

Emojis as Supervernaculars: Grassroots & Normative Approaches to Emoji Semiotization

Since their debut as Unicode character set in 2010, emojis became an integrated part of digital communication. While many studies have tried to pin down emojis' meanings and affordances, it is clear that they are multi-modal in their own right and can serve different purposes in different instances. This article demonstrates, by ethnographically studying multiple emojis discussed on Twitter, different ways in which users can approach the semiotization process of emojis both from grassroots as well as normative perspectives. On the one hand, users tap into their existing (e.g., cultural, technical) knowledge and experiences when working with emojis, while they also turn towards different layers of normative semiotization cues (e.g., the dictionary, fan club rules, culture or religious affiliation). An Emerging Theme Analysis (ETA) was initially performed to study fourteen different emojis with approximately 3,500 comments in total. The ETA guided the scope towards specific semiotic approaches and resources used by the Twitter users, leading to a 'thicker' analysis of a number of Key Incidents (KIA), isolating specific approaches and providing insights into both the grassroots and normative approaches used.

Emojis are distributed throughout globalized networks, but on individual levels, they are always used as de-globalized, locally constrained semiotic cues with unique and local interpretations. These 'supervernaculars', or rather 'transvernaculars', circulate in networks that do not adhere to the rules of physical nearness such as families or local sports clubs. While this is not unique to emojis – the lessons learned here might also apply to memes, sociolects, languaging and other forms of semiotization – it does show the implications of our post-local practices, compared to those that take place in settings with physical nearness. This article shows that emojis allow for a fruitful case study in the sociolinguistics of globalization, since their meaning is partly constructed by users as-they-go, and partly conventionalized globally, or less globally, as regional differences and, more interesting, social differences may occur.

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