

Michael Beißwenger; Steffen Pappert
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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 pragmatolinguistic 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.

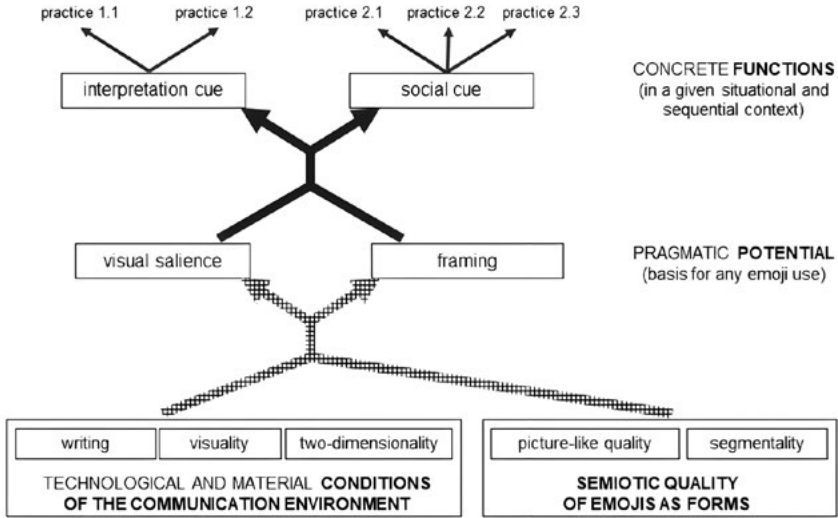


Figure 1: Pragmatic potentials and function of emojis (with regard to WhatsApp communication).

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 (>&!#%<) 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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