

## Emojis as Lexical Items: the Case of 🙄

John David Storment, Stony Brook University

Keywords: semantics, syntax, emojis, iconicity, gestures, twitter

**Overview** Emojis, a standard feature of Apple electronic keyboards since 2011 and now ubiquitous across platforms (Evans 2017), are a set of iconic expression symbols that are incredibly widespread in computer-mediated communication (CMC), especially among young people (Bai et al. 2019). The majority of published linguistic research on emojis focuses only on the semantics, which contributes to the growing literature on super semantics (Schlenker 2019). Within this body of work, many have claimed that emojis project into the meaning of the text they accompany the same way as co-speech gestures (see Pasternak & Tieu 2020; Pierini 2021). This is mostly seen in two classes of emoji that typically appear at the end of the text: face emojis, which are expressive elements, and activity emojis, which are event descriptions (Grosz, Kaiser, & Pierini 2021; Grosz et al. 2021). More lacking in this body of research are cases in which emojis appear to function as lexical items, either because emojis are able to replace words or because they are distinct lexical items, the former position being more supported (Al-Rashdi 2015; Cohn et al. 2018; Pierini 2021).

In this abstract I will present examples mostly from Twitter of a construction involving the emoji 🙄 that supports an analysis of certain emojis as distinct lexical items with their own morphosyntax and semantics. We can call these lexical emojis. The choice of internet users to use lexical emoji instead of the word it was thought to replace raises interesting questions about performativity, expressiveness, and the role of iconicity in CMC.

**Data** Pierini (2021:729) gives examples of emojis representing lexical items.

- (1) a. Yesterday, John 🍷 for two hours (Pierini 2021)  
b. Sleepy and tired ... all I want is my 🛏

Pierini notes that the example in (1a) is degraded because it feels like it's missing a past tense morpheme. Fortunately, there are numerous examples on Twitter of emojis with past tense morphemes attached to them. Some are reproduced below.

- (2) a. Not many can say they've been 💋 ed by a 🧜. (Twitter)  
b. that one dude is the most ❄ ed out person I've ever seen in my whole entire life  
c. Because someone I follow ❤ ed this tweet.

Examples of emojis with any other kind of inflectional affix are easy to find. In fact, the data from younger Twitter users seem to suggest a preference for affixes appearing separately from the emoji. This can be taken as evidence that lexical emojis are not simply replacing a word, but are actual lexical items that can inflect just like any others. If this is indeed the case, we could expect to find lexical emojis with syntactic distribution distinct from other words that share the same meaning. As evidence for this I bring up an example common among young Twitter users.

- (3) Don't 🙄 at me, you little bottom. (Tumblr meme)

Here we have something that mostly shares the meaning of *don't make the facial expression* 😞 *at me*, but the meaning of the VP *make the facial expression* 😞 is represented entirely by the face emoji. It could be the case that the emoji is simply standing in for the VP here, but that is unlikely since it is rare to find lexical emojis standing in for more than one word, and even the examples of lexical emojis representing more than one morpheme are degraded. Rather, this looks like an example of a lexical emoji that has no one-word equivalent in non-CMC. As its own lexical item, we would expect distinct inflection, which is exactly what is attested. See the following examples of 😞 with *-ed*, infinitival *to*, and *-ing*.

- (4) a. never in my life have i 😞ed at a girl like this (Twitter)  
 b. can we all just take a second to 😞 at the show's twitter bio  
 c. are u 😞ing other bitches

**Analysis** What is going on here, then? What looks like an expressive face emoji is functioning as a lexical emoji. This emoji not only represents a verb already in the lexicon, it is its own verb with distinct syntactic features, which we see in its ability to productively take inflectional morphology. Explaining how this is possible will involve a theory of diachronic change in the way emojis are used, as well as a theory of emojis that allows them to undergo lexical change.

In the case of 😞, we see its meaning undergo a change from an expressive emoji to that of a transitive verb, but the expressive element is still not lost in the meaning. It is necessary to model the semantics of the lexical emoji in a way that captures its expressiveness as well. Thus, the semantics of the purely expressive emoji differ from the semantics of the lexical emoji. Here we can see a shift from modeling 😞 as an expression (Grosz, Kaiser, & Pierini 2021) in (5a) to an event (Davidson 1967; Parsons 1980, 1985, 1990) in (5b).

- (5) a.  $[[\text{😞}]]^g = \lambda p_{\langle s, t \rangle} : g(\text{author}_0)$  has a **pleading** emotion/response towards  $p$  in  $g(w_0)$  .  $p$   
 b.  $[[\text{😞}]] = \exists e[\text{making a } \mathbf{pleading} \text{ facial expression}(e) \ \& \ \text{Agent}(e, x) \ \& \ \text{Goal}(e, y)]$

In both instances, the iconicity of the emoji's pleading facial expression must be captured. It is feasible to see how the expressive emoji gained the meaning of a predicate with the meaning of *making the aforementioned facial expression*. Similar instances to this one can be observed, which is expected if more people's grammars are readily accepting lexical emojis. These data all serve as evidence to a trend that emojis must be accounted for in the morphosyntax and semantics of CMC.

**Next Steps** This abstract puts forth an analysis of lexical emojis – emojis that appear sentence-internally – that states that they are distinct lexical items with their own syntactic distribution and semantics, focusing on the case of 😞 shifting from an expressive emoji to a lexical emoji describing an event. Moving forward, it will be important to look at more instances of emojis that have undergone similar changes (I immediately think of 🦋 being used as a preposition as early as 2018 (Storment 2021)). Looking into the morphological properties of emojis as a whole will also be necessary. Having these expressive elements functioning as lexical items in CMC creates incredible unprecedented potential for incorporating iconic elements into language, the use of which will reveal even more about expressiveness and performativity in human language.

### **Selected References**

**Al-Rashdi** (2015). Forms and Functions of Emojis in WhatsApp Interaction Among Omanis.  
**Bai et al.** (2019). A Systematic Review of Emoji: Current Research and Future Perspectives.  
**Cohn et al.** (2018) Are emoji a poor substitute for words? Sentence processing with emoji substitutions. **Davidson** (1967). The logical form of action sentences. **Evans** (2017). The Emoji Code. **Grosz, Kaiser, & Pierini** (2021). Discourse anaphoricity and first-person indexicality in emoji resolution. **Grosz et al.** (2021). A semantics of face emoji in discourse. **Parsons** (1980). Modifiers and quantifiers in natural language. **Parsons** (1985). Underlying events in the analysis of English. **Parsons** (1990). Events in the semantics of English: a study in subatomic semantics. **Pasternak & Tieu** (2020). Co-linguistic content projection: From gestures to sound effects and emoji. **Pierini** (2021). Emojis and gestures: a new typology. **Schlenker** (2019). What is Super Semantics? **Storment** (2021). The Semantics of Emojis as Syntactic Heads: Investigating the Going-✂ Construction.