

Emojis and ing: What counts?

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Emojis are ubiquitous in digital communication today. Their primary purpose is to add expressivity to written language. While emojis lack the properties of an independent writing system, they are easily incorporated into preexisting writing systems. In this presentation, we discuss semantic and morphosyntactic properties of emojis that are parallel to properties of conventional writing systems and offer an analysis of how emojis function as elements of writing cross-linguistically.

We argue that, like semantic complements in Cuneiform and Egyptian writing (Rogers 2005), emojis can add expressive information to a written utterance when they modify grammatical constituents or entire utterances (Grosz et al. 2021; Storment 2024). Moreover, just as early writing systems (e.g., Chinese, Cuneiform) utilized their symbol inventory through semantic generalizations, emojis extend their use to words with similar meanings (e.g. 🍏 ‘apple’ can be extended to morphemes such as ‘teachers’ or ‘New York’).

Emojis may combine with orthographically represented inflectional affixes. Cases of inflectional morphology are highly restricted and vary across languages, reflecting differences in writing systems and morphological structure. For instance, in English ‘she 👻ed me’, the past tense suffix -ed attaches to the verb ‘to ghost’ (Storment 2024). In languages like Russian and Spanish, a combination of emojis with inflectional morphemes is not possible due to morphological complexity.

Emojis can also function independently in two-word utterances (e.g., 🍕🕒 ‘pizza time’) and modern-day rebuses (e.g., 🦁👑 ‘The Lion King’). While in rebuses and simple sentences emojis function as words, their classification as an independent writing system is problematic since their interpretation depends on the context and culture rather than on linguistic encoding. We ultimately show that, while emojis on their own are not enough to be considered a writing system (despite often being portrayed as such in popular culture), their status as orthographic elements is highly dependent on the amount of linguistic structure that they are embedded within.

Grosz, Patrick & Kaiser, Elsi & Pierini, Francisco. 2021. Discourse anaphoricity and first-person indexicality in emoji resolution. *Proceedings of Sinn und Bedeutung* 25, 340–357.

Rogers, Henry. 2005. *Writing Systems: A linguistic Approach*. Malden, MA: Blackwell

Storment, John David. 2024. Going 🦋 Lexicon? The linguistic status of pro-text emojis. *Glossa*.