

What is the visual referent of an emoji?  
Beyond default referents and into context-dependent “ad hoc” referents

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ABSTRACT

One of the most interesting proposals of cognitive pragmatics and specifically relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1995) is the label of *ad hoc concepts*. In short, on many occasions (if not all), the concept literally coded by a word in a context is not sufficiently relevant and has to be adjusted pragmatically, as a result of which the communicated (and inferred) concept in that context (called *ad hoc concept*) differs, to a greater or lesser extent, from the original literally coded concept. This communicated concept may be *narrower* than the coded one (in other words, the coded concept is too general and needs to be inferentially narrowed), as in (1); or *broader* (that is, the coded concept seems so specific that an inferential broadening becomes necessary), as in (2). In all these cases, the *ad hoc concept* eventually communicated (and inferred) only “resembles” in meaning the concept coded in the utterance (see Wilson 2004, Carston 2019, Hall 2017).

- (1) I am worried about Jim... He drinks too much.  
[narrowing: *specifically, Jim drinks too much alcohol*].
- (2) We entered the pub but we left since it was empty.  
[broadening: *not literally empty; rather, with few people, including the waiter*].

One of the aims of my theory of *cyberpragmatics* (Yus 2011, 2021, in press) has been to extend relevance-theoretic analysis to the new discourses and interactions carried out online. In this paper, I will apply the notion of *ad hoc concept* to the referents of emojis. In the same way as words have a prototypical meaning, emojis would have a prototypical referent which, like words, has to be narrowed or broadened depending on contextual constraints imposed by the on-going messaging interaction. For that purpose, a sample of one or two typically used emojis will be collected from a large corpus of WhatsApp interactions among Spaniards (Yus 2022, in press) and their possible adjustments will be analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively. The paper aims to provide an insight about the resemblance of how words and emojis are inferred in everyday messaging interactions despite their different ways of encoding information (language vs. image).

## References

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