵ that can only be chosen from the linguistic co-text and socio-pragmatic context. For example, consider this syntagma: 🤧👃. It would seem to signify a ›sneeze‹, supposing a nexus of spatial contiguity between the two emojis. It could instead indicate ›sniffing something‹, in a literal or metaphorical sense, if one assumed that the relationship between the two signs is a causal one.

Before I deal with the heart of the topic, however, I would like to briefly summarize my theoretical framework. As already mentioned, emojis are seen as a pictographic and logographic writing system integrated in the broader context of alphabetical writing. Their main purpose is to integrate alphabetic writing with paralinguistic aspects typical of face-to-face communication. To understand how emojis achieve this goal, we must consider that they do not signify directly an iconic reproduction of facial expressions, gestures, body postures, and so on. On the contrary, to understand how the same set of emojis is created, interpreted, and used, we need to look at the many ways in which we can talk and interpret paralinguistic clues through different verbal languages and cultures. Just because the use of emojis is mediated by different languages and cultural norms, we can also find so many inter- and intra-cultural differences in the interpretation and use of emojis (cf. ABEL 2020; KARPINSKA et al. 2020). Now, we need to consider why expressing our communicative attitudes with our body in face-to-face communication is a very different practice than writing in the space of digital interfaces: how does the ›warmth‹ of the former translate into the asynchronous ›coldness‹ of the latter? What change occurs from a semiotic point of view? So, we need to consider the emoji code as:

- an arbitrary sub-system of digital writing; using some pictographic and logographical strategies to create signifiers (cf. GENSINI 2002: 112; DANESI 2017: 7); designed to be used in an integrated way with alphabetic writing;

5 ›Emoji grammar is not just a replica of linguistic grammar with visual symbols; it has its own syntactics, or system for organizing the emoji to create coherent and meaningful sequences or combinations‹ (DANESI 2017: 78). For further examples of emojis' grammatical rules (from calquing to rebus), see also Danesi (2017: 78-92).

- within a broader cultural environment in which writing is systematically bound to linguistic units;
- of the paralinguistic aspects of face-to-face communication (expression of emotions, body language, gestures, prosody, pointing, etc.);
- whose interpretation, both by the users and by those who study it, is mediated
- through a practice of linguistic analysis and reflection.^[6]

3. The use of emojis as a cultural-encyclopedic practice

In the next paragraphs, we will see how general semiotic features apply to the emoji code and how they distinguish emojis from the paralinguistic bodily clues that they try to translate into written communication. We will address the following points:

Emojis constitute a code whose uses are, first of all, like those of every other sign optional. We choose to use them with considerations about which emoji could work better in a given situation for a specific purpose and a given addressee. On the contrary, some sort of paralinguistic clues are always present: they are not only signs but also symptoms and spontaneous bodily reactions.

The use of emojis is the result of an arbitrary discretization made on the continuum of paralinguistic phenomena. Paralinguistic reactions emitted by the sender, as individual physical phenomena, are continuous. Furthermore, the iconic motivation of their signifiers does not determine their meaning.

Unlike most paralinguistic clues (which are on a continuum scale of major or minor intentionality), we always use emojis through a process of linguistic mediation and, sometimes, with some strategic communicative purpose. Emojis only simulate bodily spontaneity because they are written signs chosen from a variety of expressive possibilities.

6 From this perspective, the study of a code such as emojis must follow the famous ›reversal‹ of the relationship between linguistics and semiotics proposed by Roland Barthes (1964: 11). According to Barthes, semiotics can only be established as the study of systems of signs through the categories and the lens of the linguistic one. Indeed, language alone can put every other sign system as its own content plane, constituting itself as its metalanguage. Furthermore, in the specific case of emojis, this code is also used precisely to complete and specify verbal communication (even when they are used without words, they are written to elicit a linguistic interpretation of them).

Firstly, it must be remembered how alphabetic writing, too, can give an emotional or evaluative tone to its contents relying on its own resources, without appearing artificial or unnatural. So, the use of emojis, which, as has been noted by Danesi (2017: 96), connotes a positive and friendly attitude toward other communication partners regardless of specific choices, does not imply that their absence automatically means coldness or interpersonal distance. Although today emojis are widespread, they represent just one possibility to add an emotional tone and attitude. Indeed, a friendly tone could emerge through strategies within the alphabetic code and the different sociolinguistic varieties it can express. When we choose to use emojis instead or in addition, we try to exploit the semantic »connotations« (HJELMSLEV 1953: 114-125) that the use of emojis has assumed in our culture and their well-known pragmatic implications (speed, informality, graphic appeal, etc.). But the choices of using emojis are very different choices from the management of the paralinguistic elements of face-to-face communication. These are present and impose themselves independently of any communicative will; the speaker must know how to manage them. A voice indeed always has a certain prosody, a face, a certain expression, and so on, while every chat message can be written without emojis – and yet not lose communicative efficacy necessarily. So, it is impossible to have face-to-face communication without paralinguistic clues, while digital communication can well work without emojis. The absence of emojis does not necessarily mean a formal or serious tone toward the content and/or the receiver because alphabetic writing has its own tone resources. The use of emojis is never a necessity that just imposes itself (as our body does) but remains always a semiotic choice. It is a choice that has its own semantic connotations as well as its own pragmatic aims and benefits.

In semiotic terms, this difference can be explained by referring to the distinction made by Hjelmslev (1953: 50-57) between form, substance, and purport. What we generally call »paralinguistics-kinesics-proxemics« is the result of the interaction of different semiotic systems, whose signifying substance consists of several dimensions of the communicative partners' bodies. For this reason, these elements are always active at the same time in face-to-face communication. So, paralinguistic semantics consists of a simultaneous, multimodal, and »global« meaning (DE MAURO 1982: 33), in which the different modalities form a coherent sign pattern. It is this pattern that can be integrated with the meaning of the spoken word. However, the speaker's body is only partially used as an intentional sign by the speaker and interpreted as a sign by his partners. Most of the parts of our body simply do not produce sign dynamics and remain semiotically undefined and continuous. Some parts of the body simply produce stimulus-response mechanisms, which can only later be interpreted by someone else as signals. So, the body only partially gets access to the socio-cultural, shared, and interpretative dimension of signs; in other respects, it is present only as a natural »fact«,

acting and reacting causally. Our body also continues to express the idiosyncratic dimension of the speaker's unique and individual characteristics, as well as the universal dimension of the most natural emotional reactions.

Emojis, in contrast, are far removed from any embodied experience: they represent a sign system whose ›substance of expression‹ is a digital graphic system itself. It follows that each emoji is a discrete entity that can be combined linearly with other emojis or with alphabetical signs, according to spatial and temporal relations of the linear sequence. Instead of global, their meaning is the result of signs »articulated or combinatory« (DE MAURO 1982: 39). The result of this combination will refer to only a few paralinguistic aspects, chosen according to criteria of semantic relevance and pragmatic economy. Moreover, emojis, unlike the ›facts‹ that constitute paralinguistic clues in verbal speech, have neither natural nor idiosyncratic features. Emojis lie entirely in the sphere of semiotics and therefore in the cultural and communicative competence of the writers. So, emojis are a sort of ›common or cultural body‹ whose semantic capacity is continually enriched and modified through how they are used by the various communities.

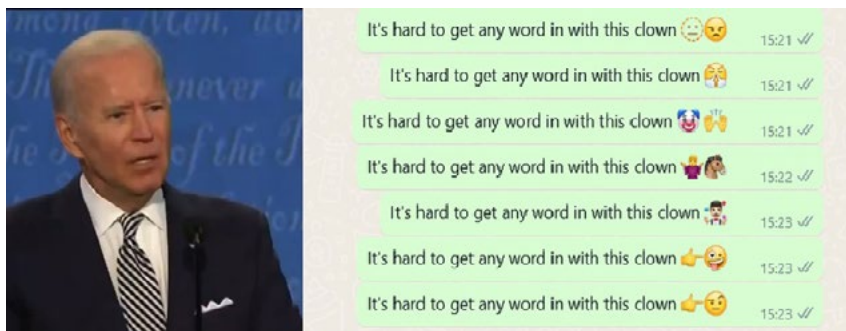


Figure 1: Biden's sarcastic expression and some possible written ›translation‹ through emojis by the author A.F.

To stress the cultural or »encyclopedic« (ECO 1975 99-100) competence required for the use of emojis let us turn to consider a famous example like the sarcastic line made by Biden during the first debate for the presidential election in 2020: »it's hard to get any word in with this clown«. If we wanted to translate Biden's paralinguistic attitude into a WhatsApp message using emojis, there would be an undeterminable number of possibilities related to different logical and cultural criteria. The first two ›translations‹ I have proposed above (cf. fig. 1), for example, try to represent the expressiveness or tone of the speaker. Likewise, the third and fourth use a gesture instead of a facial expression. These are not gestures that Biden made, but they are gestures that, reflecting linguistically, could well portray the meaning of his global attitude. For example, the gesture

of raising hands (>I give up<) combined with the clown emoji can be used to express an attitude such as >you can't argue with people like that, I give up/I raise my hands<. What matters in the choice of emojis is not the likeness to Biden's face or movement, but the motivation with respect to the semantic content of the speaker's general attitude. In the third and fourth examples, moreover, Biden's expression is reinforced by its connection to a possible Trump connotative description. Particularly, in the fourth example, this description is made through a logographic strategy representing an Italian idiomatic expression: >being mad as a horse<. The fifth message, in contrast, uses a semantically fuzzy emoji, which could refer as much to his interlocutor (portrayed in a circus performance) as to the overall tone of a communicative situation (in which words are used to play as the juggler plays with his balls). In addition, the last two examples six and seven use the gesture of pointing in different senses; while in the sixth the finger is pointed at who is being talked about, in the seventh the emoji is used to reproduce a gesture easily understood by Italian speakers. Indeed, pointing at one's temple, accompanying the gesture with a puzzled expression, means that someone is >out of his mind<. Of course, these proposed translations make sense only because, in this context, >clown< is broadly synonymous with madman.

According to this example, to understand how emojis could be used, we must relate them not only to objects or words but to the entire encyclopedic >frames< in which they appear (cf. ECO 1979; FILLMORE 1982), i.e. the structured sets of prototypical cultural knowledge. Emojis do not simply represent facial expressions or things, but the cultural, encyclopedic pathways in which those facial expressions, parts of the body, or things appear. They thus signify only in relation to situations, social positions and roles, prejudices, widespread metaphors, idioms, etc. Consequently, it makes no sense to ask for which specific expression or paralinguistic attitudes this or that emoji stands for or what it replaces. Instead, it makes sense to ask what aspects of a certain cultural-linguistic unit can be symbolized, in some respects, through a particular emoji or through a combination of two or more emojis. For example, the >sardonic laugh< is a complex cultural unit, broadly related to the expression of sarcasm, derision, and mocking. All these emojis (😏; 😊; 😄) stand, to some extent, for the sardonic laugh's bitter-sweetness: only the specific communication practices and the aim of the specific exchange can indicate which would work better in what instance. In determining their meaning, a key role derives from norms (shared even by small groups of individuals), from the alphabetic part of the text in which they are embedded and also from the overall tone of the conversation and the relation between the partners. As we could explain with Eco and Fillmore, what motivates the construction, interpretation, and finally the use of emojis is not the objects depicted, but the whole cultural contents (text, pictures, practice, conceptual frames, or

scenes, etc.) corresponding to those objects. The entire communication using emojis can be seen as an open, endless game, in which writers collectively explore the possibilities of making sense, in connection with alphabetic writing, encyclopedias, and face-to-face practices, of this system of images.

4. Devices for lying: Against an apocalyptic theory of emojis

Unlike some aspects of expressions that are highly spontaneous, emojis constitute an arbitrary network of signs without any inherent meaning. The signifiers of emojis are of course motivated by cultural aspects of their possible content, but this motivation in no way determines the actual use of emojis and their evolutions: »emoji alone are unreadable« (FREEDMAN 2020: 45). As we have seen, completely unexpected motivations can be continually found. The ›motivated signifiers‹ of emojis are thus also empty: their motivation doesn't give us a ›rule‹ to follow, but just an indefinite array of signifying possibilities. Only to the extent that they are used routinely, they can obtain a definite meaning that could be more or less widely spread, more or less dependent on the alphabetic code, more or less related to a specific jargon, or even understandable only within very small groups. A specific use of a specific emoji could indeed make sense only in a given case, even only within a single group chat: the very fragmentation of the communicative spaces inherent to digital media drives toward a very wide range of socio-semiotic variations in emojis' uses.

If emojis can thus carry complex meanings, they can activate long and nuanced pathways in the speakers' encyclopedias. Unlike our empirical bodies, however, emojis cannot express or reveal anything about the real, embodied emotional mood of the speaker. Unsurprisingly, while we can use emojis to lie as much as we want (according to ECO 1975: 6-7 they are an object of semiotic study for this very reason), we can use our body only to lie up to a certain extent. Given the presence of elements of spontaneity, unreflective reaction, and naturalness, in face-to-face communication one must make an effort to lie, and the chances of success are bound to the ability of the individual speaker to deceive, as well as to the opposing skills of their interlocutor. Indeed, our bodies are only to some extent a sign and not natural objects that, as such, can reveal something about our mood simply by reacting to environmental stimuli. In contrast, with emojis, we reflexively and linguistically work on a common, completely semiotic body. The use of emojis gives us no clue about if someone is using this ›digital body‹ to lie or not. Who can tell the emotional status of the people behind this chat by relying only on written clues?

It is important to highlight how this argument applies not just to emotional or gesture emojis, but also to any emojis representing objects. These emojis could

be used indeed to evoke entire cultural frames (cf. SIEVER 2020: 143) exactly like smiley-emojis. For example, in the following message, »come on, let's have a coffee break ☺☕☀️, the cocktail and the beach umbrella emojis are used to indicate the speaker's »summer/beach holiday« attitude (as well as a poor will to work). The »summer holiday« frame implies certain ways of presenting yourself, not directly reducible to a certain set of physical traits, but linguistically definable as being relaxed, slow, lazy, and so on. This use of object-related emojis confirms how the encyclopedia and not the iconic relation to face-to-face expressions drive the paralinguistic function of emojis.

We can thus say that emojis contribute to shaping a digital and strategic written orality. From a semiotic-cultural point of view, this communicative practice opens up sophisticated writing habits. Using emojis to signify our emotional attitudes, we embrace a task that, in face-to-face communication, we perform without reflexive efforts and with much more spontaneity. From another point of view, however, the loss of the material and individual body as an expressive resource makes communication much safer and more controllable by the writers. In digital communication we do not have to deal with a body that can betray us, producing communicative clues independent of our will and planning; we are freed from the non-semiotic but idiosyncratic or universal components bound to our material bodies. In the asynchronous times and the screen spaces of digital communication – the spaces we share with our partners are generated by the interfaces of the application employed – we are much freer to plan evaluative and emotional aspects of meaning using the full range of emojis in combination with written language strategies.

Starting from these considerations on the open-ended and indeterminate character of the use of emojis as a semiotic body of digital communication, we can reconsider the arguments put forward by Luke Stark and Kate Crawford, from the point of view of the social sciences, in a 2015 paper. In their text, the authors discuss the role of emojis in platform capitalism and its dynamics of value extraction from the communicative activity of the users who inhabit them. The discussion combines three main arguments:

1. emojis foster sociality on platforms, making an otherwise inhuman way of communicating more acceptable;
2. emojis vehicle their own ideology, related to consumerism, individualism, etc.;
3. emojis are another opportunity for the extraction and quantification of economically valuable data.

This passage from the conclusion of the paper summarizes all the above points:

Emoji, like that original smiley, are prophylactic – they help people in digital environments cope emotionally with the experience of building and maintaining social ties

within hierarchical technological platforms and unjust economic systems that operate far outside of their control. Yet the emancipatory potential of emoji is restricted by their industrial and commercial limitations [...] Emoji offer us more than just a cute way of humanizing the platforms we inhabit: they also remind us of how informational capital continually seeks to instrumentalize, analyze, monetize, and standardize affect. Emojis are an exuberant form of social expression but they are also just another means to lure consumers to a platform, to extract data from them more efficiently, and to express a normative, consumerist, and predominantly cheery world-view. In this light, emoji should be understood both as a rear-guard action to enable sociality in digital networks and also the means to quantify, measure, signal, and control affective labor, and reinforce existing regimes of inequality and exploitation (STARK/CRAWFORD 2015: 10).

It can thus be pointed out that communication is not simply an end in itself, but is often motivated by the material needs and purposes of individuals as well as the social formations they are a part of. Even simple gossip has its purpose in the regulation of social relations. So, as long as the digital platforms that profit from the most diverse communicative exchanges are integrated into how social needs are satisfied, their success has little to do with the codes made available to users. Emojis may be part of user-friendly interface design concerns, but while they may promote the use of digital platforms, they are far from being a significant cause of it. While, as argued above, using emojis to express a conversation's mood remains a choice, the chat itself and its channel very often are not.

To address Stark's and Crawford's second argument about the emojis' ›ideology‹ or ›world-view‹, it is helpful to recall the distinction provided by Eco between the two main attitudes that divide the field of mass communication scholars between »apocalyptic and integrated« (ECO 1994: 17-18). While the latter claims the total neutrality of the medium with regard to the message, the media (here understood in a broad sense, as the combination of channel, social practices, relations between the users, and codes) »is its ideology« for the former (ECO 1986: Calibre pos. 16.4). Semiotics can and must warn against these two positions. When Stark and Crawford claim that emojis convey their ideology, as if they automatically connoted the content of each message with their further autonomous meaning, they are not carefully considering the role of emojis in the communicative process, which is the exclusive one of code. Emojis, as a code, are thus »empty forms« (ECO 1986: Calibre pos. 16.23) for both the source and recipient of each communicative instance: having no natural or determined meaning prior to their actual uses, the processes by which they signify are open to indefinite attempts of possible creativity, changes, or subversions. Even if it were possible to show that the choice of the emojis made available to users responds, in the articulations of their various subsets, to some precise ideological aims of the platform owners, this would not alter the fact that this is only one of the indefinite ways in which the more general cultural knowledge allows them to be received, used, and interpreted.

Stark and Crawford acknowledge indeterminacy⁷¹ and semantic openness as distinctive features of the affective and emotional communicative practices in which emojis appear. However, from a semiotic point of view, such indeterminacy is not in itself the proper or ideologically determined meaning of the paralinguistic affectivity expressed through emojis. On the contrary, it is the indefinite possibility of many different determined uses of this picto-logographic writing system. The indeterminacy lies at the level of the Saussurean langue, of the abstract system at its highest level of generality, not at the level of the particular uses or conventions, gradually narrower, of national linguistic communities, of sociolinguistic groups identified according to the most varied coordinates (demographic, professional, local, etc.) down to the individual micro-groups of acquaintances sharing a specific background of knowledge. At this very last level, some uses of emojis can take on a meaning highly determined but also extremely unpredictable based on the superficial iconic characteristics of the signifier.

Referring precisely to this possibility of fluctuation in the use of the emojis between ›plain basic‹ and ›cryptic‹ (linked to the knowledge shared at the edge between only two people), the authors acknowledge that the meaning associated with emojis use »would be difficult for intelligence analysts or machine-learning algorithms to parse« (STARK/CRAWFORD 2015: 6). After all, even the ›plain basic‹ meaning of a ›transparent‹ emoji such as ›❤️👉‹ could be both rendered as a loving tone as well as a sarcastic tone in different communicative interactions. It is precisely this irreducible dependence on interpretative choices in the here-and-now and/or within strongly local conventions that make it difficult to predict uniform and predictable uses for advertising exploitation or user profiling (for these purposes, simple alphabetical writing seems probably to be more effective, although posing similar problems). Moreover, as we have seen, even considering emojis in their association with the expression of paralinguistic cues, it is reductive to identify the emojis' ›substance content‹ with the expression of emotions. On the contrary, what emojis refer to are the broader cultural contexts/frameworks in which certain prototypical emotional aspects can be found. Concerning the purposes of datafication, one must also always assume the rule that the owner of the platform isn't in control of how the sender uses emojis to encode its message, nor of how the message is interpreted by the addressee (cf. ECO 1986:

71 »To a greater degree than the emoticon, the utility of an emoji lies in the indeterminacy of its pictographic versus iconographic legibility as a signifier of affect, emotion, or sociality. [...] Because the meaning of individual emoji is relatively plastic – after all, what intrinsic emotion does that flamenco dancer represent? – emoji use is heavily structured by linguistic and social contexts, and by both cultural and personal conventions [...] The production of capitalist subjectivity through this affective indeterminacy is one of how capital seeks to co-opt and exploit affective labor. Emoji are useful components for working socially across computational media: they show the importance, and paradoxical invisibility, of affective and social ties across digital structures of work« (STARK/CRAWFORD 2015: 5-6).

Calibre pos. 16.14). While the stimulus compels a certain response, the characteristic of signs is precisely that of the dialogical and unpredictable openness of the interpretative response or non-response (both at the moment of encoding and decoding). What is reducible to data does not coincide with the meaning of a message for the users. To conclude, one can comment on this last passage:

Emoji, too, seem trapped in this bind, a ›normcore system of emotion‹: the generic basic-wear of digital communication, ›a taxonomy of feeling in a grid menu of ideograms‹ [...]. Emoji can deaden as well as enliven. For all their creative potentials, emoji were intended to normalize and then capitalize on the collective strength of affect in human social relations online (STARK/CRAWFORD 2015: 4).

A semiotic perspective suggests reconsidering the point at which the problem of exploitation and valorization of digital communicative flows should be placed. As said before, communication is never an end in itself and therefore it is not the sum of its codes and channels that are in themselves practices of exploitation or alienation. On the contrary, it is the economic structure in which the communicative flow is embedded and for which it is aimed that could determine a further level of alienation and value extraction (in some cases hidden from the very semiotic consciousness of those who communicate). In this sense, emojis can at most be considered as one among many affordances to make the digital architecture in which communication is embedded more user-friendly (but this, too, is an empirical question: there might be people for whom emojis and the skills necessary for their use are more an obstacle than an encouragement). Regarding the first sentence of the quote, however, it must be replied that it seems impossible to reduce the communicative practices and paralinguistic contents that can be expressed through emojis made available by a certain interface into a predetermined enclosure.

Concludingly, we can return to the example from which we have started: the meaning of 🙄🤔. It is a good example to illustrate one of the many possible ways of semiotic creativity that emojis have enabled. To recover something from the lost spontaneity of face-to-face communication, emojis could be used to represent how the body reacts beyond the screen, not how it would have reacted if it had been face-to-face. For example, our syntagm could stand for what in internet jargon is called ›snoffing‹.^{8]} This word means the reaction of amusement expressed by an uncontrolled exhalation from the nose. This is an unusual reaction in speech, but common when reading funny messages from the screen. So, emoji creativity could be used not just to represent the lost closeness of face-to-face communication and to replace the functions usually carried out by the

8 For a dictionary definition see <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=snoffed> [accessed March 2, 2023]].

bodies. They can furthermore signify a new paralinguistics, native and specific of digital communication practices.

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Christina Margrit Siever

Emojis in the Context of Digital Mourning:

A Twitter-based Analysis of Communication about ›Angel Babies‹

Abstract

Emojis have become an indispensable part of digital communication. There are undoubtedly cultural differences and individual preferences in their use, but the utilization of emojis naturally also depends on the communication situation and the topic. The present article is about emojis that are applied in the context of digital mourning on Twitter for so-called ›angel babies‹ (German: »Sternenkinder«), i.e., children who die (shortly) before, during, or after birth, and sometimes also later. The article analyzes the extent to which emojis are used in mourning processes in addition to verbally expressed grief for a deceased child and what function they have in this context. In particular, it will be analyzed what multimodal communication with emojis looks like, i.e., whether emojis are part of the message or rather have an illustrative character. In addition, the question is explored whether there are specific emojis for digital mourning communication and to what extent symbols that can be interpreted in religious terms can also be found (for example angels, praying hands, or candles). The facial signs used will also be examined; for example, the extent to which crying and sad emoticons are used to express grief and empathy. Furthermore, it will be discussed whether the heart as a symbol of love is also as present in grief communication on Twitter – as observed elsewhere in digital communication. The data basis for the analysis is a corpus of around 8,351 German-language tweets containing the sequence of characters »sternenkind« (angel baby).

1. Introduction

While emojis have found their way into various aspects of our lives and their communicative functions have been relatively extensively studied already, their role in the realm of mourning remains a captivating and underexplored subject. The focus of the present article is the use of emojis in the context of digital mourning for so-called ›angel babies‹ (German: »Sternenkinder«) who die (shortly) before, during, or after birth. Specifically, it aims to investigate the usage of emojis in the context of angel babies and the extent to which feelings of grief are expressed through emojis. The following tweet brings us immediately to the heart of the matter:


CN Stillbirth



Urgent intervention at a nearby hospital.

Twins, 1  and 1 

It is not easy to find the right words for something like this.

#angelbaby^[1]

The content note at the beginning and the hashtag at the end help readers grasp the theme of the tweet. What is interesting about the message is that the central message, namely that one of the twins has died and one has survived, is expressed through emojis. However, some prior understanding of the subject matter is required for this. The tweet can only be comprehended if one knows that children who die shortly before, during, or after birth are called »Sternenkinder« (angel babies) or affectionately referred to as »Sternchen« (literally: little stars) in German. Furthermore, one must know that a baby born after a deceased child is called a »Regenbogenbaby« (rainbow baby). The two hearts can be interpreted based on their color symbolism. Black is associated with death and mourning in the German cultural sphere (and many other cultures), while green is associated with life and hope. After the message is conveyed through emojis, the user writes that it is not easy to find words for such things. Apparently, for the author, it was easier in this case to convey the information through emojis. So, he expresses grief about this incident with the  emoji (Black Heart).^[2] Marcel Danesi (2019: 243) also states: »Emoji allow users to add emotional tones, from happiness and laughter to irony and critique, to written messages. In effect, they have emotive force, in the sense that they allow users to convey state of mind (opinion, judgment, attitude, outlook, sentiments, etc.)«.

1 »CN Totgeburt | Eiliger Einsatz im Krankenhaus bei mir in der Nähe. | Zwillinge, 1  und 1  | Es ist nicht leicht für so etwas die richtigen Worte zu finden. | #sternenkind«.

2 While reviewing academic literature on the topic under investigation, I encountered the problem that it often remains unclear which specific emojis were referred to, either because they were not explicitly mentioned or because images of emojis could not be accurately recognized. For this reason, in this study, the Unicode character of each emoji is cited together with its corresponding Unicode name in parentheses at its first mention. This ensures that each emoji can be uniquely identified.

The present article is concerned, among other things, with how mourning for angel babies is expressed. This study was conducted as part of the research project »Mourning Practices on the Internet«, which is part of the URPP Digital Religion(s) at the University of Zurich.^[3] Regarding the structure of the article, the corpus is first introduced, which serves as the basis for the subsequent analyses. Then, the suitability of Twitter as a communication platform for mourning in the context of angel babies is discussed. Subsequently, the German neologism »Sternenkinder« is elucidated, which is central to the following study. Next, the question of which emojis appear in the corpus and with what frequency is examined, categorizing the emojis into different categories. These results are then compared with the findings of other studies on emoji usage in general and, specifically, in digital mourning communication. Finally, two analysis sections follow, in which the functions of emojis that are typical for communication about angel babies are examined. They also take a closer look at emojis featuring death-symbolism and religious topics. The article then concludes with a summary and an outlook on future research.

2. The corpus used

The present corpus consists of tweets that contain the string »sternenkind«, whereby the difference between upper and lower cases was not taken into account. The data also includes tweets that contain the hashtag #sternenkind or hyperlinks that contain the string »sternenkind«. All tweets that were marked as German by Twitter were saved via the API, regardless of whether they were tweets or replies initially; retweets, on the other hand, were not crawled. The corpus includes tweets from Twitter's launch as a public platform in 2006 up to 2021; the crawling period thus ranges from 22.03.2006 to 19.12.2021 (10:33 pm). In this way, 32,741 tweets were collected. This corpus was cleaned by first searching for (near-)duplicates by machine and then removing these duplicates after selective checks. Tweets referencing Twitter users whose handles contained the string »sternenkind« were also deleted. In the end, all of this work resulted in a sub-corpus of 10,042 tweets that were then manually screened. All tweets that had nothing to do with the topic of interest were then sorted out. The expression »sternenkind« also exists, for example, in art, computer games, or music. The cleaned sub-corpus, which is the data basis for this article, comprises a total of 8,351 tweets.

3 Cf. https://www.digitalreligions.uzh.ch/en/research/internaldynamics/p1_mourning_practices_on_the_internet.html [accessed July 18, 2023].

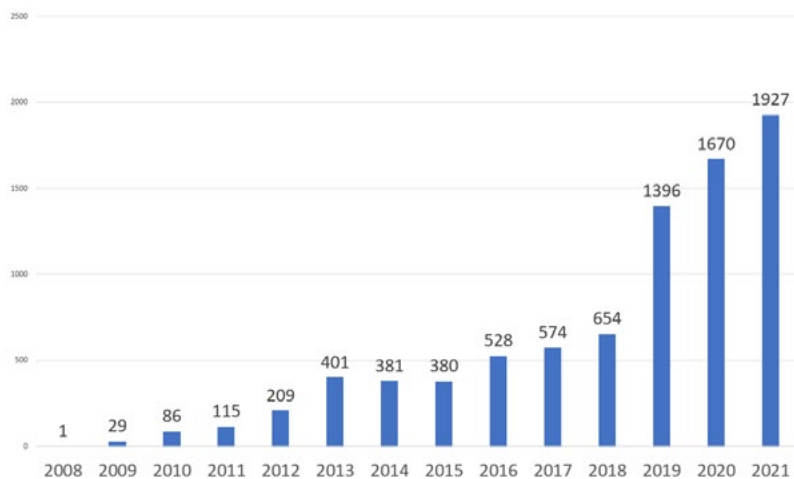


Figure 1: Tweets in the corpus grouped by year.

Twitter was founded in 2006 and the oldest tweet in the corpus dates from 2008. Figure 1 shows the years in which the tweets in the corpus were posted. From 2008 to 2018, the number of tweets increases moderately, but from 2019 onwards there are even significantly more tweets. The absolute numbers in figure 1 must of course be considered against the background of general Twitter use in the German-speaking world. However, if we look at the results of the ARD/ZDF online study^[4], we can see that the use of Twitter in Germany did not increase in the years 2016 to 2021. Accordingly, it can be assumed that the use of the term »Sternenkind« on Twitter has increased substantially in recent years.

3. Twitter as a communication platform for the mourning of angel babies

In contrast to online memorial sites, which are specifically designed to commemorate the deceased, or forums where parents of star children can exchange experiences, Twitter as a communication platform is open in its thematic diversity. Nevertheless, grief over the deceased is also expressed in many social media communities where »contact can be established with people in similar circumstances« (TIENKEN 2015: 132, translation C.M.S.^[5]). This happens in particular through

4 <https://www.ard-zdf-onlinestudie.de/> [accessed July 18, 2023].

5 Original: »Kontakt zu Menschen in ähnlichen Lebensumständen hergestellt werden [kann]«.

hashtags and so-called social tagging (cf. SIEVER 2015: 141-214). So, while some people specifically search for these topics using hashtags, other users may want to be alerted to potentially incriminating content because it could trigger them. Therefore, trigger warnings are often given by marking the tweet with »CN« (for »content note«).

When people write about their angel babies on Twitter, the narratives are often »small stories [...]: social media environments afford opportunities for sharing life in miniaturized form at the same time as constraining the ability of users to plunge into full autobiographical mode« (GEORGAKOPOULOU 2015: 266). Until 2017, tweets were known to be limited to 140 characters; currently, the limit is 280 characters. Some users deliberately want to be brief and, if necessary, exchange information with other users via direct messages. Others use threads for longer posts or the possibility to refer to other pages with more content via links. Other social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, as well as blogs and websites, are often linked.

How does digital mourning in social media communities differ from traditional mourning or even mourning in general on the internet? Korina Giaxoglou (2021: 33) states in her book on social media mourning: »The language used in digital mourning features digital writing features, such as emoji and hashtags, and also draws on platform-specific vernaculars, for example images in photo-sharing websites.« The focus of the present article revolves around the digital writing feature of emojis. Communication takes place accordingly »with various semiotic (multi-modal) resources« (GEORGAKOPOULOU 2015: 266), which is why the multimodality of communication is also discussed in the present analysis.

4. The German-language neologism »Sternenkinder« for deceased children

If a child dies shortly before, during, or after birth, people in the German-speaking area have been talking about so-called »Sternenkinder« (literally: »star children«) for about 30 years; the English equivalent is »angel« or »angel baby«. Whereas in the past the terms »miscarriage« or »stillbirth« were used to refer to the incident as such, the term »sternenkind« is now increasingly intended to highlight the deceased child as such. As per Julia Böcker's (2022: 32) sociological analysis, the metaphor inherent in the term »Sternenkinder« signifies the belief that children who pass away at a young age are believed to ascend directly to heaven or originate from there. Consequently, in the German language, the terms »Himmelskinder« (literally: »heavenly children«) or »Engelskinder« (literally: »angel children«) are occasionally employed as well. Within the context of this article, the designation »angel babies« is used correspondingly to denote

individuals referred to as »Sternenkinder« in the German language. In German, there is also the term »Schmetterlingskind« (»butterfly child«), often used for very early miscarriages where no actual body is yet present, which semantically also has a connection to heaven (cf. BÖCKER 2022: 32). Within a thread found in the analyzed corpus, it is elucidated that the term »Schmetterlingskind« is also employed to refer to children diagnosed with epidermolysis bullosa, a genetic skin disorder characterized by extremely fragile skin comparable to the delicate nature of butterfly wings. Hence, the usage of this expression is deemed unfavorable due to its inherent ambiguity.

Furthermore, a parallel evolution of novel linguistic expressions can be observed in English as well: »Earth baby, Angel baby, and Angel’s mother slowly emerge as such new linguistic categories« (RAFANELL/SAWICKA 2022: 82). The expression »Earth baby« corresponds to the German term »Erdenkind«, which appears in 6 tweets within the corpus. The term »earth baby/Erdenkind« refers to living babies or children, in contrast to deceased children. »Angel’s mother« corresponds to the German terms »Sternenmama« (found in 39 tweets) or »Sternemutter/Sternenmütter« (found in 8 tweets).

In relation to the frequency of usage observed for the aforementioned terms, it can be posited that the term »Sternenkind« demonstrates a substantially greater occurrence rate. It is important to note that, as mentioned above, the data was collected based on the search term »sternenkind«, so it is not surprising that the term appears in 6,697 tweets (the corpus analyzed consists of a total of 8,351 tweets, meaning that there are 1,654 tweets where the string »sternenkind« is only present in the linked content). The term »Schmetterlingskind« appears in 16 tweets, »Engelskind« in 11 tweets, and »Himmelskind« in 6 tweets. All the aforementioned expressions can be categorized as colloquial language. It is noteworthy to mention that some affected individuals may reject these expressions as they perceive them to be euphemistic, kitschy, or otherwise unsuitable (cf. BÖCKER 2022: 32). In the aforementioned thread, an individual also expressed their initial discomfort with the term »Sternenkind«; they further observed, however, that it is generally well comprehended, predominantly accepted, and appreciated.

Next, we will provide a concise overview of the historical background surrounding the emergence of the term »Sternenkinder«. Susanne Tienken (2015: 135) found an internet record of the expression on a memorial page on the internet from 1991; in the German Reference Corpus, »Sternenkind« first appeared in 2001. In 2008, a German-language Wikipedia article on the topic of »Sternenkind« was created.⁶ Although there were first occurrences of the word in the last millennium, it took a while for the word to become better known. In the 2013 *Rechtschreibduden* (the best-known dictionary on the orthography of standard

6 <https://de.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Sternenkind&action=history&dir=prev> [accessed July 18, 2023].

German), the lemma »Sternenkind« was not yet listed; in the 2017 edition, one finds an entry: »euphemistic for a child who died before or shortly after birth« (DUDEKREDAKTION 2017: n.pag., original emphasis, translation C.M.S.^[7]). According to Tienken (2016: 168), online forums have played a significant role in establishing the term. Of course, it is mainly personally affected persons who use such forums, but the term can since also be found more and more often in newspaper articles. As discussed earlier, based on the Twitter corpus used here, it can be observed that tweets contribute to the dissemination and awareness of the term. Other social media platforms such as Instagram likely also add to the increased familiarity of the expression.

Finally, let us consider the most frequent 20 hashtags found in the corpus as they clearly reflect the subject matter at hand (the hashtag »sternenkind« was excluded as it served as the search term for creating the corpus). The hashtags mention the individuals involved, the event, associated evaluations and emotions, as well as memorial occasions and locations (cf. figure 2).

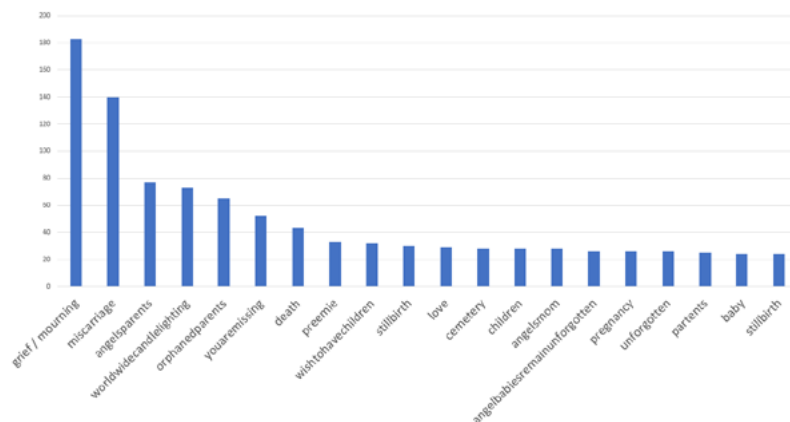


Figure 2: Top 20 hashtags in the corpus (translated into English)^[8]

Seven hashtags refer to the individuals involved. The angel babies are also referred to as »preemies« (premature babies), »children«, or »babies«. The parents are referred to »as angels' parents and orphaned parents«^[9]; with 28 occurrences, the hashtag »sternenmama« made it into the top 20, while the hashtag

7 Original: »verhüllend für vor oder kurz nach der Geburt gestorbenes Kind«.

8 Original: »1. trauer, 2. fehlgeburt, 3. sterneneltern, 4. worldwidedandlelighting, 5. verwaisteeltern, 6. du-fehlst, 7. tod, 8. frühchen, 9. kinderwunsch, 10. stillegeburt, 11. liebe, 12. friedhof, 13. kinder, 14. sternenmama, 15. sternenkinderbleibenunvergessen, 16. schwangerschaft, 17. unvergessen, 18. eltern, 19. baby, 20. totgeburt«.

9 The verb »verwaisen« (to become an orphan) actually means »to lose one's parents through death«, but in this context, the reference is reversed, meaning »parents who have lost their child through death«.

»sternenpapa« appears only three times throughout the corpus. The two most frequently mentioned emotions in the context of angel babies are grief/mourning and love. The hashtag »grief«/»mourning« (in German, there is no distinction between both) ranks first, while the hashtag »love« can be found in the 11th position. In the context of family planning, more general hashtags such as »wish to have children« and »pregnancy« are present, with the latter potentially ending in death and the birth being referred to as a »miscarriage« or »stillbirth« (in German, the terms »stille Geburt« and »Totgeburt« are used for »stillbirth«, with »stille Geburt« carrying a significantly more positive connotation than »Totgeburt«). Furthermore, several hashtags with evaluative positions can be found. There are 26 instances of the hashtags »angel babies remain unforgettable« and »unforgotten« each. It can also be noted that in the German-language online mourning discourse, the hashtag »dufehlst« (»you are missing«) has also become established. Therefore, not only are the deceased spoken about, but they are also spoken to directly using the pronoun »du« (»you«). In addition to the mentioned hashtags, the mourning discourse also includes additional ones addressing the deceased directly, predominantly containing present tense verbs such as »to be missing«, »to love«, and »to miss someone« (cf. BODENMANN et al. 2023). Finally, within the top 20 hashtags in the corpus, there is one hashtag for a memorial occasion and one for a memorial site. The initiative »Worldwide Candle Lighting« has established the annual World Remembrance Day to commemorate all children who have passed away. It takes place on the second Sunday of December, during which individuals place burning candles in their windows at 7 p.m. as a symbol of remembrance. In addition, there is the lesser-known »Tag der Sternenkinder« (»Day of Angel Babies«), which goes back to the »Pregnancy and Infant Loss Remembrance Day« originating in America and taking place on 15 October every year. The hashtag »cemetery« refers to a physical memorial site; often newspaper articles report on cemeteries when new burial sites are opened specifically for angel babies (which is then quoted on Twitter).

5. Frequency and type of emojis in the corpus

Emojis cannot be considered a typical feature in the corpus studied here; only 18% of all tweets contain emojis. Of the 1,538 tweets with emojis, 868 tweets contain only one emoji, which corresponds to 56% of the tweets with emojis. Also, 2 to 4 emojis per tweet still occur relatively frequently. More than 6 emojis, in contrast, can only be found extremely rarely (cf. figure 3).

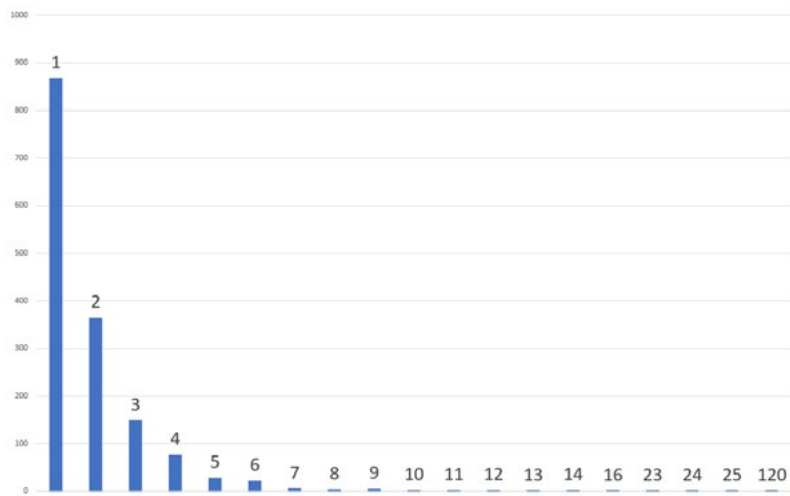


Figure 3: Number of emojis per tweet

Let us now take a closer look at the 20 most frequently used emojis in the corpus. As shown in figure 4, there is again a long-tail distribution. At the outset, it should be noted that the ranking of emojis on positions 12 and 13, as well as 14 and 15, are tied in terms of frequency of occurrence. This means that the positions can be interchangeable or that the emojis can be considered on the same level. Furthermore, it should be noted that variant selectors (text style vs. emoji style) were not taken into account in the ranking, meaning that variations of emojis were grouped together.

The ❤️ emoji (Red Heart)¹⁰ emerges as the unequivocal frontrunner, exhibiting 584 instances and thereby establishing itself as the preeminent and most prevalently employed emoji within the examined corpus. Apart from the red heart, which takes first place, there are other heart emojis in the corpus. In fourth place is the 🖤 (Black Heart), which symbolizes grief and love at the same time. Likewise, the 🩹 (Broken Heart) symbolizes the simultaneous existence of pain and love. Positions 12 and 16 are occupied by the 🍀 (Green Heart) and the 💙 (Blue Heart) emojis, while the 😊 emoji (Smiling Face with Heart-Shaped Eyes) occupies the 18th place. The 19th and 20th positions in the ranking are comprised of the 💕 (Two Hearts) and 💎 (Sparkling Heart) emojis. It can thus be

¹⁰ It can be seen that different forms of the red heart are used in the corpus. The records of the red heart include both the Heavy Black Heart and Heart Suit emoji, both used with and without variant selector 16 (U+FE0F) for the emoji style. In the corpus, the Heavy Black Heart with variation selector (U+2764U+FE0F) dominates with 290 occurrences, followed by the same emoji without variation selector with 181 records. The Heart Suit emoji (U+2665U) is found 63 times with a variation selector and 50 times without.

summarised: Within the top 20 emojis, a total of 8 symbols are included that represent different forms of hearts, with two of these hearts symbolizing both love and grief. In addition, one emoji is depicted as a facial emoji with heart-eyes.

Grief is expressed with the already mentioned ❤️ in 4th position, the 💔 in 9th position, or the sad face emojis in 6th (😭 Crying Face), 7th (😱 Loudly Crying Face), 8th (😞 Pensive Face), and 17th (😓 Sad but Relieved Face) position.

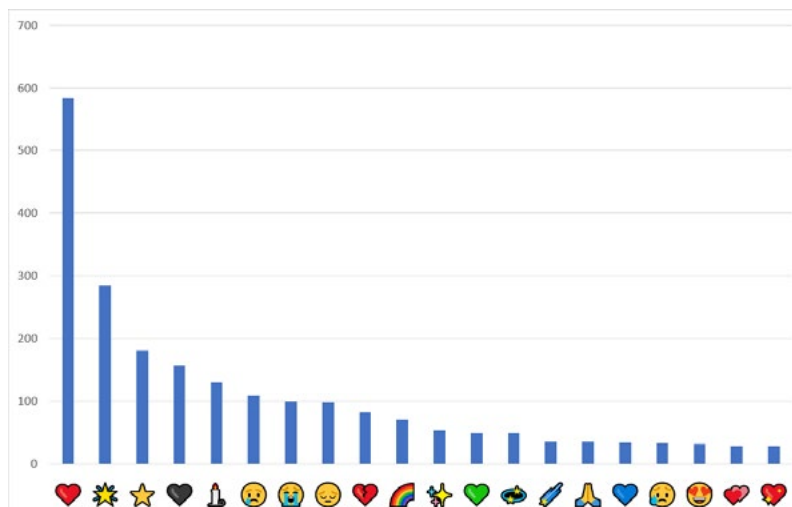


Figure 4: The most frequent 20 emojis in the corpus

When comparing the symbols representing love and grief, including the ❤️ and the 💔 in both categories, it is evident that the top 20 encompasses a total of 990 emojis symbolizing love, whereas 576 emojis symbolize grief. The symbol for love thus clearly dominates on the visual level before the emotion of grief and this is an interesting result because with regard to the hashtags, the situation is reversed: the hashtag »#mourning« leads the top 20 with 183 occurrences, while the hashtag »#love« in 11th place has only 29 occurrences.

As a result of the thematic orientation, emojis related to the topic of stars are naturally frequently encountered. The 🌟 emoji (Glowing Star) is in second place, followed by the ★ emoji (White Medium Star)¹¹ in third place. ✨ (Sparkles) follows in 11th place, 🌀 (Dizzy Symbol) in 13th place and finally 🌠 (Shooting Star) in 14th place. According to this, a quarter of all emojis in the top 20 can be

11 This emoji has only been available since 2015, cf. <https://emojipedia.org/star> [accessed July 31, 2023]. Other emojis have also been added to Unicode over the years, but as we know from figure 1, most of the tweets in the corpus were written after 2016.

classified as star symbols. In addition to the emojis mentioned so far, there are only three more emojis in the top 20 that we will now take a closer look at. To start with, we should mention the 🌈 (Rainbow) emoji, which is in 10th place. As in English, a child born into a family that has previously lost one or more children, for example through stillbirth, miscarriage, or even in infancy (or later), is called a »Regenbogenbaby« in German (»rainbow baby«). The symbol of the rainbow thus signifies the convergence of the sorrowful loss of a child (rain) with the subsequent joyous birth event (sun) and symbolizes the bond with the deceased sibling (cf. BÖCKER 2022: 32). So, the rainbow symbol is also closely connected to the topic of interest.

The 🕯️ (Candle) emoji, the 🙏 (Person with Folded Hands) emoji, and the 🍼 (Baby Angel) emoji can be seen as religious or spiritual symbols. In terms of popularity, the 🕯️ ranks fifth, behind the two different heart and two different star emojis. The act of lighting a candle holds significance in various religious beliefs. For instance, according to Carsten Stage and Tina Thode Hougaard (2018: 51-52), the Catholic Church has a tradition of lighting candles to commemorate the deceased; they also state that the flame can symbolize the soul of the deceased when lighting a candle in the context of death and remembrance. Additionally, grave lights are commonly placed at gravesites as a way to remember the deceased. As mentioned earlier in the text, the global commemoration day Worldwide Candle Lighting plays an important role in the remembrance of angel babies. Therefore, it is not surprising that the 🕯️ emoji plays an eminent role in the corpus. The 🙏 emoji represents a prime illustration of an emoji that elicits diverse interpretations across different cultures. In Japanese contexts, this emoji is employed to convey meanings such as »please«, »sorry«, or »thank you«. In the German-speaking regions, in contrast, folded hands are also interpreted as a gesture of humility, which conventionally can be associated with gratitude (cf. BEISSWENGER/PAPPERT 2022: 109). Conversely, in other cultural contexts, it is perceived as a representation of praying hands, while certain segments of the US population interpret it as a gesture symbolizing a »high five« (cf. SIEVER 2020: 136). When considering the interpretation of the folded hands as a symbol of prayer, the usage of the emoji can be attributed to the religious or spiritual domain. The act of prayer is typically associated with the gesture of folding one's hands in front of the chest, and prayer itself represents a central religious practice in many faiths.

As mentioned earlier, the variant selectors that influence text style and emoji style were not taken into account in the ranking. Emojis with different variants in terms of skin tone or gender were not grouped together. If this were done, there would be a total of 28 records of the 🍼 (Baby Angel) emoji, which corresponds to position 19 in the ranking. The frequent occurrence of the 🍼 emoji is not surprising considering that occasionally the term »Engelskind« is used in

German. The notion that the deceased (>child in heaven<) could take on the form of an angel, perhaps even that of a guardian angel, is also quite plausible. We find tweets in which an angel baby is explicitly mentioned as »Sternenkind« but is nevertheless referred to as an angel: »This can't be true.. We will always have the little angel in our hearts. #Angelbaby ❤️👼🌈🌟«. [12] Furthermore, it is worth noting that all four emojis used in this tweet belong to the top 21 most frequently used emojis in the corpus, and they serve as a representation of the theme of »mourning for an angel baby.«

6. Emojis in the context of digital mourning

The use of emojis will now be compared to general emoji usage and emoji usage in the context of digital mourning. In a large-scale project on WhatsApp communication in Switzerland, the ❤️ emoji was also identified as the most frequently used emoji (cf. DÜRSCHIED/SIEVER 2017: 276). In positions 2 to 10 within the top 10, face emojis are found, with no >frowneys< (any sort of sad faces) included. Therefore, apart from the heart emoji, there is no overlap in usage. In a study on German-language Instagram communication, only the 😊 emoji and the ❤️ emoji, which are also commonly used in the emojis under investigation, occupy the first and second positions (cf. SIEVER/SIEVER 2020: 187). Let us finally examine a study on Twitter data. Mengi Li et al. (2019: 1753) analyzed emoji usage with data from the year 2016, collecting a thematically neutral corpus. In their data, the 😊 (Face with Tears of Joy emoji) ranks first by a large margin, followed by the ❤️ emoji in second place, and the 😊 emoji in third place (cf. LI et al. 2019: 1757). Interestingly, in these data, we find the 😞 emoji ranking fifth, which corresponds to the seventh position in our corpus. Additionally, we also observe other sad faces such as the 😞 or the 😞 emoji, which are also present in our corpus.

This indicates that the ❤️ emoji is widely popular in communication, ranking first or second in both the current study and the mentioned investigations. However, in everyday communication on WhatsApp and Instagram, joyful emotions dominate, while in mourning communication, sad faces are prevalent. On Twitter, conversely, we also observe the presence of frowney face emojis. It would be valuable to conduct further research in order to examine the potential platform-specific disparities in the utilization patterns of frowney face emojis. Besides the technical affordances offered by different platforms, it is particularly likely that distinct communicative practices have emerged on various social media platforms, which in turn have an influence on emoji usage. For instance,

12 Original: »Das kann nicht wahr sein.. Wir werden den kleinen Engel trotzdem immer im Herzen haben. #Sternenkind ❤️👼🌈🌟«.

on Twitter, there are so-called ›RIP storms‹, a term coined by journalists to describe the »phenomenon of mass mourning or widespread expressions of emotional engagement«^[13] (STEIN 2021: 65). This phenomenon has also been referred to as collective fan mourning, as the death of prominent individuals is often collectively mourned under the hashtag »#RIP« (cf. FRICK 2019: 179). While Karina Frick (2019: 186) was unable to include emojis in her analysis due to technical reasons, Giaxoglou (2020: 144) notes as a side remark in her work on the hashtag #RIP: »it is worth noting that on Twitter, the expression R.I.P. is often accompanied by the use of emoji, e.g. folded hands emoji, heart emoji or a combination of these, where emoji further intensifies the specific affective undertone of the message.« This frequently observed communicative practice of so-called ›RIP storms‹ on Twitter could therefore be a reason why there is a higher occurrence of frowney emojis in Twitter communication compared to other forms of digital communication.

The following discussion will focus on the emojis that are relevant in mourning communication. Xinyuan Xu et al. (2021: 262) conducted a study to identify mourning communication on Twitter using machine learning techniques. They concluded that emojis alone are insufficient for this task, and the most effective strategy for identifying mourning tweets involves the combination of emojis and words. For their analysis, they considered which emojis could be most representative in mourning contexts, categorizing them into two groups: 1. »*Emotional emojis* that express grief and condolences, for instance, ❤️, 🖤, 😞, 😔, 😓, 🍷« and 2. »*Death symbolic emojis*, that may reflect the offline symbols of death and mourning, for instance: 🙏, 🙏, 🙏, 🙏, 🙏« (XU et al. 2021: 257, original emphases). The analyses revealed that the key emojis in the context of mourning were ❤️, 😞, 😞, 🙏, 😞, and 🖤. This implies that only the 🙏 emoji originates from the category of death-symbolic emojis, while all the other emojis belong to the first category of emotional emojis representing grief and condolences (cf. XU et al. 2021: 261). In comparison to our data, we can observe that all the emojis mentioned in the analysis also appear in our dataset, specifically ranking 6 to 9 and 15. Conversely, in our corpus, we find the 🙏 and the 🙏 emoji among the death-symbolic emojis, which were deemed less relevant in Xu et al.'s analysis. However, as explained earlier, this can be attributed to the specific theme of angel babies or the commemoration of angel babies.

Regarding Danish mourning communication on Facebook, Stage and Hougaard (2018: 57) note that, while facial emojis play an increasingly important role in expressing empathy and grief on social media, the ❤️ emoji was by far the most frequently used. Unfortunately, the authors do not specify the respective emojis but make a more general statement: »*In addition to the heart, we observed*

13 Original: »Phänomen der Massentrauer bzw. massenhaft bekundeter Betroffenheit«.

different varieties of the crying or sad face, stars, angels, praying hands, and flowers« (STAGE/ HOUGAARD 2018: 57). The appearance of star and angel symbols in contrast to the other mentioned online mourning communication can be attributed to the nature of the data: the corpus consists of two public Facebook groups discussing cancer in children (cf. STAGE/HOUGAARD 2018: 5). Stage and Hougaard (2018: 44) also note that »participants write about ›a children’s heaven‹ from which the child ›is looking down‹ on us, or when they describe the children as ›stars‹ and ›angels‹ having ›wings‹.« Consequently, it can be inferred that these emojis, which were described earlier as typical for mourning angel babies, are generally used in mourning the loss of deceased children. Flowers play a minor role in the corpus analyzed here, in contrast to the analysis by Stage and Hougaard. In the present study, the emoji 🌿 (Wilted Flower) only appears in 69th place with 6 occurrences, followed by 🌺 (Hibiscus) with 5 occurrences, 🌹 (Rose), and 🌸 (Cherry Blossom) with 3 occurrences each, 🌼 (Bouquet of Flowers) and 🌻 (Sunflower) with 2 occurrences each, and 🌷 (Tulip) finally appears once.

In summary, regarding emojis in mourning communication, it can be concluded that in addition to the ❤️, emojis expressing grief, such as frowneys or broken hearts, play a central role. Death-symbolic emojis like folded hands or religious symbols are of secondary importance in mourning communication. Symbols like stars, the 🌈, and the 🙏 are even more specific to mourning communication associated with the death of angel babies or the death of children in general. As noted by Stage and Hougaard (2018: 57), the »inventory of emojis mirrors what many Westerners associate with death, mourning, and funerals.« Accordingly, the emojis used in mourning for angel babies or deceased children generally reflect the associations that people have with this topic.

Lastly, two exemplary tweets will be discussed, featuring heart emojis and emojis that are typical for mourning communication in general as well as for communication related to angel babies. This will also involve a closer examination of the multimodal relations between the text and the emojis. In the first tweet, the question could be raised whether they actually represent mourning communication at all, as neither the text nor the emojis express grief, but rather love: »❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️ Remembrance may fade, but my love for you shines in many colours. 🌸🌸🌸🌸🌸🌸 #angelbaby«. ¹⁴ In terms of multimodality, specifically semantic text-image relations, it can be observed that there is redundancy present: The emojis mirror the message conveyed in the text. In the second tweet quoted in the following, the child’s date of birth and name have been anonymized: »On [date of birth], [first name] was stillborn ❤️💔😭 My dear wife was in her 19th week of pregnancy. However, [first name] already received angel

14 Original: »🌸🌸🌸🌸🌸🌸 Andenken verblissen aber meine Liebe zu dir leuchtet voller Farben. 🌸🌸🌸🌸🌸🌸 #sternenkind«.

wings in the 17th week 😞😞 #AngelBaby #AngelBabies 🕯️🙏🌟🌟🌈«.^[15] The quoted example tweet includes a total of 10 different emojis, all of which are represented in the top 20 of the analyzed corpus. The use of these emojis can thus be considered prototypical for this type of communication. However, the number of emojis used significantly exceeds the usual number in the analyzed tweets. In this example, we find the semantic relation of complementarity, meaning that the overall meaning of the tweet arises from the combination of the text and the emojis. Evaluative verbal expressions are only found regarding the wife, but not regarding the deceased child. The grief for the deceased child is expressed in two places in the tweet not verbally, but non-verbally through sad faces and a broken heart. The emojis at the end of the tweet are typically used in the context of angel babies, thus showing a certain degree of redundancy within the text. However, it should be noted that although the text mentions angel wings, there is no corresponding emoji present. The following two sections will present exemplary analyses of emojis in communication related to angel babies.

7. Analysis of the functions of emojis in mourning communication regarding angel babies

As mentioned before, there are certain emojis that are typical for communication related to the death of children. In this context, various star emojis are most commonly used, as explained in section 5 above. However, conducting a comprehensive analysis of the usage of these star emojis would exceed the scope of the present article. Instead, I focus on analysing the 🕯️ emoji, 🙏 emoji, and 🥰 emoji in this context.

In the corpus, the 🕯️ emoji was found 130 times, spread across 109 tweets. The following analysis focuses on the functions and contexts in which this emoji appears in the corpus. From a thematic perspective, we can elicit the following aspects. As mentioned above, lighting a candle is associated with the global commemoration day for angel babies, Worldwide Candle Lighting. Additionally, on Twitter, candles are specifically ›lit‹ for individuals who have (just) lost an angel baby, similar to the practice of lighting a candle on an online memorial site (cf. FRICK 2021: 253). At this point, let us give an example in which a parent asks to light a candle for their angel baby. »🌈 [First name]. 🕯️. Have a safe journey, my darling. 🥰 I love you! . . Would you do me a favour and light a candle for my son?

15 Original: »Am [Geburtsdatum] wurde [Vorname] still geboren❤️💔😞 Meine liebe Frau war da in der 19. ssw. Engelsflügel hat [Vorname] aber bereits in der 17. ssw bekommen. 😞😞 #Sternenkind #Sternenkinder 🕯️🙏🌟🌟🌈«.

🕯️ The thought of a sea of lights for my angel baby feels comforting.«^[16] Finally, candles are also used ›only‹ for purposes of illustration related to the topic of angel babies, sometimes in combination with other emojis. The analysis of the tweets shows that a total of 39 tweets can be found in relation to the mentioned commemoration day, with 19 tweets belonging to the practice of lighting candles on Twitter. The remaining 51 tweets are generally related to the topic of angel babies.

Regarding the semantic relations in the domain of multimodality or interpicture-ality, it can be observed that in 22 tweets with 🕯️ emojis, candles are explicitly mentioned as such or as light. In 28 cases, the emoji refers interpicture-ally to an image associated with the tweet, where a candle is also visible. In 53 tweets, 🕯️ emojis are used purely illustratively, an example being: »Another angel baby in the family. I would have loved to meet you, my little niece. ❤️⭐️🕯️«^[17]. Lastly, there are 4 cases of iconographic communication, indicating a complementary relation. In two cases, the noun »candle« is replaced by an emoji, with both tweets coming from the same author: »A 🕯️ for our angel baby« and »A 🕯️ for our #angelbaby ❤️⭐️🕯️«^[18]. Another Twitter user employs the emoji in a similar manner: »Today is #angelbaby day. At 7:00 PM, a 🕯️ will be lit for all angel babies. We will never forget you. 🕯️❤️«^[19]. In the fourth example, the emoji represents »one candle« (instead of 18): »18th birthday. 🕯️🎂 Actually. But instead, like every year, only 🕯️. And infinite love.«^[20] In 2 cases, the emojis have a segmenting function, i.e., the emojis serve as structuring individual signs within the communicative messages: »🕯️🕯️🕯️🕯️🕯️🕯️🕯️🕯️🕯️🕯️🕯️🕯️🕯️🕯️🕯️« and »🕯️ [first name] 🕯️«.

In summary, it can be concluded that approximately half of the tweets with 🕯️ emojis can be thematically attributed to the commemorate day for angel babies and the practice of (virtual) candle lighting. Regarding the text-image or image-image relations, a redundant relation can be found in approximately half of all tweets. Taken together, the 🕯️ emoji appears a total of 47 times in the corpus, distributed across 44 tweets. The total count is higher than the numbers indicated in the top 20, as the emoji exists in various skin tones in the corpus. When examining the functions^[21] of the emoji, it can be observed that expressing solidarity is the most common in 18 cases. An example of this is the following

16 Original: »🌈 [Vorname]. 🕯️. Gute Reise, mein Schatz. 🌟 Ich liebe dich! . . Würdet ihr mir einen Gefallen tun und eine Kerze für meinen Sohn anzünden? 🕯️ Der Gedanke an ein Lichtermeer für mein Sternchenkind fühlt sich gut an«.

17 Original: »Wieder ein Sternchenkind mehr in der Familie. Ich hätte dich gern kennengelernt, meine kleine Nichte. ❤️⭐️🕯️«.

18 Original: »Eine 🕯️ für unser Sternchenkind« und »Eine 🕯️ für unser #Sternchenkind ❤️⭐️«.

19 Original: »Heute ist #sternchenkindertag. Um 19.00 Uhr wird eine 🕯️ angezündet für alle Sternchenkinder. Wir werden euch nie vergessen 🕯️❤️«.

20 Original: »18. Geburtstag. 🕯️🎂 Eigentlich. Aber stattdessen wie jedes Jahr nur 🕯️. Und unendliche Liebe«.

21 Adding up the respective counts of all functions results in a total of 47. This is because, in some tweets, multiple functions were found.

tweet: »Today is the day of #angelbabies, which may be a very emotional day for many of you. I'm thinking of you and your little stars [angel babies] 🙏🌟«. [22] In 14 tweets, the emoji is used to express thanks or gratitude, as in the following example: »[...] Many thanks for your kind and comforting words 🙏❤️ [...].« [23] In 7 tweets, the religious meaning of prayer can be found: »I will include you and the angel baby in my prayers. 🙏❤️«. [24] In 5 tweets, the emoji is used along with other emojis to signify a form of remembrance, as in the following example: »Yesterday, I composed a little song. I dedicate it to my dear father ❤️ and my dear #angelbaby [first name] ❤️ I miss you both infinitely ❤️❤️😭😭😭😭🕯️🕯️🙏🙏🌈🌟🌟🌟📺«. [25] Finally, in 3 cases, it is used to frame requests: »🙏 PLEASE 🙏 RETWEET ❤️ [...].«. In conclusion, it can be observed that the 🙏 emoji primarily expresses solidarity with those affected and gratitude. Only in a few cases is the emoji used in a religious interpretation of prayer.

Finally, the 🧚 emoji is found 27 times in 19 different tweets. Explicit mention of angels is only made in two cases, as in the following tweet: »I believe this needs to be made public! Thank you for your attention! Fly high little angel 🧚❤️ † 27.05.2020 #AngelBaby«. [26] In the other 17 cases, the emoji is used to refer to angel babies, with the implicit notion that angel babies are angels. Therefore, unlike the previously analyzed 🙏 emoji, the 🧚 emoji is predominantly associated with religious or at least spiritual connotations. Lastly, let us look at two more examples where the 🧚 emoji is used for angel babies. In the first example, a distinction is made between a late and two early losses in pregnancy: »+1 angel baby 🧚 +2 early 🌟 little stars«. [27] In another tweet, the 🧚 emoji is used to differentiate between living and deceased children: »Today was the baptism of child number 4: Four candles but unfortunately only three children. #Angelbaby ❤️🧚🧚🧚«. [28] Through the emojis, additional information is conveyed that the third of the four children has passed away. The tweet text refers to a photo with four (baptism) candles, where the third candle stands out from the others due to its smaller size. It is worth noting that the tweet mentions candles, but it does not include a 🕯️ emoji.

In summary, it can be concluded that the emojis 🕯️ and 🧚 are primarily used with a religious connotation in communication about angel babies. The 🙏 emoji

22 Original: »Heute ist der Tag der #Sternenkinder, für viele von euch vielleicht ein sehr bewegender Tag. Ich denke an euch und eure Sternchen 🙏🌟«.

23 Original: »[...] Vielen lieben Dank für eure lieben und tröstenden Worte 🙏❤️[...]«.

24 Original: »Ich werde dich und das Sternkind in meine Gebete einschließen. 🙏❤️«.

25 Original: »Gestern habe ich ein kleines Lied gedichtet. Ich widme es meinem lieben Papa❤️ und meinem lieben #Sternkind [Vorname]❤️ Ihr fehlt mir beide unendlich ❤️❤️😭😭😭😭🕯️🕯️🙏🙏🌈🌟🌟📺«.

26 Original: »Ich denke mir, sowas muss einfach an die Öffentlichkeit! Danke für Eure Aufmerksamkeit! Fly high little angel 🧚❤️ † 27.05.2020 #SternenKind«.

27 Original: »+1 Sternkind 🧚 +2 frühe 🌟 Sternchen«.

28 Original: »Heute war Taufe von K4: Vier Kerzen aber leider nur drei Kinder. #Sternenkind ❤️🧚🧚🧚«.

is rarely used in the meaning of prayers or praying, but rather expresses a sense of solidarity, thanking, and gratitude.

8. Death-symbolic emojis and religious emojis in the context of digital mourning regarding angel babies

As previously explained, death-symbolic emojis generally play a minor role in the context of mourning communication. However, we have observed that in the context of angel babies, the emojis analyzed in the previous section, such as the 🕯️ emoji, the 🙏 emoji, and the 🙄 emoji, play a central role. All these emojis can potentially be used as religious symbols. In this section, we will investigate whether there are additional emojis that can be classified as death-symbolic emoji or religious emojis. It should be noted, however, that the corpus contains very few of these emojis. Nevertheless, these emojis are briefly discussed on the basis of the tweets.

Firstly, we find the ☁️ (Cloud) emoji with 26 records, which can indirectly serve as a symbol for the sky or – here – heaven. Upon closer examination, however, we see that the emoji only appears in two tweets, which will be briefly explained here: »Day of Angel Babies – Oh, how beautiful. My little rascals in heaven are rejoicing! ☁️☁️🕯️🍏🕯️🍓🕯️🍌🕯️🍌☁️☁️«^[29]. The parent who wrote this repeats the verbal expression »my little rascals in heaven« using emojis, indicating redundancy in terms of multimodality. However, the post is only partially redundant, as the emojis actually provide more information than the text. Based on the emojis, we learn that there are four angel babies. The second tweet contains 22 ☁️ emojis arranged in an ASCII art style. It is a reply to a tweet where a father asks people to light a candle for his deceased angel baby. The frequency of the candle emoji in the corpus can be attributed, among other things, to many replies to this tweet. As seen in the example tweet, a candle was initially used.

» 🕯️

I hope it is cosy for an angel baby on the fluffy clouds. Say hello to Dad and [first name]. They are kind.

☁️☁️☁️☁️☁️☁️

☁️☁️E★R☁️☁️☁️☁️

☁️☁️☁️☁️☁️☁️«^[30]

In the first tweet, the concept of heaven as an afterlife is explicitly mentioned, while in the second tweet, only the fluffy clouds are referred to. However, here

29 Original: »Tag der Sternenkinder – Oh wie schön. Da freut sich meine kleine Rasselbande im Himmell! ☁️☁️🕯️🍏🕯️🍓🕯️🍌🕯️🍌☁️☁️«.

30 Original: »Ich hoffe, dass es kuschelig für ein Sternenkind auf den Flauschwolken ist. Grüße Papa und [Vorname]. Die sind nett«.

too, heaven is implied casually, since greetings are also directed to other, previously deceased individuals. We also observe redundancy here, as the angel baby on the fluffy clouds is visually depicted with a star emoji and presumably the initials »E.R.« amidst cloud emojis.

The 😊 (Smiling Face with Halo) emoji is present 5 times in the corpus. In Christian art, angels are depicted with a halo, just like saints. In 2 out of these 5 tweets, angels are mentioned. In one tweet, from which only a part is quoted here, the emoji can be understood as a symbol for a child in the iconographically (cf. SIEVER 2015: 281) realized compound »Sternenkind« (🌟😊): »Thank you also for showing the important 🌟😊 photographers^[31]/images in the hospital.«^[32]

The ✝️ (Latin Cross), which is arguably the most unmistakably Christian symbol for death, appears a total of 4 times in the corpus, and in each case, it is mentioned alongside a date of death. As an example, consider a tweet in which the cross is contrasted with the 🍼 (Baby) emoji. The exact birth and death times have been anonymized, but the child was born in the early morning and passed away late in the evening: »The toughest day of my life! [first name] [date and time of birth] 🍼 [date and time of death] ✝️ #angelbaby.«^[33]

All other emojis in the corpus that can be classified as death-symbolic emojis and religious emojis are only attested once in the corpus. The 🏛️ (Church) emoji is used to illustrate the expression »healthcare chaplaincy«^[34]. The 🪦 (Gravestone) emoji, on the other hand, has only been available on Twitter since May 2020. It would be interesting to observe over time whether the use of newly available emojis increases. The tweet with the gravestone reads as follows: »On the way to visit the big brother to light a few grave candles 🕯️ 🪦 #angelbaby #angelbabies-remainunforgotten [photo of a toddler in a cemetery among gravestones]«^[35] We once again have a semantic relation of redundancy here: The word »grave candle« is depicted visually through a candle and a gravestone.

In one tweet, we find the 🤝 (Palms Up Together) emoji and 🙏 (Prayer Beads) emoji: »I am so ashamed.... 🙏♀️ 🤝🙏 Rest in peace, little Artin, you are also an #angelbaby 🤝🕯️🙏 [Link to another tweet]«^[36] The tweet only becomes understandable when considering another tweet it refers to. There, it is mentioned that the body of a 15-month-old child, washed ashore in Norway, has been identified.

31 »Sternenkindfotografen« (literally: photographers of angel babies) are widespread in German-speaking countries: Photographers take pictures of angel babies on a voluntary basis so that their parents have a memory of the deceased child.

32 Original: »Vielen Dank, auch dafür, dass die so wichtigen 🌟😊 fotografen/Bilder im KKH gezeigt wurden«

33 Original: »Der härteste Tag meines Lebens! [Vorname] [Geburtsdatum und -zeit] 🍼 [Todesdatum und -zeit] ✝️ #sternenkind«.

34 Original: »Klinikseelsorge«.

35 Original: »Auf dem Weg zum großen Bruder um noch ein paar Grablichter anzuzünden 🕯️ 🪦 #Sternenkind #SternenkinderBleibenUnvergessen [Foto eines Kleinkinds auf einem Friedhof mit Grabsteinen]«.

36 Original: »Ich schäme mich so sehr.... 🙏♀️ 🤝🙏 Rest in peace, kleiner Artin, auch Du bist ein #Sternenkind 🤝🕯️🙏 [Link zu einem anderen Tweet]«.

It is a Kurdish boy who had been missing since the sinking of a refugee boat. This context explains the use of the two emojis mentioned above: In the Muslim context, the 🙏 emoji can represent prayer while the ❤️ is a symbol of significance in various religions. The commonly used phrase »rest in peace« (Latin: *requiescat in pace*) is expressed here as a wish. The author of the tweet may not be aware that this is used in the liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church in a prayer for the deceased, asking God to let them rest in peace. In any case, in terms of multimodality, we find the semantic relation of redundancy here, as both words of prayer and the prayer emoji are used. Furthermore, we see an example here that even older infants can be referred to as angel babies.

Finally, there are the emojis 🙇♀️ (Woman Bowing Deeply) and 🙇♂️ (Man Bowing Deeply), representing the female and male versions of the 🙇 (Person Bowing Deeply) emoji. This emoji would not be classified as a religious emoji, but users seem to perceive a kind of halo above the heads of the figures. Looking at the two tweets in which the emojis are used, there are indeed references to angels. In one tweet, the 😊 emoji is also included: »Sternenkind [first name] 🙇♂️ Rest in peace, angel«^[37] and »Angel babies watch over us as guardian angels 🙇♀️ 🙇♂️ 😊«.^[38]

In summary, it can be concluded that death-symbolic emojis and religious emojis – apart from the three emojis 🙏, 🙇, and 🙇 – play a marginal role in the examined mourning communication. Future research could focus on analysing the contexts in which these emojis are used. Additionally, comparing religious emojis from various religions and cultures in larger datasets could provide further insights.

9. Conclusion and outlook

In the present study, the use of emojis in the context of digital mourning, specifically in relation to angel babies, was examined. Based on an analysis of a Twitter corpus, various emojis were identified that are typical for this type of communication, and their functions and meanings were investigated.

The key finding is that emojis cannot be considered a typical feature of the analyzed mourning communication, as only 18% of all tweets in the corpus actually contain emojis. However, the tweets that contain emojis were examined. It can be stated that the ❤️ emoji – just as in digital communication in general – is the most important emoji in mourning communication. Grief for angel babies is strongly associated with the concept of love. This is evident not only in the frequent use of heart emojis but also in the hashtag »#love«, which appears

37 »Sternenkind [Vorname] 🙇♂️ Ruhe in Frieden Engel«.

38 »Sternenkinder passen auf uns auf als Schutzengel 🙇♀️ 🙇♂️ 😊«.

relatively frequently. Additionally, other emojis play a role, which can be categorized as emotional emojis and death-symbolic emojis. In this context, it was discussed to what extent there are grief-specific emojis used across platforms in general, as well as specifically in relation to mourning for deceased children. Emotional emojis include emojis such as the ❤️ or 🤔, as well as various sad faces that express sadness and compassion. These emojis can be considered grief-specific, regardless of the specific topic or platform. Among the death-symbolic emojis, three emojis are particularly relevant in the context of communication about angel babies and the death of children in general: 🙏, 🙌, and 🥲. These emojis and their functions in communication were analyzed, and it was observed that the 🙏 emoji is rarely used in the sense of praying. Furthermore, it was found that death-symbolic emojis and religious emojis play a minor role in the context of digital mourning for angel babies. Although they occur occasionally, mourning communication primarily focuses on emojis that express grief and compassion. Furthermore, using various examples, the relations between text and emojis in multimodal communication were examined, particularly in terms of their (partial) redundancy or complementarity.

In future studies, a more detailed analysis of the use of different star emojis could be conducted. Building upon the insights from sections 4 and 5, it would also be interesting to further investigate the 🦋 (Butterfly), 🌈, and the various flower emojis. Exploring platform-specific differences in the context of digital mourning for angel babies would be valuable as well. Additionally, it would be intriguing to examine cultural variations, particularly between German and English, as emojis are culturally influenced symbols. In particular, the different terminologies used for children who have died shortly before, during, or after birth, as well as the concepts underlying the terms »Sternenkind« and »angel baby«, are likely to also influence the use of emojis.

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Digital Stickers in Japanese LINE Communication

Abstract

This study examines the usage of digital stickers in Japanese LINE communication by analyzing 764 cases in authentic data. Digital stickers are often described as emojis, just larger in size. I argue, however, that stickers differ from emojis in that they are more expressive and fulfill more functions as a result of their ability to perform a distinct speech act on their own, such as intensifying a text message, softening a request, or serving as decoration to indicate one's positive attitude. Additionally, the analysis of sticker usage among university students brought to light that the majority of stickers are sent independently, i.e., without an accompanying text message, thus revealing a way of communicating visually without words. Moreover, further examination of textual features and gender differences showed that female students used more animal stickers than male students, that men used fewer stickers with an integrated text when communicating with women than with other men, and that women used fewer criticizing stickers than men. Overall, the analysis of the stickers actually employed indicates that sticker usage combines many cultural features that are closely connected to the Japanese way of communicating.

Introduction

LINE is a popular Japanese messaging application for smartphones and not only includes common emoticons like *kaomoji* and emojis, but >stickers< (*sutanpu*, スタンプ), which provide users with a great variety of visual stimuli. Stickers are larger than common emojis and have more stylistic variation. Wang (2016) describes them as more expressive than traditional emoticons like *kaomoji* and emojis. This is one of the reasons why they have become so popular in Japan (cf. NISHIKAWA/

NAKAMURA 2015). The Korean instant messaging service known as LINE started to include stickers in Japan in 2011 when its internet-based application was first launched there. By 2013, LINE had expanded to become Japan's biggest social network. Its users worldwide sent approximately 2.4 billion stickers a day in 2015 (cf. SHU 2015). Moreover, LINE had the largest number of active users per month in Japan.^[1]

LINE features a sticker shop^[2] that offers stickers depicting original characters created by LINE developers as well as other well-known characters from manga, anime, and computer games. Stickers are available as free downloads or for a small fee. New sets of stickers are released each week by LINE, but it is also possible to create and sell your own virtual LINE stickers. As Kato (2017) points out, the popularity of LINE is mainly due to the sticker function it provides. Because Japanese stickers have gained such an important status in communication via LINE, it is necessary to investigate their linguistic role in a broader way. In order to meet this desideratum, this study seeks to answer the following research questions: What kind of stickers do LINE users actually employ and in what kinds of situations? What are the characteristics of a typical sticker, especially in contrast to *kaomoji* and emojis? A small-scale corpus of actual LINE communication that includes stickers provided the source material for this study.

1. Research on different visual supplements in online communication

The term ›emoticon‹ is often used as a generic term for different variants of visual supplements to online communication, but several terms are used for it in Japan that mean different things: *kaomoji* (顔文字), *emoji* (絵文字), *ekigō* (絵記号, graphical symbols) and *sutanpu* (スタンプ, stickers). Figure 1 shows an example of each of these visual supplements.^[3]

Since research on stickers is based on earlier work about simpler visual supplements, I will include a short overview of all four elements mentioned above, first of all. This is to lay the foundation for the subsequent analysis of the collected data.

1 Cf. <https://gaiax-socialmedialab.jp/post-30833/> [accessed May 30, 2023].

2 Cf. <https://store.line.me/stickershop/> [accessed May 30, 2023].

3 Herring and Dianas (2017) use the term ›graphicon‹, which includes GIFs, images, and videos.

<i>kaomoji</i> (顔文字)	emoji (絵文字)	graphical symbol (<i>ekigō</i> , 絵記号)	sticker (<i>sutanpu</i> , スタンプ)
(^o^)	😊	♪	

Figure 1: Visual supplements

1.1 Research on kaomoji

Facial images mainly produced using ASCII punctuation marks are called *kaomoji*.⁴ *Kao* is the Japanese word for >face< and *moji* means >letter< or >character<. These images are combinations of characters and depict upright faces, unlike the traditional Western >smiley<, which is similarly made of multiple punctuation characters but oriented sideways. In most cases, *kaomoji* are enclosed in brackets to create the outline of a face. Since *kaomoji* are text-based, they can be created easily by exchanging, omitting, or adding some graphical symbols. It is also possible to omit the brackets of a *kaomoji*. *Kaomoji* are used in emails, blogs, and other social media. Many lists of them are available on the internet to help unfamiliar users find the appropriate *kaomoji* for a particular situation.⁵ In comparison, Western emoticons (excluding emojis) are much less complex – the most popular emoticon in America is the smiley face :), which is made up of two punctuation characters (cf. OLESZIEWICZ et al. 2017).

Research on emoticons follows various approaches. Some researchers have analyzed them in conjunction with the intentions of emoticon senders (cf., e.g., GARRISON et al. 2011; AMAGHLOBELI 2012; KAYE et al. 2016; CHEN/SIU 2017). Others have concentrated on interpretations by the emoticons' recipients (cf., e.g., WALTHER/ADDARIO 2001; ARAKAWA/SUZUKI 2004; LO 2008; TAGUCHI 2014; TAKAHASHI et al. 2014; DUAN et al. 2018). Further research on emoticons has focused on their functions. However, many researchers have investigated their playfulness (cf., e.g., MIYAKE 2002; HARADA 2004; HSIEH/TSEN 2017). In contrast, Huang, Yen, and Zhang (2008) stress the facilitation of information richness. Some researchers regard emoticons as paralinguistic devices and as substitutions for nonverbal cues (cf. KIESLER et al. 1984; MARCOCCIA 2000; MIYAKA 2007; DUAN et al. 2018). Others argue that emoticons have an additional function as structural markers (cf. AMAGHLOBELI 2012). Dresner and Herring (2010: 250) stress that such

4 Kishimoto (2017) calls them >face marks< (*fēsu māku*).

5 Cf., for instance, <http://kaomojiya.com> [accessed May 30, 2023].

structural markers should be »understood in linguistic, rather than extralinguistic, terms«. Thus, Skovholt, Gronning, and Kankaanranta (2014) differentiate three main functions: emoticons (i) serve to mark a positive attitude, (ii) signal the usage of jokes and irony, and (iii) serve as hedges.

Research on gender-related issues has mostly found that women use more emoticons than men (cf. WITMER/KATZMAN 1997; HERRING 2003; BARON 2004; TOSSELL et al. 2012; OLESZIEWICZ et al. 2017). One exception to this rule is in the case of teenage emoticon usage in weblogs; Huffaker and Calvert (2005) reported more frequent use by boys than girls. Moreover, Tossell et al. (2012) found that men used a more diverse range of emoticons than women. Conversely, Fullwood, Orchard, and Floyd (2013) observed a general convergence of emoticon usage towards a female style of expression. According to Wolf (2000), however, gender differences appear in the senders' purpose: women use emoticons to indicate humor, while men tend to use them to express sarcasm. Baron and Campbell (2012) argue that cultural differences often outweigh gender differences; their study involved them comparing mobile phone use by university students in Sweden, the U.S., Italy, Japan, and South Korea. Kavanagh (2016) also discusses cultural differences between American and Japanese users and shows that Japanese users employ emoticons more as positive politeness strategies than American users do.

1.2 Research on emojis

Graphically rendered pictograms are called emojis. Emojis were first used in Japanese mobile phones in the late 1990s (cf. DANESI 2017: 2). Since then, they have become increasingly popular worldwide, which is why well over 1,000 emojis have been incorporated into Unicode over the years. Unlike *kaomoji*, emojis are single characters rather than a composite of multiple characters. Each emoji is a little picture, in fact, as the meaning of the Japanese term indicates: >e< (絵) means >picture< and >moji< (文字) means >letter< or >character<, as in *kaomoji* above. As they become more widely used, emojis are gradually pushing out *kaomoji*. In areas of the internet where emojis are not yet integrated, however, *kaomoji* continue to be used frequently, as on the famous Japanese textboard 2channel, for example.⁶ Sugiyama (2015) highlights two functions of emoji use among Japanese teens: Emojis stabilize the communication mood of their social interactions and help to establish and fashion their >aesthetic self<. In contrast to this positive view, Rodrigues et al. (2017) contend that emojis use does not always have positive effects on romantic partners: Usage of emojis in serious relationship issues can have a detrimental effect and may lead to an escalation of the problem.

6 Cf. <http://2ch.sc/> [accessed May 30, 2023].

Marengo, Giannotta, and Settanni (2017) link emoji usage to personality traits, namely emotional stability, extraversion, and agreeableness. Lu et al. (2016) investigated cultural differences and analyzed emoji usage in nine different countries, producing the result that French messages contain the highest proportion of emojis and that French users tend to use more emojis that fall into the category of ›heart-related‹, while other countries prefer emojis related to faces.

The size of emojis usually corresponds to the font size of the written text, but in LINE, if a message is only composed of one emoji, it is automatically enlarged (cf. fig. 2). In this case, it is hard to distinguish emojis from stickers if one is not familiar with the respective lists.

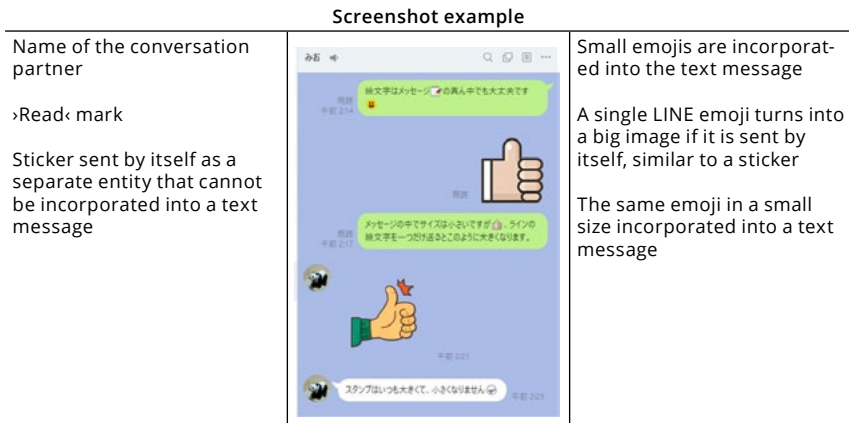


Figure 2: A screenshot example showing an emoji and a sticker

1.3 Research on graphical symbols

Such symbols are similar to emojis in the sense that they are pictograms that cannot be composed of internal ASCII elements like *kaomoji*. There has been less research on symbols than on *kaomoji* and emojis so far, but in an earlier publication (cf. OBERWINKLER 2006: 250), I analyzed a Japanese text corpus of 160 mails from Japanese ›mail magazines‹, as they are known, and identified 1,429 tokens consisting of three types of graphical symbols: a white asterisk ☆, a black asterisk ★, and a note of music ♪, the white asterisk being the most commonly used (49.5%), followed by the black asterisk (35.1%), and finally the music note (15.4%). Nishimura (2015: 109) also addresses the use of other non-linguistic symbols, like ♥ and ♂. Like *kaomoji*, the use of ASCII graphical symbols has lessened since sets of emojis have been available on smartphones, as these provide so many graphical

symbols (even in various colors, like the heart symbol). This is why many Japanese no longer differentiate between graphical symbols and emojis.

1.4 Research on stickers (*sutanpu*)

As mentioned earlier, stickers are much bigger than other visual supplements (cf. fig. 1). Stickers can only be sent alone, too, i.e., as separate entities (like a GIF or JPEG image) and cannot be sent together with a typed text message. Hence, stickers cannot be inserted into a sentence in a text message (which is possible with emojis). LINE provides a small set of stickers for free, but a much greater variety of them are available for purchase or free of charge under certain conditions, like adding the company to one's friends list and receiving advertising, answering a questionnaire, or registering with a particular internet portal first. A sticker earned this way is generally available for 180 days, after which it cannot be used any more and new stickers have to be downloaded instead. Stickers that have been paid for remain available, though (a normal set of stickers cost 240 Yen in May 2023). On the one hand, communication via LINE is described as fast, since messages are often short and easy to read and write (they can contain anything between one and ten characters; cf. KUSUI 2017: 294). On the other hand, LINE users have the opportunity to put breaks in between individual messages and continue the stream of conversation later (after several hours or even a whole night) (cf. NISHIKAWA/NAKAMURA 2015: 49).

One major reason for quick exchanges of messages is the appearance of the ›Read‹ mark (*kidoku*) after a message has been viewed, as Kusui points out (2017: 294). Many researchers have reported stress and trouble caused by this mark, however (cf. ISHIZAKI et al. 2015; SAKAI/SHIOTA 2015; TANEMURA 2015). LINE communication can take place quickly and easily just by sending a sticker without a text message. According to Wang (2016: 461), »the combination of text and stickers may convey the current mood of the message sender more clearly«. Porn-tipa (2015: 112) came to a similar conclusion for Japanese and Thai students who were participating in LINE communication role-play, namely, turning down an invitation to watch a movie together: The Thai students used single-sticker communication more often than the Japanese participants, who combined stickers with text messages more often. Suda et al. (2016) attempted to classify stickers by their degree of ambiguity. According to their analysis, 57% of the stickers had a clearly understandable content, while 24% were ambiguous and 19% did not have any communicative function at all. Okamoto (2016: 228) distinguishes stickers matching facial expressions, gestures, and emotional expressions, but does not provide any information on quantities. Kato (2017) analyzed differences caused by gender and reported that text messages used in conjunction with stickers in LINE communication were most often sent by women rather than men; the latter

wrote to their friends rather than members of their family, their romantic partners, or seniors.

Research on the functions of stickers – especially in comparison to the other visual supplements described above – is still in its infancy, and published results are not consistent. Wang (2016: 471) mentions that »stickers [...] may serve the same function as the emoticons used in text-based CMC, which can compensate for the facial mimics and gestures that would otherwise be hard to express in writing and that support verbal communication«. But Nishikawa and Nakamura (2015: 54) argue, to the contrary, that conventional emoticons function as intensifiers of the verbal context, while stickers help to clarify emotional expressions and to avert misunderstandings of the expressed emotions. Kato (2017: 32) takes the view that stickers are similar to *kaomoji* and emojis in that they all express emotions, but in the case of stickers the emotions are more complex and more complicated than in *kaomoji* and emojis. The present research aims to shed more light on these questions and to clarify the functions of stickers: What specific role can stickers fulfill?

2. The screenshot corpus

To gain an insight into the actual usage of LINE communication with stickers, I collected and analyzed a small-scale corpus of 505 screenshots showing 764 stickers. The screenshots were provided by 140 university students at the three big universities in Kyoto (Doshisha University, Ritsumeikan University, and Kansai Gaidai University) in September and October 2017. I asked the students to send me screenshots of three of their latest conversations in which they had used stickers since it was not technically possible to copy individual parts of a LINE chat and forward it to another person at the time. Screenshots were the only way to document sticker usage in their natural environment in a conversation. Additionally, I asked the students to provide me with some ethnographic information about the sender and recipient of the stickers along with the screenshots, namely, their age, gender, occupation or subject of study, and the relationship between the sender and recipient. This information was incomplete or ambiguous in some cases, so not all the collected stickers could be evaluated for gender comparison, for example. Apart from these unclear cases, each collected sticker was categorized in terms of the senders' and recipients' gender. The clear cases revealed the following situation: The vast majority of stickers (511 or 72 %) were sent by women, while 198 stickers were sent by men (28 %). From a gender point of view, 338 stickers were sent by women to women, 125 stickers were sent by men to men, 100 stickers were sent by women to men, and 56 stickers were sent by men to women. When I analyzed the gender situation, I only took cases that were clear into account.

3. Analysis and discussion

3.1 Sticker motifs

The images presented by the stickers were categorized into three groups: (a) human motifs, (b) animal motifs, and (c) any other figures. The last category included fantasy (manga) characters with non-human body features, food, and other things like vehicles or flowers. However, even things like food and flowers tend to be depicted anthropomorphically – with faces and sometimes with hands and legs as well, which makes them different from emoji figures, which depict things in the simplest and clearest way possible.

Animal motifs were sent most often (64.5%). This result can be linked to the previous finding that cuteness is important for stickers (cf. OBERWINKLER / OIE 2022). Most of the animal pictures that are used for the stickers look cuter than their human counterparts. The women sent more animals than the men did, and they tended to do so especially if the recipient was a man (76.0%; cf. fig. 3). Although cuteness is a positive concept regardless of gender, women are even more active in using cute things in Japan. This may be the reason why they send more animal stickers than men do.

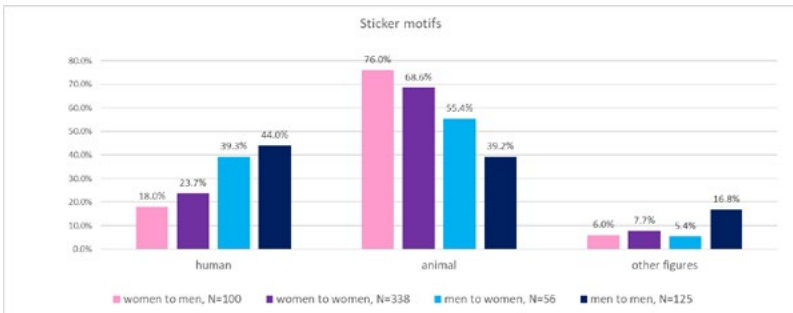


Figure 3: Sticker motifs

83.9% of the sticker images only show one animal, including a human or another figure as well. The animals in the corpus that were sent most frequently were rabbits (24.7%), followed by bears (19.3%), cats (15.6%), panda bears (8.5%), dogs (6.9%), birds (5.3%), and seals (3.7%). Many of the animals look very similar to each other, so familiarity with the sets of stickers provided by different companies is necessary for users to be able to recognize the different types of animals (which are often not intuitively recognizable to people outside the Japanese cultural sphere). According to one of the students who provided screenshots, it is not particularly important to know what kind of animal the sticker represents;

what matters more is that the stickers look cute and convey a positive vibe. This statement is supported by the fact that some animals are presented in costumes or even disguises, making it even more difficult to discern what kind of animal the sticker shows (cf. fig. 4, especially the last example).



Figure 4: Examples of animal stickers

3.2 Stickers with integrated texts

As Paul Duncum has said (2004: 252), »visual culture isn't just visual« – text is frequently an integral part of visual communication, too. This is also true for the vast majority of the stickers in my corpus, namely 75.1%, as they share the feature of integrated text. Sometimes the integrated sticker text is packed in speech bubbles, but most of the time it is written without them, i.e. without any limiting ›frame‹. The reason for the high percentage of stickers containing texts is that they are a means of avoiding ambiguity and possible misinterpretation. In my study, men frequently sent women stickers with integrated texts (83.9%) but did not do so quite as often when they wrote to other men (60.8%; cf. fig. 5). Conversely, the opposite applies to stickers without any texts: These were not used by men very often when they wrote to women (16.1%), but the usage more than doubled when men wrote to other men (39.2%). In the collected LINE data, men strove to prevent misunderstandings and tended to use easily comprehensible stickers with integrated texts in conversations with women.

7 <https://store.line.me/stickershop/product/1518300/ja> [accessed May 30, 2023].

8 <https://store.line.me/stickershop/product/1434023/ja> [accessed May 30, 2023].

9 <https://store.line.me/stickershop/product/1759964/ja> [accessed May 30, 2023].

10 <https://store.line.me/stickershop/product/1143809/ja> [accessed May 30, 2023].

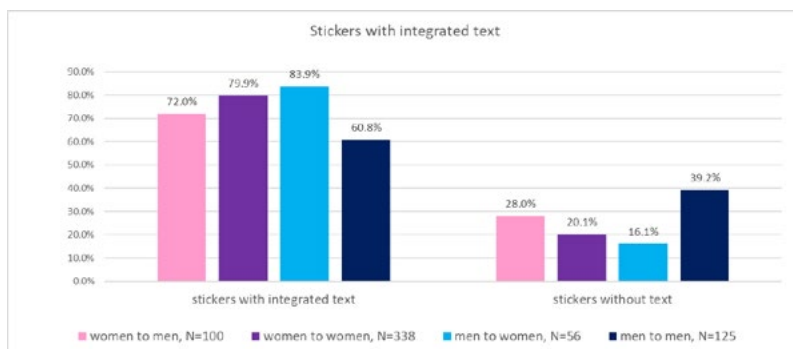


Figure 5: Stickers with integrated texts

In the collected data analyzed in this study, all the writing systems used in Japan were found in stickers integrating texts: kanji, hiragana, katakana, and Latin letters. The statistical distribution of the usage of the respective systems is shown in figure 6.

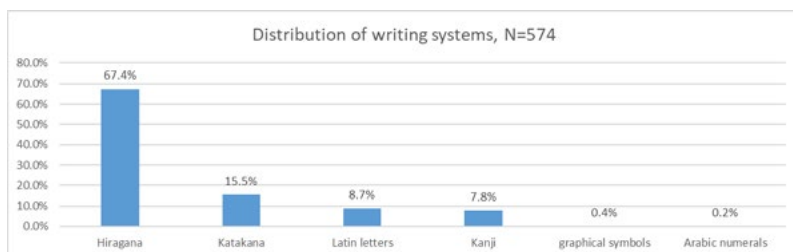


Figure 6: Distribution of the writing systems used for the texts in stickers

Hiragana was used most often in the collected data (67.4%). Katakana, in contrast, was only used in 15.5% of the stickers. The percentage of Latin letters (8.7%) was slightly higher than that of kanji (7.8%). For good readability, a kanji–kana ratio of 30% is recommended for average educated adult Japanese readers.¹¹⁾ However, since stickers that integrate texts do not have to convey fact-rich content, it makes sense to write them with fewer kanji and more hiragana characters. The high percentage of Latin letters can partly be explained by the fact that the screenshot providers were university students with a keen interest in foreign languages. Even so, the use of Latin letters was above average. These letters seem to fit the requirements of a sticker with a simple message that is clear and precise,

11 <https://科研費.com/kanji-kana-ratio> [accessed May 30, 2023].

such as »OK« (the most frequent term with 17 instances and »Okay« with three instances) or »Thank you« (four instances). A list of the words used most is provided in figures 7 and 8:

Types	Tokens
OK	17
Happy Birthday	4
Thank you	4
Okay	3

Figure 7: Words in Latin letters often used in texts in stickers

Types	Tokens	Types	Tokens	Types	Tokens
›thank you‹	37	›I understand‹	34	›bowing‹	22
ありがとう	24	了解	7	ぺこり	12
ありがとうございます	4	りよーかい	7	ぺコリ	6
ありがとうー	2	りよ	7	ぺコー	1
あざ〜っす	2	りよ〜かい	6	ぺコッ	1
アリガトウ	1	了解です	3	ぺコ	1
ありがとうございますーす	1	了解しました	1	ぺこっ	1
ありがたい	1	りよーかいです	1		
感謝です	1	りようかいです	1		
感謝	1	りようかい	1		

Figure 8: Japanese expressions used most often in texts in stickers

From a statistical point of view, graphical symbols rarely appear in sticker texts, but this is an interesting phenomenon that shows the integration of one visual supplement into another. The heart symbol was used most frequently (in eight instances), as figure 9 shows:

Types	Tokens
♡	8
♪	2
♪	1
○	1
🌸	1

Figure 9: Graphical symbols used in texts in stickers

Stickers with integrated texts can include whole sentences (13.9%), but short comments that consist of one word occur much more often (one-word comments: 72.8%; two-word comments: 13.9%). The lexical analysis of the sticker texts shows a high incidence of onomatopoeic expressions (27.9%). The one used most

frequently in the data is *»pekoru«* (with 22 instances in various writing styles), which refers to bowing (22 instances in various writing styles). In Japanese culture, bowing is multi-functional: It is used for thanking, requesting, apologizing, and greeting people. Due to its multi-functional usage, it is often mentioned in cross-cultural studies as a specifically Japanese behavior (cf. DE MENTE 2015: 37ff.). The findings of this analysis of stickers with integrated texts reveal the importance of bowing humbly even in Japan’s digital culture.

3.3 Stickers’ functions

The stickers collected for this study performed various speech acts. The ten most frequent ones are shown in figure 10:



Figure 10: Stickers’ functions

In this study, broad categorizations of speech acts were used for the analysis. Further research should undertake a more detailed analysis with a more defined categorization of speech acts in conjunction with the conversational function of the stickers. Nonetheless, the findings in this study already show that stickers are not only used to clarify emotional expressions and avert misunderstandings, as stated by Nishikawa and Nakamura (2015: 54). Nor do stickers only serve to compensate for facial mimicry and gestures, as Wang postulates (2016: 471). Rather, the analysis of the data in this study confirms Kato’s (2017: 32) view that stickers are more complex than *kaomoji* and emojis. It contradicts the claim that they all express emotions, however. As figure 10 shows, the analysis in my study concludes that stickers are most often used for confirmation (20.5%), which does not necessarily involve emotions. As shown in a previous study of mine (cf. OBERWINKLER/OIE 2022), LINE users send stickers because it is easier and faster to send them than to type a text message. A suggestion can simply be confirmed by sending a sticker saying *»OK«* without a preceding or following text message (cf. fig. 11). A sticker can therefore fulfill the function of performing a speech act that the sender wants to realize.

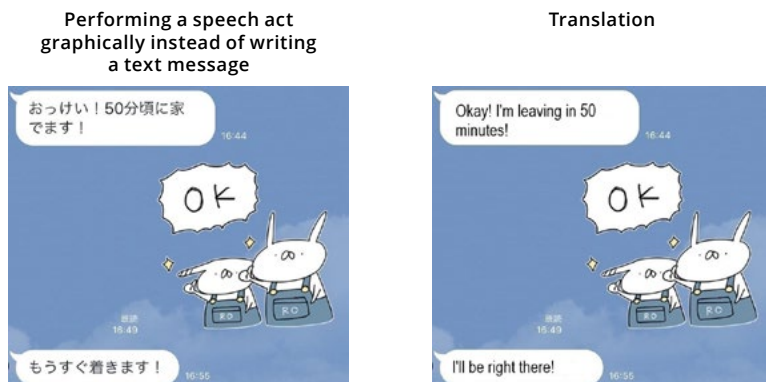


Figure 11: Performing a speech act with a sticker instead of writing a text message

Most of the stickers in this study were sent independently without an accompanying text message (61.1%; cf. fig. 12). In these cases, the stickers' function was to convey important information and not just play the role of a visual supplement. This is an important difference compared to the function of *kaomoji* and emojis.

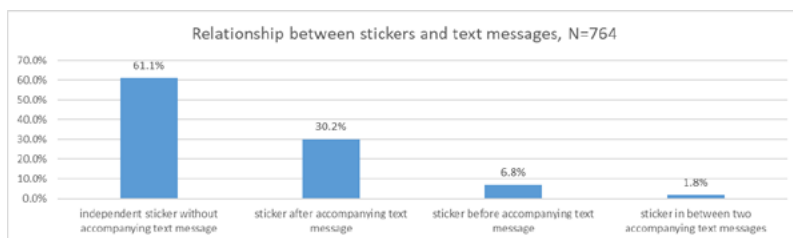


Figure 12: The relationship between stickers and text messages

Although emojis such as the thumbs-up image can be used alone without any accompanying text, this generally only occurs in situations where it is quite clear what is being agreed to. There does not seem to be any difference between the visual supplements in such cases. Nevertheless, the situation is quite different in more complex contexts: If the sender not only wishes to agree to a clearly stated fact or to confirm it but also wants to encourage their conversation partner, then a single emoji without any accompanying text would be inadequate. Stickers can easily fulfill this task, though, depending on the depicted image. Stickers with integrated texts are especially convenient for this purpose. For instance, one of the collected screenshots is a message from an unconfident student indicating that he has to present a paper in class that day (cf. fig. 13). His friend's response

was to send him a single sticker showing a colorful bird beaming with confidence and shouting »Fight!!«. Thus, a single sticker can express the sender’s empathy and indicate support and encouragement:

Independent sticker without an accompanying text message: a way of expressing empathy and encouragement

Translation



Figure 13: A single encouraging sticker without an accompanying text message

The advantage of stickers is particularly evident when more intense emotions are associated with the conversation: a simple ›thank you‹ could be expressed by a single heart emoji, for example. This might be a conceivable option for familiar conversation partners regarding a small favor. However, the more closely the gratitude is connected with deeper emotions, the less likely it is for a single emoji to be used; that would not be enough. A sticker, on the other hand, takes up more space due to its size, shows more details, and can thus express deeper feelings of gratitude even if it is sent without a message to explain it. Although the Japanese communication style is often considered minimalistic according to the high-context theory (cf. HALL 1976), it is also claimed that politeness plays an important role in it, especially when expressing gratitude (cf. COULMAS 1981). In a digital context, politeness is expressed by choosing an appropriate sticker for one’s conversation partner. Therefore, it seems that a refined sticker fits Japanese communication practices better than a plain emoji without any text.

In one example from the corpus, a student thanked someone for a compliment the student was very happy to receive (cf. fig. 14): The single sticker shows a cat with wings floating happily on cloud nine. Above the cat’s head, it says »Thank you«. The student can express several feelings at once this way, such as happiness and gratitude, which would not be as easy if a single emoji were used, as the message would not be as clear.

Independent sticker without an accompanying text message: expressing happiness and gratitude

Translation



Figure 14: An independent sticker without an accompanying text message

The above statement also applies to apologies. A single emoji can hardly convey a sincere and humble apology without an accompanying text, because an explicit expression of the established catchphrases is expected in Japanese communication. A sticker, on the other hand, is more effective in conveying a sincere apology due to the detail in the image and the ability to anchor text in it. Several examples in the corpus demonstrate this usage. It can therefore be argued that single uses of emojis without any further text may well be conceivable, but their effectiveness is markedly limited compared to stickers. The latter can be used in a much wider range of situations without an accompanying text message and can convey several emotions at the same time. This is a specific feature of them.

The second most frequent usage of stickers in this study is for performing greetings (13.1%), as can be seen in figure 10. Like the examples above, greetings can also be performed by using a single sticker. However, the data analyzed in this study showed many instances of combining greeting stickers with a text message fulfilling the same speech act (cf. fig. 15).

Serving as decoration to indicate a positive attitude: saying goodbye



Translation



Figure 15: Serving as decoration to indicate a positive attitude

In this combination, the sticker is a decoration that serves to indicate a positive attitude (cf. SKOVHOLT et al. 2014: 788).¹²

The third most frequent use of stickers in this study is in the speech act of thanking someone (11.4%; cf. fig. 10). Combinations of stickers with text messages of the same content could also be observed in this group. In this case, the sticker intensifies the text message and thus serves as emphasis (cf. fig. 16).

Acting as an intensifier by repeating a preceding text message



Translation

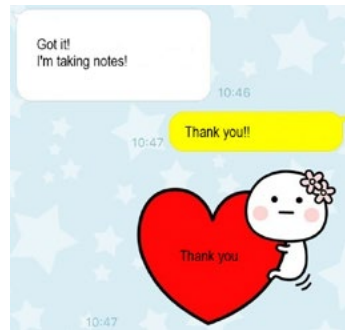


Figure 16: Acting as an intensifier by repeating a preceding text message in an appropriate image (here a heart to indicate heartfelt thanks)

12 Skovholt, Gronning, and Kankaanranta (2014) categorize the function of emoticons that follow greetings as strengtheners of expressive speech acts, but emoticons that follow signatures as markers of a positive attitude.

The opposite function is seen in the use of stickers in requests (5.9%; cf. fig. 10): The stickers serve as softeners showing a new manifestation of politeness, as seen above in the case of the onomatopoeic term for bowing, *pekori*. *Pekori* stickers are able to soften the illocutionary force of a request (cf. fig. 17). Skovholt, Gronning, and Kankaanranta (2014: 789) explain that emoticons »serve to modify the propositional content of the utterance and functions as a softening hedge«. This is similar in sticker usage.

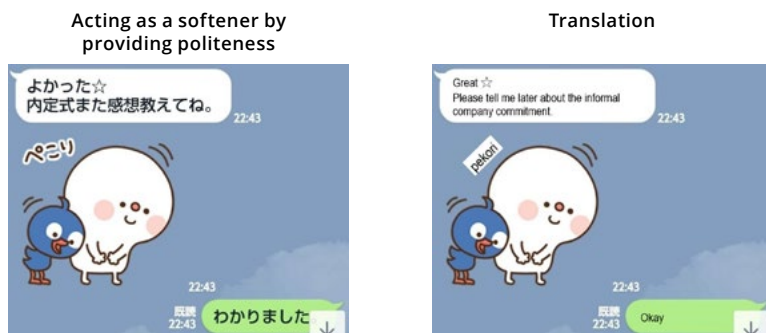
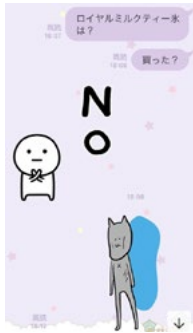


Figure 17: Acting as a softener by providing politeness

Stickers that reveal criticism reached an unexpectedly high percentage (9.6%; cf. fig. 10). The ones in this group were often sent without an accompanying text message and performed the entire speech act, as seen in the case of confirmations. They only had a contradictory meaning in relation to the accompanying text message in a small number of cases, thus functioning as a means of fulfilling a face-threatening act and being a way to reveal covert emotions (cf. fig. 18).

Gender differences are very prominent in the use of critical stickers, as figure 19 shows; it indicates that female students sent fewer criticizing stickers to other women (5.0%), while male students sent the most to other men (20.8%).

Performing a face-threatening act



Translation

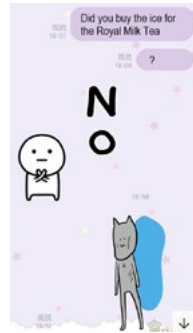


Figure 18: Performing a face-threatening act

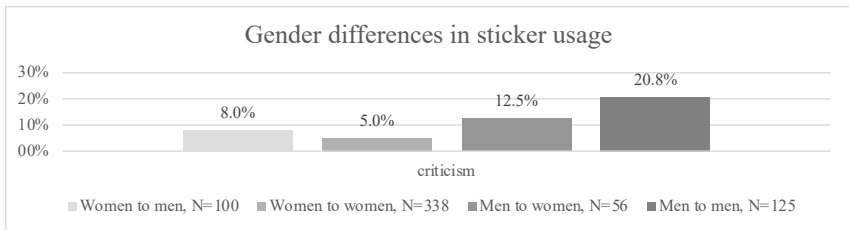


Figure 19: Gender differences in sticker usage expressing criticism

These gender differences can also be explained by cultural inclinations. As Nakamura (2014: 378) demonstrates, there are precise societal expectations regarding women’s language in Japan: »the polite, indirect, and soft ways of speaking are established as normative ways of expressing the speaker’s femininity«, she says. In my own data, it appears that women follow these expectations in their use of language, even in digital communication via a messenger. In terms of sticker use, the majority of female students adhered to the polite and courteous language style that conforms to normative expectations, and refrained from using stickers that represented critical statements. Herring (2003: 207) has stated that »[p]oliteness is one common means through which gender is cued in asynchronous CMC. Women are more likely to thank, appreciate, and apologize«. Gender differences in communicative style may possibly be related to social expectations and norms in Japanese society: Women are expected to be more polite and indirect in their communication, while men are not subject to these normative expectations to the same extent, so it is easier – and more natural – for them to express criticism more openly, partly through sticker use.

4. Conclusion

Previous research (cf. OBERWINKLER/OIE 2022) has shown that in comparison to *kaomoji* and emojis, stickers are more often used at the end of a conversation and/or when it is bothersome to type a sentence. Regardless of the fact that a huge number of stickers are provided in LINE and the effort needed to pick the right one is considerable, many Japanese LINE users find it easier, faster, and more convenient to send a sticker than to type a text message. Furthermore, because stickers are considered cuter than *kaomoji* or emojis, I maintain that LINE users enjoy looking through them, choosing one, and sending it to a recipient (cf. OBERWINKLER/OIE 2022 again).

In the present study, the analysis of 764 stickers in actual LINE conversations revealed some interesting gender-related differences in the choice of stickers. Women tended to choose more stickers with animal motifs and more stickers with integrated texts than men did. Even though it is possible to integrate a complicated sentence into a sticker's design, most of the stickers in my dataset only included simple text messages like »OK« or »understood« (*ryōkai*). Various functions of the stickers could be identified according to the situation in which they were used and whether the sticker was sent without an accompanying text message or along with one beforehand or afterward. Stickers can perform a speech act independently instead of a text message, or (albeit rarely) even contradict a preceding or an ensuing text message. Even if they are sent without an accompanying text, they can convey multiple emotions at the same time. They can act as intensifiers in conjunction with a text message expressing the same content or as softeners in conjunction with a text message expressing a request by conforming to the standards of expected politeness. Stickers can also serve as pure decorations indicating a positive attitude. Thus, they are more expressive than *kaomoji* or emojis and have a broader variety of functions. The complexity of Japanese stickers shows a new dimension of CMC. In conclusion, digital LINE stickers reflect traditional patterns of the Japanese style of communication and at the same time show aspects of a new visual way of communicating.

Suggestions for further research

This study analyses sticker usage among male and female university students in Kyoto. Future studies should not just investigate gender aspects but generational characteristics as well, since the Japanese vernacular differs substantially for each generation. Furthermore, research on different sticker use due to regional variations (e.g., in Kyoto as opposed to Tokyo) and cross-cultural comparison may also lead to some interesting insights and to a better understanding of this complex tool for visualization in Japan's digital world.

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Marcel Lemmes

»I'm so Pogged I've Got Pog-Juice Seeping out of My Eyes!«

The Affective and Communal Language of Emoji on Twitch
and Discord

Abstract

The present article explores the affective and communal dimensions of emoji as semiotic resources in digital communication. From a media studies perspective, the author analyzes the usage of emoji on the live streaming platform Twitch and the community chat platform Discord. In exploring the specific affordances these media platforms provide, a comprehensive framework for examining the usage of emoji within these and related contexts is established. The framework takes into consideration emoji's pictorial qualities, their role as signs, and their intersemiotic embeddedness within digital platforms. Additionally, the article emphasizes the importance of cultural and contextual knowledge in understanding emoji usage. By integrating these elements, the article aims to shed light on the multifaceted nature of emoji and their significance in fostering affective and communal interactions within online communities. It also points toward a broader transdisciplinary perspective that could further enrich an understanding of the social/communal functions of emoji, such as research on internet memes and fandom.

Introduction^[1]

Visual glyphs have been an integral part of digital communication for almost thirty years and are, by now, heavily ingrained into everyday messaging with the advent of smartphones in the 2010s as so-called emoji.^[2] Unlike text proper, these kinds of glyphs have a pictorial quality, opening them up to an interpretative vagueness that can only partially be alleviated by the multimodal arrangements they are embedded in, i.e., typographical co- and context in the most literal sense. The meaning of visual glyphs is more so dependent on broader contexts; their academic analysis is, therefore, reliant on taking social, communal, cultural, and especially medial factors into account. This article tries to offer insight into how such a context-dependent understanding can be documented by focusing on two particular digital platforms where communication with glyphs occurs regularly: Twitch and Discord. By providing a detailed explanation of how these platforms create a technological framework for using customized glyphs, how they manage the possibility of social interactions, and what other affordances for the communal language they offer, a foundation for a more detailed case study will be given. Firstly, however, a central terminological question must be discussed: what kinds of visual glyphs can we find in the area of digital communications? This issue can be approached from two different directions: What terms and differences are usually employed by regular users and participants? And how do we tailor-fit these into concepts that satisfy academic rigor?

Emoji, emoticons, and emotes – What's the difference, anyways?

While emoji are widely adopted nowadays, it is neither the first nor the only term for and phenomenon of visual glyphs as part of digital textual communication. In this section, a short overview of some of the most commonly used terms in the digital world will be given. While these short paragraphs will not necessarily offer all-encompassing definitions (which are hard to come by), they are intended to highlight different areas of distinction that will be of importance later on.

- 1 The author thanks Klaus Sachs-Hombach and Lukas R. A. Wilde for their support throughout the publication process. Special appreciation to Lukas for his helpful critical comments, which significantly improved the paper and helped me present my thoughts more concisely.
- 2 The title quote goes back to a live stream of the streamer »Northernlion« playing the game *Super Mario Maker 2*, describing the nature of comments made by his viewers on YouTube. The archived clip can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bRDK6JVyuos&t=1689s> [accessed May 10, 2023]

Emoji are considered digital pictograms or ideograms (cf., e.g., GIANNOULIS/WILDE 2020: 2). While we as consumers only get to see ›them‹ in their pictorial form, on a machine level they are referenced and created by, as well as actually composed of by specific lines of code. Although the ways these code macros are resolved as images vary slightly from device to device, the level of standardization of emoji is highly noteworthy. To ensure that emoji can be rendered on virtually every modern device, they have been implemented as part of the so-called »Unicode« which is managed by the Unicode Consortium, a non-profit organization that aims »to standardize [and] maintain [...] a standard character encoding that provides for an allocation for more than a million characters« (UNICODE CONSORTIUM 2021: n. pag.). In a very basic understanding, the Unicode standard can be thought of as a ›dictionary‹ between pictorial signs and textual typography legible by humans on the one hand and machine code in bits and bytes on the other. Being more ambitious in scope and direction, it allows for encompassing most if not all the world's living languages and can thus be considered an extension of the also widely known ASCII-Standard. To ensure cross-compatibility between platforms and software, most commercial companies rely on Unicode. Only some big vendors and manufacturers like Microsoft or Samsung implement additional emoji that only work in the respective vendor's digital ecosystem (yet, technologically, are handled in a similar matter to the Unicode ones). In this sense, the term »emoji« is – from the point of view of precise terminology – rather problematic. It invokes the notion of the ›official‹, mostly platform-agnostic emoji managed by the Unicode Consortium, yet it is also used to refer to other small pictures of faces and objects that are used together with regular text – not just by companies (like Discord, as we'll see later), but also by scholars alike (cf., e.g., DANESI 2017). This article thus understands the term in its broadest sense, otherwise referring specifically to »Unicode emoji«. As a general phenomenon,

[emoji] can (and do) replace words and phrases. Their main function seems to be that of providing nuances in meaning [...]. So, they are not completely substitutive of traditional written forms; rather, they reinforce, expand, and annotate the meaning of a written communication,

as Marcel Danesi (2017: 41) puts it. He continues: »The [linguistic] emoji code is a kind of visual alphabet code providing characters that can be used [...] (1) adjunctively within a written text; or (2) substitutively of such a text« (DANESI 2017: 36). Danesi also refers to three »generic features that define the emoji code« (DANESI 2017: 41): »representationality« (›the picture can stand for something‹), »interpretability« (›the picture can be meaningfully interpreted – even without any prior knowledge‹), and »contextualization« (›context affects the interpretation of the picture‹). This description loosely fits the definition of a sign after Charles S. Peirce, who considers those in the sense of a triadic relation between a

physical form (*representamen*), a real-world entity/phenomenon the sign carries a meaning about (*semiotic object*), and a context in which interpretation occurs (*interpretant*) (cf., e.g., NÖTH 2000: 62; ECO 1972: 76f.). For emoji as signs, at first glance one could assume that the relationship between the image (*representamen*) and that which the image ›shows‹ (*semiotic object*) is not entirely based on social convention as is the case with words, given that a visual similarity could be presumed. However, as, for example, Lukas R.A. Wilde (2021) has argued, this generalized intuitive assumption of referential meaning is flawed. While emoji certainly can be used as representations of ›that which they show‹ (or rather, in a more generalized and abstract way, ›all of that which they show‹ instead of a singular object), this visual ›immediacy‹ may also be employed to use them symbolically, i.e., ›standing for‹ something completely different. A prominent example of this is the usage of fruit and vegetable emoji for sexual organs; another is the way different hand gestures are perceived as either friendly or highly offensive in different cultural contexts – sometimes being unrecognizable to people of a certain culture. This vertical differentiation of meaning also has to be expanded by a horizontal dimension; the meaning of emoji may change over time within a given cultural context. An example of this would be the ›OK‹ hand gesture emoji which came to a secondary meaning of representing the letters ›WP‹ as an abbreviation for ›white power‹ – originally created as a hoax by users of the infamous image and messaging board 4Chan but eventually employed by real white supremacists in the USA. As we can see from just these few examples, the realm of non-iconic interpretation is of immediate concern when looking into the meaning-making of emoji. Section 5 below will outline these notions more thoroughly from a semiotic point of view.

What we nowadays consider as »emoji«, however, was not the first phenomenon of visual glyphs as part of digital textual communication. Their predecessors (not implying that they have been fully replaced by them), emoticons, are typographic approximations of (mostly) facial expressions. Using letters, punctuation marks, parentheses – i.e., typography that can be represented by the more simplistic ASCII-Standard – emoticons try to mimic certain emotions, objects, or actions, making them less nuanced and expressive than the visual glyphs that are an integral part of emoji. As they only rely on ASCII, emoticons can (or rather: technically could) be used/incorporated in some form or another on any digital device and platform with a screen to show text (e.g., early mobile phones). These Western-style emoticons, in turn, have been preceded in Japan by the so-called *kaomoji*, which additionally feature Japanese typography and usually focus more on the eyes of the represented facial expressions (cf., e.g., GIANNOULIS/WILDE 2020: 3).

A third term »emote«, which is also part of the title of this article, originated from online gaming practices. In a very similar manner to emoji, emotes

in online gaming could be evoked by typing a set of pre-defined code macros (which, of course, could differ from game to game) within the in-game chats. Typing a command like »/dance«, for example, would make the player's in-game avatar do dancing motions in the in-game world, to be seen and observed by other players. These kinds of emotes, which would be just loosely connected to the phenomenon that is contoured by emoji, are still present in modern online games, albeit mostly activated by keyboard/gamepad shortcuts or clickable buttons rather than by textual commands. However, at least with the advent of the live streaming platform Twitch, the term has been more widely used in the online gaming sphere to also refer to code macros that reference small graphics with expressive actions or faces to be incorporated into textual messages. Yet, in this sense, »emotes« refers to a set of pictograms that are bound to a certain digital ecosystem rather than being (mostly) platform-agnostic like Unicode emoji. In the present article, the term »emote« thus refers to a special set of emoji used only on Twitch. One could wonder why we should use the term »emote« instead of something like »Twitch emoji« for a more consistent terminology. There are three main reasons for doing so and thus keeping the category distinct: firstly, these special sets of emoji used by viewers and streamers on Twitch have always been referred to as »emotes« by users. They are perceived as a highly distinct phenomenon compared to the Unicode emoji – so much so that, in the very early days of Twitch (perhaps around 2011/12), users that employed Unicode emoji in their messages sometimes were mocked and ridiculed by other viewers or even auto-banned by streamers according to my own observation. Secondly, unlike emoji whose medial context consists of text-based communication, emotes are embedded in more complex dynamics of live video and -chatting. To keep up with the high speed of textual communication required in these live settings, substitutive emotes tend to be visually more complex and more specialized to the communicative needs of a given digital community. In the terms of Danesi (2017) mentioned earlier, they are less »interpretable« by outsiders and contextually more complex than Unicode emoji tend to be. Thirdly, they constitute a very different relationship between text and image. The Unicode for the smiling emoji ☺ »U+1F600« is not at all related to the visual glyph. Users need a special kind of emoji keyboard, a digital interface where they can click on/touch the likeness of the desired emoji, to insert them comfortably into their writing. Remembering and typing the different Unicodes is way too complicated for everyday use. On the other hand, a smiling face represented through an emoticon – as in :) – is literally typography and can be typed out on any keyboard easily. Emotes, in turn, function entirely differently. On Twitch, they are invoked by certain codewords that usually hints towards an intended meaning or usage. A commonly used emote in messages to express fun or laughter is »LUL« (cf. fig. 1), a spoonerism to the abbreviation »lol« standing for »laughing out loud«. Another poignant

example would be »BabyRage« (cf. figure 2), which is used to refer to child-like, uncalled-for anger. Table 1 summarizes all the differences that have been outlined in this section.



Figure 1: The Twitch emote »LUL«



Figure 2: The Twitch emote »babyrage

emoji	broad, generic term	pictures of faces/objects used in combination with/as a substitute for written language
Unicode emoji	(mostly) platform-agnostic	a special set of emoji managed by the Unicode Consortium
emoticon	platform-agnostic	simple approximations of facial expressions by means of typography
emote	platform-bound	here: custom emoji on Twitch

Figure 3: Differences between terms used in the present article

A short introduction to Twitch and Discord

Next, I would like to give a quick introduction and overview of the live streaming platform Twitch and the messaging and voice chat service Discord. While both have started with a primary focus on gaming and gaming communities, nowadays they have developed into important sites for communication and networking in a range of digital fan communities.^[3] By providing extensive tools for moderation and community management, both platforms offer a great amount of freedom for creating, maintaining, and transforming communal communication patterns. One of the most important tools for this purpose is the ability to integrate custom emoji which can be far more stylized as well as specialized and poignant in meaning accordingly – always tailored to the specific needs of their communities.

3 Their importance for non-gaming related community-building and communication soared even further throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

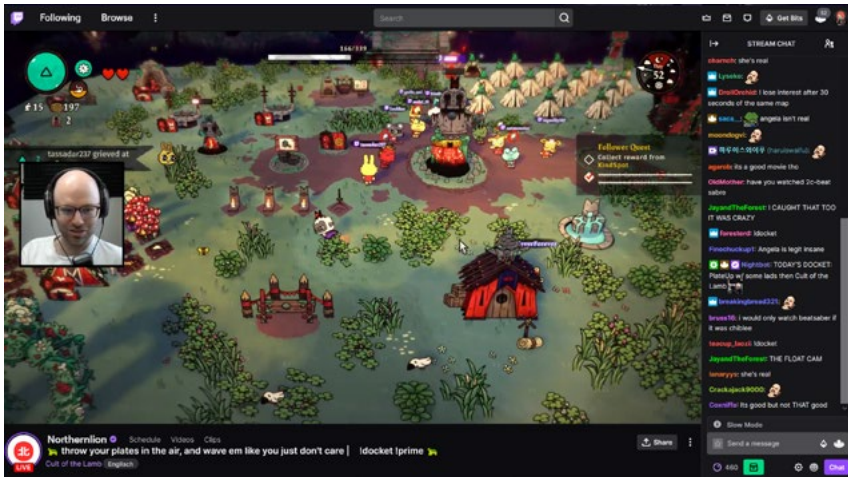


Figure 4: The interface of a typical Twitch live stream. The channel depicted is <https://www.twitch.tv/northernlion> [accessed May 10, 2023]

As a live streaming platform with chat functionality, Twitch's interface consists of two basic areas: the video area and the chat area (cf. fig. 3). The chat area is where emoji and emotes can be shared by viewers via messages. There is a set of global Twitch emotes as well as the standard Unicode emoji, available to all users of the platform alike. The chatting experience of users can also be enhanced by individualized (additional) custom emotes. Customized emotes must be activated by a streamer and can come through three different ways: either by means of the official Twitch partner program or by using one of two (currently available and most popular) third-party add-ons, BetterTwitchTV^[4] and FrankerFaceZ^[5]. Twitch Partner emotes can be submitted (both, their text code and image) by so-called Twitch Partners, i.e., live streamers who reach a certain size of audience and apply for this status, turning them eligible to make money from advertising on their live streams and via subscriptions by viewers. After a reviewing process by Twitch for undesired imagery, these emotes are then available for all ongoing subscribers of the live streamer's channel who can use them on *every* Twitch live stream. The process for third-party emotes is more complicated yet does not require any payment or audience size at all. A streamer can connect their channel with either (or both) a BetterTwitchTV account and a FrankerFaceZ account. On the respective websites, they can then again either choose from a vast pool

4 Official website: <https://betterttv.com/> [accessed May 10, 2023]

5 Official website: <https://www.frankerfacez.com/> [accessed May 10, 2023]

of emotes (which may also be created by fans/viewers of the respective channel for this very purpose) or submit an emote of their own and enable these for their channel. Henceforth, the emote can be used on the channel by all viewers who did install a browser add-on by BetterTwitchTV and/or by FrankerFaceZ, respectively. To emphasize this point: without the respective browser extension, the text code for a custom third-party emote does not resolve to an image in the chat window. Having them installed is thus mandatory to share the experience of using these emotes with other viewers. Therefore, less tech-savvy users or those on one of the official Twitch apps (where the extensions are not available) have what the communities would consider a diminished viewing experience. Albeit this process seems more complicated and requires more involvement by viewers, the third-party add-ons and their emotes are an integral part of communicative culture on Twitch: they are widely adopted among the audiences, and Twitch even integrated one of the most used third-party emotes officially – the aforementioned »LUL«. ⁶¹ Table 2 summarizes the differences between the types of custom Twitch emotes:

	streamer	viewer	visibility
Twitch Partner	may upload custom partner emotes for subscribers of their channel to use	has to subscribe (\$) to use a channel's custom partner emotes	partner emotes work on every Twitch channel and can be seen by anyone
BetterTwitchTV	must register, install add-on, and enable/upload custom emotes for their channel	must install add-on; may upload custom emotes for their streamer to enable	BTTV emotes work only on channels they are enabled on and can only be seen by BTTV users
FrankerFaceZ	must register, install add-on, and enable/upload custom emotes for their channel	must install add-on; may upload custom emotes for their streamer to enable	FFZ emotes work only on channels they are enabled on and can only be seen by FFZ users

Figure 5: Overview of different sub-types of customized emotes on Twitch

Unlike Unicode emoji, which are encoded incomprehensibly for humans and thus have to be selected from a digital emoji keyboard with preview images, the code macros for emotes consist of regular text (although there is also a digital preview keyboard available). By memorizing the spoken-language-like text pattern of an emote, one can spell them without one's hands ever leaving the keyboard. This is helpful for a live-chat scenario, as this may increase the messaging speed of an avid viewer/chatter.

6 Cf., e.g., this tweet from the official Twitch Twitter account: <https://twitter.com/Twitch/status/903701450618011649> [accessed May 10, 2023]

Interface-wise, Discord resembles something more akin to a regular messaging service (cf. figure 4). On the very left you have a list of all servers that you as a user have successfully joined. There are lots of different servers about different topics and connected to various fandoms, servers publicly available via search/lists on third-party websites as well as private ones that you must get invited to. When you click on a server, you will find a list of all users on this server, sorted by customizable roles and activity status. On the left, you can see all »channels« within the server you are currently viewing. Every channel is basically an individual chatroom, usually focused on a certain topic. Finally, the chatting area is positioned in the center of the interface – i.e., the chatroom of the channel you have currently selected. This is where custom emoji can be posted.

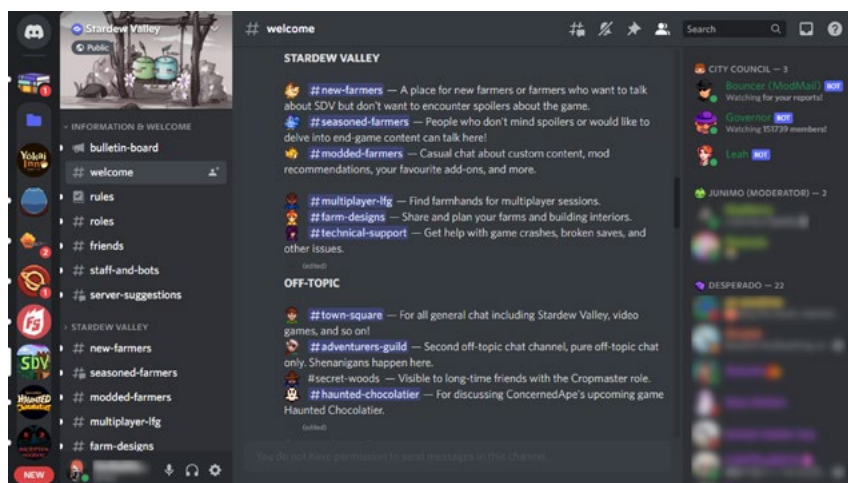


Figure 6: The interface of Discord (slightly edited for visual clarity and blurred for privacy by the author – M.L.). The depicted server is the unofficial Stardew Valley server, hosted by and for fans of the game by the same name and can be found via public search [accessed May 10, 2023]

On Discord, customized emoji must be implemented by the owners of a server.^{7]} Code-macro-wise, they are represented by plain text enclosed between two colons – »:SDVthinking:«, for example, invokes the image seen in figure 5. Much like Twitch emotes, custom Discord emoji tend to only work on a single server and hint towards a possible meaning. However, there is also a premium feature available, so-called »Nitro« emoji which are available for paying users to post on

7 Interestingly, while this procedure is enabled and endorsed by Discord, there is no reviewing process for these custom emoji in place. Instead, Discord seems to only rely on a reporting system and places a lot of trust in the respective moderators of public servers. Cf., e.g., <https://discord.com/safety/360043709612-our-policies> [accessed May 10, 2023]

any server of their choosing; they can also be animated graphics instead of still images.



Figure 7: The Discord emoji »:SDVthinking:« available on the Stardew Valley Discord server

Customizing language – How affect and community are shaped by emoji

There have been several works on the semiotic capabilities of meaning-making created or modified through the pictorial components (i.e., an additional semiotic mode) that emoji add to textual communication. Stefania Spina (2018) proposes an interesting set of functions of how emoticons are used in textual communication on Twitter. Her categorization also fits nicely with what we can expect of the usage of emoji in written text:

- *As emotion icons:* emoji can be used to express currently felt emotions.
- *As social markers of familiarity:* When addressing others, the usage of emoji may imply a sense of closeness.
- *As pragmatic markers:* emoji allow for marking certain tonalities, humor, and irony concisely.
- *As structural markers:* emoji may be used to partition semantic units in a single text.
- *As creative resources:* Being visually appealing and ›eye-catching‹, emoji may be used to make one's message ›stand out‹.

To add to their function as pragmatic markers, emoticons (and thus, most likely, emoji as well) may be used as a means to weaken so-called ›face-threatening acts‹ (THALER 2012: 171), i.e., they can bridge perceived social gaps and borders between communicators, especially when giving advice or criticizing, which may be important on a platform like Twitch where the streamer-viewer relationship is clearly hierarchical.

In a recent literature review, Michael Beißwenger and Steffen Pappert (2019: 26) propose nine communicative functions of emoji (translations mine):

1. framing (i.e., phatic function; how a text is to be interpreted);
2. economization (i.e., enabling low-effort communication);
3. relationship shaping (i.e., managing tonality and preventing misunderstandings);
4. modalization (i.e., extension, repetition, ambiguity);

5. commenting/evaluation (i.e., expressing opinions and affective interpretations);
6. structuring (i.e., a semantic function to make a text more easily readable);
7. representation (i.e., replacing words);
8. ludic function (i.e., closeness and playfulness in social interaction);
9. embellishment (i.e., being eye-catching and making a message ›stand out‹);

These categories of functionality can be aligned on a two-pole-spectrum between social functions on the one hand and structural or semantic ones on the other.

From this perspective, we can strongly assume that emoji generally have capabilities to help create a sense of community: Firstly, they facilitate clear and concise expressions of feelings, thus promoting immediacy in digital interactions and minimizing misunderstandings. Secondly, by softening tonality, they may help in bridging perceived differences in social standing. And thirdly, in these very acts of community building, certain emoji may become part of the vernacular of a certain digital community. Knowing when to use which emoji thus helps to distinguish the ›in-group‹ from the ›out-group‹ (cf. also LJUBEŠIĆ/FIŠER 2016). This is especially true for custom emoji on both Discord and Twitch. On the one hand, the usage and popularity of these emoji may be shifting over time. An example of this is the Twitch emote »KEKW« (cf. figure 6). On many channels, it has basically replaced the earlier mentioned »LUL« (cf. figure 1) as the main way of expressing a sense of entertainment and laughter, albeit also invoking a certain notion of *schadenfreude*. As this differs from channel to channel, and thus from community to community, newer users may be easily identified as not belonging to the ›in-group‹ (for example, if they use »LUL« when »KEKW« would be more apt); they are not in the knowing about the contemporary vernacular. Given that such jargon changes over time and that new/different emoji may be added at any given time, knowing about the history of a certain emoji adds another dimension to the ›in-group‹ knowledge. As custom emoji are often suggested by the community in reference to certain events (e.g., a spectacular failure during a Twitch live stream) or sometimes democratically decided upon via polling (which is quite common on Discord), a feeling of ›I was there‹ may at times be integral to the ›in-group‹'s identity.



Figure 8: The third-party Twitch emote »KEKW«

In the realm of digital communication, not just emoji but also so-called memes play a significant role in shaping online communities, especially with regards to creating ›in-groups‹, which Limor Shifman (2014) has prominently argued for. Given their connection to the intricate mechanism of ›prosumption‹,

these digital tokens of information and knowledge vary in significance and popularity across communities. A possible perspective as to how these differences may arise is offered by Grant Kien (2013, 2019). He has extensively explored how memes shape community and audience behavior by using the Baudrillardian concept of »simulacra«, which refers to signs detached from any physical referents. Kien suggests that the success of memes is tied to their aesthetic appeal to individuals online. This notion extends to emoji, as they help shape and shed light on a shared knowledge base.

In creating a sense of ›belonging‹ and ›not-belonging‹, emoji are closely linked to the discursive process inherent in building memetic communities. Klaus Krippendorf proposes that discourse »creates its own reality« (2009: 289) through their objects constantly being (re)elaborated by their corresponding community. For emoji, we can observe this process in the slow and iterative back-and-forth by which a community-specific vernacular is negotiated and finally becomes dominant or accepted. For example, from the usually rather big pool of custom emoji on a Discord server only some will ›stick‹ and be regularly used. This ›organic‹ practice involves a flat hierarchy where every user contributes to the formation of communal speech patterns. On Twitch, however, due to the hierarchical nature between streamer and viewer, the negotiation of jargon can function quite differently. The emergence of a stream's vernacular is often a reciprocal process involving both viewers and streamers. On the one hand – with regards to custom emotes –, viewers on Twitch (especially those from bigger channels) tend to be especially vocal about wanting the streamer to ›activate‹ a cool, new, or otherwise desired emote from BTTV or FrankerFaceZ by ›spamming‹ and arguing in a streamer's chat. In the most extreme scenarios, this almost amounts to bullying. On the other hand, by ›spamming‹ certain emotes (or combinations of emotes and phrases) in a ›hive mind‹ process that is very hard to analyze or reconstruct from a scholarly perspective, viewers may get a streamer to acknowledge a certain emote in a certain way, for example, by reacting with anger or frustration. Conversely, as streamers tend to *talk* rather than *type*, speaking the textual code of an emote out aloud may entice emote-based textual reactions in the chat. The frequency of such interactions contributes to the integration of specific emotes within a digital community surrounding a streamer. The quote by streamer Northernlion that has been integrated into the title of this article, »I'm so pogged I've got pog-juice seeping out of my eyes!«, may be considered as a – kind of hyperbolic – penultimate example of how intensely a certain emote, »Pog« and its derivatives, can become incorporated into a streamer's (and their viewers') language. Exploring this process through the lens of Fan Studies might offer additional insights. For example, drawing from the work of Paul Booth, we could describe this interplay between fans, streamers, and the adoption of emotes as a »multivocal media ›game««, reflecting a »philosophy of playfulness« (BOOTH 2017: 8) at the core of fanish

practice. Examining the complex dynamics at play here, this avenue of inquiry presents a promising direction for further exploration and understanding.

Toward a semiotics of emoji

A semiotic analysis provides a background for analyzing semiotic signs and symbols of different modalities to uncover their underlying meanings, their cultural embeddedness, and how they shape communication and (social) representation. Building on the understanding prominently outlined by Ferdinand de Saussure (cf., e.g., 2011) that the relation between the *signifiant* (the physical form of a sign) and the *signifié* (the concept or meaning associated with the sign) is an arbitrary one, questions on how these relationships are created arise. Building on Peirce's work, whose triadic understanding has already been shortly mentioned in section 2, we can differentiate three types of signs (cf., e.g., DANESI 2004 who outlines this nicely): *icons* that visually resemble their referents (e.g., a photograph of a tree), *indexes* that have a causal connection or correlation with their referents (e.g., smoke indicating a fire), and *symbols* that rely on conventions and cultural codes for their meaning (e.g., words or flags). However, it has to be noted that the relationship between signs and culture is by no means unidirectional. Signs are influenced by culture and society just as much as they, in turn, shape them by constructing ideologies or what Roland Barthes (cf., e.g., 2010: 253-261), who most prominently underlined this notion, would call cultural »myths«.

Briefly put, a semiotic analysis aims to examine signs within their broader cultural and social contexts, looking at the various relationships between signs and their meanings, the associations/connotations they evoke, and the codes and conventions that influence their interpretation while also trying to argue for the cultural impact of a given sign in a given community. By employing a semiotic analysis in the study of emoji, we can delve beyond surface-level interpretations and explore the deeper layers of meaning embedded in emoji and their uses. In the following paragraphs, I will demonstrate this approach by taking a closer look at how emoji contribute to community formation, shared understanding, and the negotiation of meaning on Twitch and Discord.

a) Pictorial and symbolic semiotics of emoji:

As has been established and is eminently plausible, the pictorial nature of emoji (including their shape, color, and facial expression/object resemblance) contributes to their communicative capabilities. Through a semiotic analysis, one can explore how specific pictorial features of emoji align with specific emotions or concepts. For instance, while also keeping cultural codes in mind,

a smiling face emoji with heart-shaped eyes may connote extreme happiness or affection as has traditionally been established in Western cartoon and comic media. Analyzing the pictorial characteristics of emoji, i.e., their likeness to a referenced object, can reveal the underlying codes and conventions that influence their interpretation within a community: How important is, e.g., the likeness of custom emoji on Twitch to the streamer? How does closeness to other memetic content from different platforms mediate the popularity of certain emotes? One example of this kind of popularity that goes beyond the scope of a single streamer's community is the widely embraced usage of emotes featuring the cartoon character Pepe the Frog, who has been popularized through memetic spread as early as 2008, featuring various facial expressions, actions, and moods.⁸⁾ Inversely, some streamers adapt these popular Pepe emotes by creating similar emotes featuring their face in the very same, cartoonized pose or with the same expression. Referentiality in the sense of ›looking similar to something‹, here bordering between both an iconic and a symbolic notion, can thusly be considered a factor for stimulating community interaction that must not be neglected.

Preceding a proper embedding in socio-cultural contexts, a short classification of individual emoji in Peircean terms, i.e., identifying their iconic, indexical, or symbolic dimensions can further help to guide the following steps of analysis and may offer new understandings and update preconceived notions during research. Given that the aforementioned example of Pepe emotes may nowadays invoke the notion of a symbolic sign due to the controversy surrounding the cartoon frog, there are also iconic or indexical dimensions to be considered when looking at concrete examples. An emoji of a laughing Pepe the Frog – aside from its symbolic nuances due to any cultural/discursive context – also has the iconic characteristic of representing a laughing face. Such iconicity can guide assumptions on how these emoji may be used, as the relation between iconicity (›what it shows‹) and meaning must not necessarily be (or rather: seldom is) entirely based on conventions. Furthermore, the live nature of streams on Twitch is essential to the communicative process and stimulates a rather indexical relationship between what is seen on stream and what viewers chat about; this also translates directly to an indexical function of emote. A popular third-party emote, »KEKW« (cf. fig. 6), is exemplary of this, featuring the likeness of Juan Joya who became memetically popular through a video of him as a guest on a Spanish live talk show laughing

8) It has to be noted here that, while Pepe the Frog is nowadays often considered a hate symbol often used by various alt-right movements and actors, his usage in Twitch emotes has been well established long before this appropriation.

hysterically whilst trying to tell a story.¹⁹⁾ This emote is frequently used by chatters to both express laughter at jokes made by the streamer and, more prominently, to ironically make fun of the streamer for failing or dying in a video game, i.e., to express a certain tongue-in-cheek *schadenfreude*. In this sense, the emote can be read as an index of what is happening during the stream while also giving insight into how the audience perceives the current content (which is also an important function for streamers to realize at a glance how engaged their viewers are at any given moment).

b) Cultural semiotics of emoji:

As has just been exemplified by Pepe emotes, emoji are not devoid of cultural influence; they reflect and embody cultural values, norms, and the memetic practice of referentiality (i.e., invoking frameworks of understanding by bringing up knowledge/information that is assumed to be communally shared). In the case of Twitch and Discord, these are closely related to subcultures surrounding fandom and memes. A semiotic analysis allows researchers to delve into the cultural connotations attached to emoji within specific communities. Certain emoji may be more directly associated with specific subcultures or online communities, carrying nuanced meanings understood only by the members of those in-groups. Some emoji have a certain meaning attached to them that goes beyond any immediate preconceptions, e.g., referencing inside jokes only understood by community members. An example of this is the animated custom BTTV emote »hesBALD« implemented on the channel of streamer Northernlion, showing a short animation of the streamer shouting energetically in disbelief. The text code for invoking this emote points toward an ongoing inside joke in the Northernlion community, randomly asking in disbelief via comments or messages the question »Wait, he's bald?!« (directed at no one in particular), as if they were just noticing the hairstyle of the streamer (who is, very obviously, bald). By looking into the cultural semiotics of emoji on this micro level, researchers can uncover shared cultural knowledge, identity markers, and social norms within a community.

c) Situational semiotics of emoji:

The meaning of an emoji is not fixed; it can change depending on the situational context in which it is used (the just mentioned »KEKW« being an example of this). A semiotic analysis should consider how emoji function within

9 The original clip from the talk show is available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WDiB4rtpt1qw> [accessed May 10, 2023]

specific communicative contexts and how their meaning is negotiated and interpreted by community members. For instance, a particular emoji may be used sarcastically in one community/situation, while conveying genuine enthusiasm in another. This can be seen in the Stardew Valley Discord, where the emoji »SDVpuffercoolest:« (cf. figure 7) is used both when celebrating a personal achievement and in ironic contexts, pointing toward the notion of covering up one's failures by just ›looking cool‹ over it. By examining the contextual semiotics of emoji, an understanding of the complex interplay between community-specific norms, intentions, and their usage patterns can be further deepened; or rather: a contextual understanding is the very necessity for any plausible assumptions about the communal functions of emoji. Without a minimum of participant observation, a semiotic analysis of emoji is bound to fail.



Figure 9: The Discord emoji »SDVpuffercoolest:« available on the Stardew Valley Discord server

d) Intersemiotic analysis:

Emoji are not confined to their pictorial form but can also be interpreted in relation to the modes of communication they interplay with. Intersemiotic analysis can show how emoji interact with text, speech, or other modes of expression within a community. For instance, understanding how emoji are combined with specific words or phrases can shed light on how they enhance or alter the intended meaning of a message. This seems easier with regards to Twitch, where the high speed of live chat nudges viewers towards short-form messages that sometimes follow certain memetic patterns. On the other hand, the communicative patterns in Discord communities seem more complex to conceptualize. Even in a single chat channel, different interactional patterns may emerge consecutively. For example, in the channel »#new-farmers« in the Stardew Valley Discord (cf. fig. 4), new community members may introduce themselves by writing a short profile about themselves, which may or may not entice further communication. Other community members use this channel as a public chatroom where sometimes one-to-one communication in a public space may emerge (i.e., an exchange of messages uninterrupted by other user messages). Here, different ways of addressing a (potential) other can be observed: Users express themselves quite differently when they ›speak to the void‹

by addressing no one in particular compared to answering each other directly, which also directly influences their usage of emoji.

Final remarks

Finally, I would like to condense the many thoughts established in this article and offer some concluding reflections. Firstly, terminologically speaking, while this article has offered a perspective on how to properly address these tiny little pictures that are so commonly used as part of or instead of textual cues, when trying to establish »emoji« as an overarching general term there are many other avenues of inquiry one could take. It might be more proper, academically speaking, to avoid these kinds of terms that are part of everyday language altogether and, for example, adopt a more technical term like »visual glyph«, which Unicode emoji, emoticons, and emotes then would be subcategories of. This terminological debate remains open for discussion. Secondly, my demonstrated approach to outline the affective and communal dimensions of emoji usage on Twitch and Discord is by no means exhaustive, neither for these platforms in particular nor for emoji in general. The ideas discussed serve as initial steps to triangulate these phenomena, leaving ample room for further exploration. There are various unexplored avenues to be pursued, including the study of internet memes and the application of frameworks provided by Fan Studies that have been partially hinted at here. Thirdly, the same limitation applies to the semiotic framework suggested in this article. While it proved useful as a guideline to my own understanding of emoji usage, adjustments and adaptations may be required when applied to different medial environments such as one-to-one chatting on messaging apps. However, what has been established in this article is that understanding the (sub)cultural significance of emoji within a community can shed light on shared values, identity markers, and insider knowledge, which are used by community members to strengthen communal ties. Employing a semiotic approach following the guiding rails of a semiotic analysis enables the exploration of how emoji are interpreted, negotiated, and assigned meaning within different communities.

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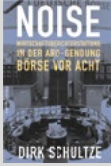
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