The Semiotics of Emoji: The Rise of Visual Language in the Age of Internet

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Abstract: Semiotics has complemented linguistics by expanding its scope beyond the phoneme and the sentence to include texts and discourse, and their rhetorical, performative, and ideological functions. It has brought into focus the multimodality of human communication. This article applies semiotic approaches to linguistics and nonverbal productions, social institutions and discourses, embodied cognition and communication, and the new virtual realities that have been ushered in by the Internet. It also is inclusive of publications in relevant domains such as socio-semiotics, evolutionary semiotics, game theory, cultural and literary studies, human-computer interactions, and the challenging new dimensions of human networking afforded by social websites.

Keywords: symbol, sign, discourse, utterance opener, utterance ending, global intelligence, phatic, phatic communication, emotively, signifier, lingo.

In 2015, a truly remarkable event occurred. The emoji known as "Face with Tears of Joy," , was chosen by the Oxford Dictionary as the "*Word* of the Year." Not only was it not a word—it was a pictogram—but it was chosen by one of the most prestigious dictionaries in the world. Incredibly, the choice did not garner any significant complaints, protests, or polemical arguments from the guardians of traditional literacy (academics, teachers, language purists, and so on). This was a mindboggling event in many ways, signaling that a veritable paradigm shift might have taken place in human communications and even human consciousness.

On its website, the Oxford Dictionary explained that it chose a pictogram over a word because it "captures the ethos, mood, and preoccupations" of the year and reflects "the sharp increase in popularity of emoji across the world in 2015." Is this increase a signal that print based literacy is declining since the arrival of Web 2.0 technologies? The spread of literacy is traced to the invention of moveable print technology in the late 1400s, which made printed materials broadly available and inexpensive, encouraging the acquisition of literacy among all classes of people. But the same kind of literacy that has served us so well since at least the sixteenth century may have, over the last few decades, lost much of its social value and prestige, as the Oxford Dictionary choice subconsciously suggested. The Internet Age is making new kinds of demands on writing practices, relegating the traditional practices increasingly to the margins. The Internet has brought about new forms of writing and literacy. According to research carried out by Oxford University Press and the mobile technology business, SwiftKey, the "Face with Tears of Joy" made up over 20 percent of all emoji used in Britain in 2015, and 17 percent of all emoji used in the United States. Emoji are, in fact, becoming increasingly popular across the world, allowing people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds to communicate and interact with each other more concretely, thus making it possible to facilitate intercultural communications by transcending the symbolic barriers of the past demarcated by specific scripts and the implicit sociopolitical ideologies that they entailed. In the current age of "connected global intelligence" these may have started collapsing. Many of the analyses carried out and described here are based on a database compiled at the University of Toronto, consisting of electronic messages that involve the use of

emoji. The information for the database was collected by a "research team" of four students at the university—

Nadia Guarino, Soli Doubash, Lily Che, and Yvone Tuan. They were assigned two main tasks: collect actual written materials that allow for a first-hand analysis of emoji, and interview an "informant group" composed of one hundred undergraduate students at the same university, all of whom were identified in advance to be regular users of emoji, and who willingly and even enthusiastically participated in the research project for this book. The group was selected, as well, to reflect an equal number of males and females—fifty each—in the event that gender emerged as a factor in emoji usage. All informants were between eighteen and twenty-two years of age. They provided the team with 323 of their personal text messages, tweets, and other social media materials. These were offered by every informant and their usage underwent an ethics approval process for utilization in this book. Personal information has been removed from the texts and materials if it entails some compromising situation. Overall, the informant group constituted a "field laboratory" within which emoji usage could be examined directly. Emoji writing is a product of the Internet Age, although there are precedents for analogous writing styles in previous eras, as can be seen in the illuminated texts of the Medieval and Renaissance eras (to be discussed subsequently). My objective is to assess the *raison d'κtre* for the rise of emoji at this time and the social and philosophical implications it might have for the interrelation among literacy, human communication, and human consciousness. The spread of emoji raises several key questions about how we now communicate and, more significantly, why we do so in this new comic book style.

Before even attempting to consider this question, it is useful, if not crucial, to take a step back and look at the nature and role of writing systems in human life and how they evolved. That is the main purpose of this chapter. This historical sortie will allow me to establish the theoretical framework that will be required to discuss the emoji phenomenon semantically. So, after a brief discussion of the origins of emoji, this chapter will look at writing systems schematically, along with the social aspects of writing and its various modalities. The discussion here is restricted to bare essentials.

Theories on the origins of writing abound. The history of the debates need not concern us here. There are, however, some facts and ideas that have received wide acceptance among linguists and archeologists, which are useful to the subject matter of this book. The most prominent one is that pictographic writing precedes all other kinds phylogenetically and that its emergence coincides with what scientists call "prehistoric art." If so, then writing and art might have a common origin (Bouissac 1983, 1994, 1997)[1]. To this day, we seem intuitively inclined to perceive picture writing of any type, including emoji, as somewhat artistic. This "picture writing instinct" (Dutton 2010) seems to be part of the human DNA, so to speak, manifesting itself early in life. At about the time that children utter their first words they also start scribbling and doodling without any training, if given some drawing instrument. Some claim that this may be an evolutionary residue from the distant past that unconsciously guides language development (Vygotsky 1962[2]). The archeological record suggests that defining attributes of the human species, such as the ability to think and plan consciously and to transmit skills and knowledge across generations, coincide with the emergence of language, which appears in vocal and non vocal forms (such as gesture) from the outset.

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[1] Bouissac, Paul (1993). "Beyond Style: Steps towards a Semiotic Hypothesis." In M. Lorblanchet and P. G. Bahn (eds.), *Rock Art Studies: The Post-Stylistic Era*, 203–06. Oxford: Oxbow Monograph 35.
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Bouissac, Paul (1997). "New Epistemological Perspectives for the Archaeology of Writing." In I. R. Blench and N. Spriggs (eds.), *Archaeology and Language*, 53–62. London: Routledge.
[2] Vygotsky, Lev (1962). *Thought and Language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Many linguists (perhaps most) see vocal language as preceding written language on the evolutionary scale, considering the latter to be simply a means of recording vocal speech. As Leonard Bloomfield[3] (1933: 21) famously put it: "Writing is not language, but merely a way of recording language by means of visible marks." However, it is no coincidence that this view is largely a product of alphabet-using societies. If the archeological and paleontological records are correct then it cannot be fully sustained, if at all. There is strong evidence that language as a mental faculty developed before vocal speech and that it was expressed through gesture and pictography. The evidence is indirect, but still persuasive.

The larynx makes vocal speech physically possible. In human infants it is high in the neck, as it is in other primates. Infants breathe, swallow, and vocalize in ways that are physiologically similar to gorillas and chimps. But, at some point around the first three to six months of life, the larynx starts to descend down into the neck. The new low position means that the respiratory and digestive tracts now cross above it. This entails a few risks: food can easily lodge in the entrance of the larynx, and humans cannot drink and breathe simultaneously without choking. But in compensation, it produces a pharyngeal chamber above the vocal folds that can modify sound, making vocal speech possible. Now, research on the casts of human skulls has established that the lowering of the larynx became a permanent feature of human anatomical development around 100,000 years ago (Laitman 1983, 1990)[4]. This strongly suggests that there may have been language without vocal speech in pre-Homo sapiens species. The most probable modes of communication were, therefore, gesture and perhaps pictography. When vocal speech became physiologically possible, it is likely that it was used in tandem with the previous gestural signs, not replacing them completely. This is the most likely reason why we still use gesture as a mode of communication (when vocal speech is impossible), and why we gesticulate when we speak.

Now, whatever the relation between writing encoding, storage, and transfer of information. They are not mutually exclusive. The two complement each other in many ways. Clearly, the study of writing systems has many implications for the origins and evolution of human cultures. Writing systems fall into several broad categories. Pictographic writing consists, of course, of picture signs that are made to resemble what they stand for. Ideographic writing involves the use of pictures and symbols to represent both objects and ideas, usually by combining pictographs in some way. Syllabaries are made up of characters that stand for speech syllables, thus approaching alphabet systems, and logo graphics consist of symbols that do not stand for a referent directly, but for the words that do. Alphabets consist of a standard set of letters, known technically as *graphemes*, representing speech units called phonemes (such as distinctive vowel and consonant sounds). Although this is a highly reductive categorization of writing systems and their modalities, it will suffice for the present purposes.

Alphabets are the most "economical" of all the systems since, like the digits in the decimal or binary numerical systems, they consist of a finite set of symbols, from twenty to around thirty-five, that can be used to write all the words of a language over and over, whereas syllabaries have from eighty to one hundred symbols, and the other systems several hundreds. In alphabets, graphic symbols, known as punctuation signs, were introduced much later to aid in the layout of the written text, both as cues for word and sentence boundaries, and to signal prosodic features such as intonation and inflection. Given the abstract symbolic complexity of alphabetic systems, it is little wonder that learning and mastering them requires time and significant schooling.

Alphabetic scripts are called *linear* because they involve laying out texts in some linear form, from left-to-right, right-to-left, up-down, or down-up; non alphabetic systems are less dependent on

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[3] Bloomfield, Leonard (1933). *Language*. New York: Holt.

[4] Laitman, J. T. (1990). "Tracing the Origins of Human Speech." In P. Whitten and D. E. K. Hunter (eds.),
Anthropology: Contemporary Perspectives, 124–30. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Company.

directional layout, because their symbols stand for concepts, rather than sounds. This does not mean that the latter systems do not possess structure. As Naomi Baron (2010)[5] has observed, a main characteristic of alphabetic writing is that it matches the syntax of the language it transcribes, allowing for the concatenation of singular ideas into complex interrelated ones in some rule-based arrangement (Trager 1974)[6]. On the other hand, pictographic systems are less dependent on the syntax of verbal language (Mallery 1893)[7]. They are highly versatile in their ability to represent the sequential stages of episodes and actions, such as narrative ones (Diringer 1962)[8]. Research shows that a balance between visual and phonetic writing modalities emerges in most writing practices and styles. There was also a connection between parts of speech and actual writing forms. Concrete nouns were typically portrayed as pictographs, whereas verbs were represented by ideographs (Goldwasser 1995)[9]. Some modern scripts are more precisely "bimodal," rather than mixed modal, involving two main types of writing scripts. Japanese, for example, is written with two complete syllabaries— the hiragana and the katakana—devised to supplement the characters originally taken over from Chinese. All this suggests that writing is not an arbitrary way for representing vocal speech, but rather a highly adaptive and culturally sensitive tool for encoding information.

In the Internet Age, the popularity of mobile devices encourages writing rather than speaking for reasons that will be discussed subsequently. This means that writing has assumed many of the functions of face-to-face (F2F) communication. There are two temporalities involved in digital writing: synchronous and asynchronous. Asynchronous digital communication occurs when the receiver is not necessarily aware that a message has been sent to him or her—this characterizes emails, bulletin boards, blogs, and chat rooms. The receiver will access the message in a time-delayed fashion and then respond to it. Synchronous digital communication occurs, instead, when the receiver is aware of the communication as an ongoing one—in real rather than delayed time. F2F conversations are synchronous, influencing verbal interaction. This, however, is changing in synchronous digital communications, as the data collected on emoji writing for this book strongly suggests. Offline asynchronous communication occurs mainly in written print media (letters, books, and so on), which carry their own set of dislocated (delayed) reading patterns depending on the genre of writing. Synchronous forms of digital communications require rapid writing, so that the back-and-forth repartee can be maintained in real time without losing the receiver's attention. This is creating new types of literacy and communicative practices based on time-saving devices such as abbreviated forms. Some observers are decrying this as a product of modern-day inertia and laziness-inducing technologies. Helprin (2009)[10], for instance, cautions that such styles of communication produce an addictive effect on how people process information, rendering them much less pensive and reflective. Others respond that they reflect nothing more than an efficient way to create written messages for informal communication. In this view, people use abbreviated language and emoji, not to generate thoughtfulness and literary contemplation, but to make sure that written synchronous communication can occur rapidly and efficiently. In no way does this new form of writing imply that people have lost the desire to read and reflect upon the world.

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