



Three lessons that use emojis

Lesson 2

What is an emoji? Learning about grammar, punctuation and semantics (word meanings)

Emojis are a new form of communication, pictures that are attached to a tweet or a text message.

This lesson will ask you to think hard about aspects of the way we use language in writing – grammar, punctuation and semantics (the meaning of words).

Linguists, working on new forms of communication, have been specially interested in emojis because it isn't altogether clear what function they perform. Are they just like words, with meanings? Are they more like punctuation, for instance like question marks or exclamation marks at the end of a bit of written text? And do they have their own syntax, for instance having a set order in which it's acceptable or not for them to appear, just like words in a sentence?

This short language investigation will teach you more about emojis but also help clarify for you the ways in which words, punctuation and syntax work in written language.

1. Do emojis take the place of words?

- Look at these emojis. On your own, try to translate them into words. Now compare with a partner, or in a small group. Did you come up with the same, or similar phrases?



- What does this suggest about the ‘meaning’ of emojis and whether they are like words, in how they function?

2. Is there a case for seeing emojis as a form of punctuation?

- To answer this, you first need to think about what the function of punctuation is.
- Discuss in pairs your ideas for why we use punctuation.
- Now look at the list below. How many of these uses did you come up with yourselves?
 - I. It can change the meaning of sentences
 - II. It indicates pauses and new lines of thought
 - III. It hasn’t got a meaning in itself, but it can give meaning to the words that it precedes or follows
 - IV. It shows when something is speech, and when new speakers start speaking
 - V. It indicates the tone or mood e.g. an exclamation mark indicates an exclamatory tone, a question mark signals a questioning mood, a series of dots indicates a tailing off of an idea.
 - VI. It separates off parts of a longer, or more complex idea in a single sentence, dividing the main idea (main clause) from the additional idea (subordinate clause), using commas, dashes, colon or semi-colon
 - VII. It gives choices to the writer, who can use punctuation to stamp their own individual identity on their writing. Not all writers punctuate in the same way. Not all writers use punctuation in the same way in different kinds of texts.
- Now think about emojis. Which of the functions of punctuation do you think could be true for emojis? Is there a case for thinking they sometimes act as punctuation?

Do emojis have their own syntax?

Syntax is the way that words are structured into sentences, in a right order. You can see why this is important below:

*An is example here.
An example is here.
Here is an example.
Example is an here.
Here example an is.*

- Of these five examples, all using exactly the same words, which make sense? What is it that makes them make sense when the others don’t?

The ordering of words into sentences is called syntax.

- Do emojis have a syntax? In other words, if you use more than one emoji, is there a set order and pattern for how they should appear? Could a newbie user of emojis get that wrong? Is there also an order in a text message, or in a WhatsApp

message, where the emoji should appear e.g. at the end of the writing only, or can it appear anywhere in the message?

- Here are a few examples to test this out. Do any of them seem 'wrong'?

Example 1

How are ? you?  See you soon!

Example 2

I'm going to be a bit late. . Sorry if it messes you around. .

Example 3

  Thanks for  the present. It's cool .

- From this discussion, write a list of what you think you have learnt about:
 1. The functions of punctuation
 2. What syntax is in written communication
 3. How meaning is made through more than just words
 4. Emojis and how they function.